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If “a hero is an ordinary individual who finds the strength to persevere and endure in spite of overwhelming obstacles,” then Magda Herzberger is certainly a hero (Christopher Reeve). She, an author, poet, and Holocaust survivor, went through some awfully terrible times in her life. Still, she carried on. Magda Herzberger persevered despite having to withstand the atrocious deeds of the Nazis during the Holocaust.

When Magda Herzberger was in fourth grade, Nazis started taking over the government in Cluj, Romania. She was incessantly bullied by her teachers and classmates for simply being Jewish. Her father lost his job because Jews could no longer work in public positions, and as a result, her family moved to a small apartment. However, not long after they moved there, they were relocated to a ghetto on the borders of town. This area was essentially a dump. Herzberger and her family had to sleep on the ground next to an old factory. They did not even have running water. Worse, she and her family were deported and sent to concentration camps. On her way, she was locked in a cattle cart for three days with no food or bathrooms. Herzberger was already being faced with the treatment of an animal, and she was only 17 at the time (Ellis). Little did she know what was waiting for her later on.

Magda visited three concentration camps, Auschwitz, Bremen, and Bergen Belsen, places “where love and compassion were dead” (Hansen). There, she was forced to do dreadfully difficult labor without sufficient nutrition to keep her healthy. Prisoners became so weak that they were described as “walking skeletons” (Ellis). Not only were the victims malnourished, the barracks were infected with lice, dysentery,

typhus, and tuberculosis. Herzberger had to sleep outdoors next to the dead bodies to avoid getting sick. People died every day from malnutrition, cruel experimentation, disease, or being gassed. The air reeked of rotting flesh. Due to the harsh camp conditions and despicable acts of the Nazis against her well-being, Herzberger was lying in a pile of corpses on the verge on death when a British soldier found her and liberated her.

Despite all her struggles, Magda Herzberger persevered. After being liberated from the Bergen Belsen camp, she suffered from PTSD and depression. Often, she would have nightmares about her horrifying past. Nevertheless, she overcame this. Her new motto became “Start the day with a smile and not a tear; but with courage and no fear” (Cruz). Instead of ignoring her difficulties, she faced them head on. Even after being a victim of such cruel treatment, she “put a ray of hope inside when all [she] saw was darkness” (Cruz). She published eight books, some of which describe her experiences during the Holocaust. Although she struggled doing so, Herzberger believed it was her duty to “revisit hell” in order to share her story.

Magda Herzberger lived through obstacles in her earlier life, but she overcame them. What is most inspiring about her is that she did not let those obstacles stop her from making her mark on the world. In fact, she brought those negative experiences to her advantage by writing and speaking about them which inspired hope and change. Not only is her writing motivational, but her story is encouraging in itself. It shows that no matter what you have going against you, where there is a will, there is a way. It is up

to you whether you are willing to have enough guts to keep going when the going gets tough.

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Holocaust Rescuer Essay

By: Grace Brown

He was executed. This man was killed just like the millions of others in camps during the Holocaust. He was beaten, bruised, bloodied, and broken at the hands of the SS and Nazis. But this man was more than just one of the masses of bodies that had been mercilessly littered throughout Germany. Johan (Joop) Westerweel was more than just another number; he was a teacher, a father, and a rescuer. During his short-lived life Joop had to make many hard choices and decisions, but all his work did not go without recognition. Because of the choices he made during his life Joop inspired and saved hundreds from facing death, even if he could not save himself.

Joop Westerweel was born in the Netherlands in the year 1899. His parents were Derbits, and they raised him with a “strict Christian background” (“Teachers Who Rescued Jews”). Religion “instilled in him a sense of justice for all and a belief in the basic goodness of mankind” (“Teachers Who Rescued Jews”). Joop carried his religion with him his entire life; and as the war was beginning, more and more men were being forced to join the army. Due to his religious beliefs Joop refused and was fired from his teaching position in the Dutch Indies (“Teachers Who Rescued Jews”). Nevertheless, he did not let this minor setback stop him from continuing his career. Next, he taught at Werkplaats in Bilthoven, left that position, and then became principle of a Montessori school (“Teachers Who Rescued Jews”). A Montessori education is one that is “based on self directed activity, hands-on learning and collaborative play” (“What is a Montessori Education?”). He also married and had four children with his wife Wilhelmina. Even with four kids and careers of their own, Joop and his wife “dedicated their lives to helping

others” (“Teachers Who Rescued Jews”). Because of their inspirational drive to help others, the Westerweel’s began a journey that would change their lives forever.

