

## FIRST PLACE MIDDLE SCHOOL PROSE

*Unwavering Essence, Unwavering Strength*

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*It was like being in a kettle.*

With the Russians advancing from the east and American, English, and French troops moving in from the west, the Nazis were feeling the heat. Officials ordered the elimination of all witnesses to their attempt at a “Final Solution.” So on May 7, 1945, more than thirty SS officers entered the Brännlitz camp connected to Oskar Schindler’s “armaments factory” intending to kill the more than 1,000 Jews still living there. I, Leopold Pfefferberg, was one of those Jews.

*Inside the camp, pressure started to build.*

The SS officers didn’t know that Schindler had warned us of their plans and helped us to devise a plan of our own. They were completely surprised when we attacked and disarmed them. Many of the other Jewish prisoners demanded that the SS officers be killed. Their fury was understandable. For years, the Nazis had treated us as disposable, as animals. They had stolen our lives; this was a chance for payback.

*But even when water is heated until it vaporizes, it is still water. The form is different, but the essence is the same.*

The other Jewish leaders and I refused to lower ourselves to the level of our persecutors. We were not killers. We were human, and we behaved as such. Not even the Holocaust could change that. So for three days we held the SS officers in the camp and then turned them over to the Russians who liberated us.

After the war, the memory of that decision gave me the strength to rebuild my life. Despite all I’d been through, it confirmed that I was still the man I’d always been. I was still the courageous army officer who had looked a Nazi soldier in the eye, unflinching, as he beat me; the resilient worker who learned welding and metal polishing because those skills could keep me alive; the bicycle rider who delivered hope in the form of bread and advice to those in the ghetto. Once liberated, I worked with the UN Relief Fund, setting up schools for refugee children so that they could have a brighter future. I emigrated to America and didn’t let challenges like a language barrier keep me from opening my own business within three weeks. And I relentlessly told the story of Oskar Schindler to anyone who would listen until finally a book was published and the world learned what he had done.

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The realization that people can stay true to themselves continues to offer hope. Today, our biggest enemy is each other. Reports of hate, lies, and violence fill the news. A single community can be both victim and attacker. But to initiate change, it only takes one person to stand up for what is right; to remember the essence of who they are; to insist, “We are human, and we behave as a human people.” That is courage. That is resilience. That is hope.