

First Place Winner
Division I – 7-9th Grades
A Light in the Darkness
by Braeleigh M.
Holy Family Catholic School, Grand Junction, CO

Generations of doctors, lawyers, military commanders, actors, singers: generations of *difference-makers* may have been lost without one single man's morality, which provided hundreds with the opportunity to live. This man was a part of a group that committed the most appalling genocide in wartime history, a group that is responsible for over 11 million lives lost. He was a German in the Nazi party, but unlike his peers, who used their power to harass and kill men, women, and children of different minorities, Helmut Kleinicke used his power to save the lives of hundreds and to become a light in the darkness.

Helmut Kleinicke joined the Nazi party in 1933 after finishing his studies in civil engineering. He was then hired in 1941 to supervise construction projects at the largest and most horrific concentration camp of the Holocaust, Auschwitz. He was commanded to find and select Jews who were in good and strong condition to help work and build at the camp. As he was instructed, he found Jews to work, but Helmut Kleinicke treated them with fairness and respect, unlike the other Nazi officers. A survivor of the Holocaust later stated, "Those of us who worked for Kleinicke were like VIPs." He did not allow any guards to persecute or torment the Jews under his command.

Kleinicke used his position as a senior official to benefit others. Many times, after hearing of Jews who would be deported to Auschwitz, Kleinicke intervened and claimed them as his workers. He also repeatedly harbored Jews in his basement or attic who were sick, had declining health, or were in danger of being relocated to Auschwitz. Each time he learned about Nazi schemes to assemble local Jews and bring them to the concentration camp, Kleinicke himself found every single Jewish man or woman that was at risk of being transferred to Auschwitz and cautioned them of their arrest. He would then either help them find a safe place to hide in Germany or assist them in advancing past the border, where they would be protected. He did all of this while risking his own life to save the lives of others.

Eventually, in 1943, Kleinicke's Nazi superiors became aware that many Jewish prisoners under his authority had disappeared. Helmut Kleinicke was removed from his position as construction supervisor and lost his ability to rescue Jews. After Germany's surrender in World War II, he was held captive in a British prison for his association with the Nazi party. Many of the Jews that he had rescued wrote letters revealing the goodness of the German engineer's actions. Many of these survivors, such as Josef Konigsberg, avowed that they "owed their lives" to Kleinicke. As a result of these testimonies, he was freed from his prison four years later and absolved of his crimes. After being released, Kleinicke very rarely spoke of his courageous deeds, even to those he saved. Several survivors wrote to him after the war expressing their gratefulness, but he never responded, perhaps out of modesty. The exact number

of the Jewish lives Helmut Kleinicke saved is unknown, as he did not keep track, but it is estimated to have been in the hundreds.

Despite the personal risk, Helmut Kleinicke showed moral courage by working against the Nazi party to save Jewish people, who were barely considered humans at the time. Kleinicke was not Jewish, but regardless of their differences, he provided hundreds more Jewish people with the opportunity to live the rest of their lives. This morally courageous man reminded me to always accept and treat all people with equality, even those who are different from me.

I was recently faced with a decision to either accept or neglect someone, just as Kleinicke had to either accept or neglect the Jews. A woman who I have known for much of my life was never married but recently gave birth to a baby girl. At first, I morally struggled with this situation because my Catholic faith tells me to wait until marriage to have children. I realized that although her actions may contradict my beliefs, I should still treat her with the fairness and respect as I do others. I learned that I do not have to treat her differently, nor change my beliefs to continue to have a good relationship with her. Many people overlooked her and her child because of the difference in beliefs, but I decided to accept and recognize her just the same.

Although the decision I had to make was much less difficult than the one with which Kleinicke was faced, a decision as simple as accepting someone could positively impact their life. Helmut Kleinicke made a morally courageous decision to risk his own life for the Jewish people. His story makes me ask myself: when some can risk their lives for others, why can't I do something as simple as accept others, regardless of our differences? The answer is simple. I *can*.

He was light in the world of the Jews that he saved, and he has motivated me to be the light in the dark moments of others. Inspired by Helmut Kleinicke, I will always remember to not only accept, but treat all people fairly, regardless of our differences. During the years of the Holocaust, a darkness fell over our world, but even the smallest flicker of light provided hundreds with the opportunity to live the rest of their lives. Helmut Kleinicke has inspired me to become that light in the darkness of the lives of others.