

The Luxury of Oblivion
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Survivor Testimony: Renee Firestone

Question #33: How many Jews were killed during the Holocaust?

- a. Five million
- b. Six million
- c. Seven million
- d. Eight million

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I am faced with this disturbing attempt at capturing the oppression, discrimination, and injustice of the Holocaust into a single question. The problem isn't that I don't know the answer—I know it's six million—the problem is that if I were to see this on a test, I would circle the letter 'b' without any hesitation, any sense of remorse, any genuine human emotion. I could move on to the next question without a second thought about what that answer really means. Six million—six million human beings. The light of life within six million innocent people, extinguished, burned out by blind hatred.

The Holocaust to me was just a date to memorize...*When did the Holocaust begin?* My brain would spit out the date like an automated machine: January 30, 1933. That was it. But that's not reality.

Reality is Renee Firestone. Reality is the story of a young girl from Czechoslovakia, whose life was robbed from her. At only 19 years old, Renée was thrust into Auschwitz: a world of humiliation, abuse, and degradation. The first time Renée lined up waiting to be fed and accounted for, three blankets were half-heartedly discarded onto the ground in front of her. The blankets were moving. She later found out that under those blankets lay three fellow prisoners with diabetes; however, their insulin had been confiscated from them. They were dying. They were merely there to be accounted for, their lives worth nothing more than a tally on a sheet. This was the Holocaust. Not just a date, but real people with real stories about the hell they were sentenced to.

However, I have the luxury of oblivion. I can choose to forget the meaning of the word "Holocaust" as I please, for I have no ties to it. I can ignore the stories, the gruesome tales about what occurred, simply because I can't relate. I have never seen my skin translucent, malnourished to the point where I can count all the 206 bones in my body. I have never felt that level of fear—real fear. Not the kind of fear of failing a test or of public speaking, but the kind of fear that my next breath would be my last, that my heart would succumb to the pain, or that the brittle bones in my feet would break from the crushing weight of my skeleton.

But now, I know hell exists. It lives in every soul, every fiber, every remnant of those who endured the Holocaust. Every mother with no daughter, every son with no father, every child with no brother, hell lives within them. When you have the luxury of oblivion, it's easy to avoid topics that make us uncomfortable, but we cannot simply cast aside stories like Renée's. We must remember them for the cruel reality that they were. Oblivion may be easy and comforting, but it's merely a romanticized facade masking ignorance. Oblivion circles the letter 'b' without flinching; it hears the Holocaust and thinks of a number. This resides in all of us, and must be rejected.