Being a teacher, Joop began to come in contact with many Jewish students in need of aid. To help them, he and his wife would even take the “Jewish refugees into their home” (“Teachers Who Rescued Jews”). During this time the Germans were pushing the Jews out, but Joop was letting them in. It took lots of courage to go against the power, but Joop did it even if it meant putting his own family at risk. After the family had begun taking in Jews they got word that a group of *halutzim* (Zionist pioneers) were about to be deported (“Teachers Who Rescued Jews”). Determined to save them, Joop got his colleagues to band together and form a group to save the people of the *halutzim*. Together the group created an “escape route for young Jews fleeing the Netherlands” (“Ona Simaite, Joop Westerweel, Irena Sendler”). As time went on the plan proved very effective and the Westerweel group was getting people out of German territory safely. They “smuggled between 150-200 Jews to Belgium on to France, and from there to Switzerland and Spain” (“Ona Simaite, Joop Westerweel, Irena Sendler”). This continued until things went sideways when “[o]n March 11, 1944, Joop and his co-worker Bouke Koning were caught at the Belgium border” (“Teachers Who Rescued Jews”).

While Westerweel escorted two Jewish women out of Germany and into Belgium, he was captured and arrested on site (“Teachers Who Rescued Jews”). Joop was then taken to Vught concentration camp which had two sections. The section that he was in was meant for Dutch and Belgium prisoners, which housed men and women (“Concentration Camps: Vught”). The other half housed Jewish prisoners. At the camp, “food was nearly non-existent” (“Concentration Camps: Vught”). Also the SS guards “provoked the dogs to attack prisoners” leaving many with

severe wounds (“Concentration Camps: Vught”). Torture was a common occurrence as well; Joop was one of the prisoners who had to experience this. During his brutal torture, the guards tried to break him into revealing who he was working with. But even through malnourishment and torture, Joop never revealed his contacts within the Westerweel group (“Teachers Who Rescued Jews”). He was then executed in front of the entire camp. Wilhelmina had been moved to the Vught concentration camp, and witnessed her own husband's execution (“Teachers Who Rescued Jews”). A man who had only ever used his life to help people had been murdered in cold blood.

Joop Westerweel is an inspiration. He bested adversity, saved many, and changed lives. He took Jews into the comfort and sanctity of his own home (“Teachers Who Rescued Jews”). Joop brought it upon himself to create a group to save people during the Holocaust, many of whom were Jews and he was not even Jewish. He saved them because it was the right thing to do. During the short time before his execution, he even “became a spiritual leader for many of the prisoners” (“Teachers Who Rescued Jews”). It was said that he still had “unfailing high spirits in the face of the brutality of camp” (“Teachers Who Rescued Jews”). Joop was more than just an inspiration, he was a good person. No matter the circumstances he did what he knew was the right thing, and everyone should aspire to have this level of self confidence in their actions. Joop did not even know the people he was saving. Everything that he did in his life was an inspiration to many, and will be for a long time.

Joop Westerweel had a very courageous personality that inspired many, and drove him to save people during the Holocaust. He did many things in his life that showed this. For example, even in hard times, he kept to his religion. He also created a rescue group and put the

lives of others before his own. What he did was important because not only did he save lives, Joop stayed true to his beliefs. Although ultimately resulting in his death, his strength of character and determination allowed him to help many. Joop was a true hero during the Holocaust. In order to save others, Joop Westerweel took a stand against the powerful Nazi regime, even in the hardest and darkest of times. Perhaps someone could have done the same for him.

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