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Have You Ever Seen a Ghost?

Danny Ghitis

Have you ever seen a ghost? I thought I had.

After coming home from the March of the Living, during which I had visited Nazi death camps, I gave a Friday night presentation about my experiences at my synagogue. Afterwards, the congregation held an *oneg*, a reception where hors d'oeuvres and drinks are served. I found myself standing alone, immersed in thought about the March, trying to make sense of my life that I now found to be trivial. Then, as though a sixth sense made me aware that I was being watched, I turned to my left and noticed a figure. The image I saw was not of that of an ordinary man. For all I knew, I may have invoked a spirit or a personification of the experience in my speech. Our eyes met; it seemed like an eternity that I looked far into them. He was enfeebled by age: his pale skin was blotched, and the world-weary look in his eyes had a quiet sobering effect on me. With his eyes fixed on mine, the man began to speak: "You know, I'm from Hungary." During the war, his family had been rushed to the edge of town. He stopped to watch a Nazi stormtrooper accost a middle-aged woman, ordering her to remove her wedding band. She adamantly refused. The man's voice quivered as he said, "So he cut off her finger in front of everybody." The tears rolled down his face as he staggered away, and I watched, dumbfounded.

I came to my senses and frantically wove around the chatting adults, all drinking their special coffee; I searched for the man's worn figure, but I could not see him. Was this a ghost I had encountered? Finally, I caught him turning a corner. The old man slowed and glanced at me as if beckoning me to come. I approached him, trying to restrain myself but I had to blurt out, "Sir, please tell me the rest of your story. I want to listen." He hesitated, sighed, and began in strongly Yiddish-tinged English: "Well, it was 1944 when Germany took Hungary..."

Formerly, I had believed obstinately that anyone who had

witnessed such atrocities or had beheld the sites where they occurred, as in my case, was bound to exist merely to attest to the crimes that had been committed. Hoping for a response to the contrary, I asked the wizened old man, "Didn't your experience destroy your faith in mankind? How did you...?" But he cut me off. He told me that he had suppressed this nightmare for most of his life. The old man went on to tell me about the family that he had built after the war. I learned that although he had faced a virtually insurmountable darkness, he now looked only forward because life was "still a beautiful thing."

After the old man spoke, I understood that my existence was more than a combination of molecules that were unimportant in the grand scheme of things. The nameless old man's poignant message allowed me gradually to translate what I had known before, only subconsciously, into a vivid awareness of my reason for being. I now use this lesson, as well as my life experiences, to tell myself to live every moment as if it were my last. Thus, I began a nationwide program to raise Holocaust awareness and give others the opportunity to find a deeper appreciation of life. As for the old man, I have not see him since.