

# HOLOCAUST CENTER OF NORTHERN CALIFORNIA



## 2008 Morris Weiss Scholarship

### About Morris Weiss

Morris Weiss was a founder of the Holocaust Center of Northern California. A survivor of ten concentration camps who testified at trials for crimes committed during World War II, Morris Weiss was dedicated to keeping the lessons of the Holocaust alive. In his memory, his family established a writing contest open to 11th and 12th grade Bay Area students. The winner receives a \$1500 college scholarship. The Holocaust Center of Northern California thanks all participants for their entries and congratulates the 2008 winner Ariela Koehler.

### The Writing Contest

The 2008 Morris Weiss Scholarship focused on the issue of personal accountability. The writing contest prompt was as follows:

Can you recall a time in your life where you were either a witness to, an active participant in or were subjected to bullying, humiliation or isolation involving a friend, classmate or complete stranger? If so, what happened? Would you react differently than you did at the time? Why? In your essay, examine your personal experience in the context of the Holocaust.



**Ariela Koehler** *Grade 11, Irvington High School, Fremont*

*“First they came for the socialists,  
And I did not speak out –  
Because I was not a socialist.  
  
Then they came for the Jews,  
And I did not speak out –  
Because I was not a Jew...”*

My Sunday School teacher’s words droned on as I diverted my attention to counting the water marks on the beige ceiling. I had heard this poem before. I viewed it as The Holocaust Poem. I had always taken it as just a standard poem about the Holocaust, but that night, as I sat in a plastic orange chair attached to a wooden veneer desk, I thought about Natsumi Kato.

Second grade. I was a bubbly blonde, a cute little girl. After a lesson one day, our teacher announced that we would be getting a new student. The class erupted with joy. A new student meant one more person on our class soccer team so we could finally beat Room 21. A new student meant finally when we played charades on rainy days, we would have even teams. Everyone was excited the day of her arrival.

I remember it well.

Ms. Harris went outside to open the door and Natsumi shyly stepped inside. The moment we saw her we bombarded her with questions.

“Are you good at soccer?”

“What’s your favorite color?”

“What school did you come from?”

It didn’t take us long to figure out that the only word she knew in English was “yes.”

I liked to think that Natsumi spent all her time with me because she liked me, but at the beginning, she spent all her time with me because I was the only kid who would spend time with her. That was fine with me, though. I loved her. We would spend our recesses alternating turns doing what I wanted to do and then what she wanted to do. As we were playing, we would teach each other words. I would point to my peanut-butter and jelly sandwich and say “sandwich.” Have her repeat it. She would point, say “*tabemono.*” Have me repeat it. That’s how we spent our time together. People kept commenting on how quickly her English was improving. I always smiled to myself whenever I heard that, feeling secretly responsible for part of her success.

As she became more fluent and confident in English, she started speaking it out loud. When she had spoken Japanese before, it sounded beautiful and poetic. But now that she was speaking English, her accent was full blown. She stuck out more in English than she ever did in Japanese.

We were painting flowers for Mother’s Day when I heard Natsumi crying. I turned around. Three kids were standing over her, imitating her accent. “*Natsumi, rill yeeoh preese pass meh dee relloh peenntt? Geeve meh dee peenntt.*” I could not believe it. These kids were my *classmates*. I had gone over to their houses before, played with them, met their families. I went up to them and told them to stop. My heart was beating so hard I was waiting for it to pop out of my chest. They didn’t stop. I asked them again to stop. They refused. I then committed the taboo, the ultimate embarrassment: I told the teacher. I told the teacher what they were doing to Natsumi.

Twenty minutes later, they were at home.

I had the title of “The Tattle-Taler” for about two weeks and then it died down. Still, I would not have changed my actions for anything.

I never really understood all those “thank-yous” I received from others and Natsumi until I started school as a new student. We moved right after eighth grade, and I started my freshman year of high school not knowing a single person. I kept thinking of Natsumi – I knew I had it a lot easier than she -- at least I could speak English. But still, I found my face getting hot whenever I went up to a random group of kids and asked them if I could eat lunch with them. The answer was always “yes,” but that wasn’t what was reflected in their actions. It took me a year to find “my group.” They did not judge me as a “new student.” They saw me for who I was, not as “the new kid,” and now I could never ask for better friends.

*... Then they came for me –  
And there was no one left to speak for me.”*

I understood it. For the first time I got the poem, I *really* got it. How it is important to stand up for others because you will never know when you will need an advocate or friend. Finally I could connect the poem and my experiences with Natsumi to the lesson of the day: the Holocaust. During the Holocaust, people spoke out for others who were being persecuted. If they did not speak out, then they sheltered them or found other ways to help. Not only did most act without the expectation of reciprocity, they did so at great risk to themselves. The lesson of the Holocaust teaches us that regardless of the gravity of the situation, whether helping a friend in need or risking one’s life to save another, it is important to speak up for those who are unable to speak for themselves.



#### **About the Holocaust Center of Northern California**

For close to 30 years the Holocaust Center of Northern California has worked to increase awareness in the Bay Area about the causes and consequences of racism, anti-semitism, intolerance and indifference during the Holocaust and today.

#### **At the Holocaust Center of Northern California**

A renowned Survivor Speakers Bureau  
One of the world’s largest Yizkor book collections  
Unsurpassed educational programs  
World famous speakers  
Cutting-edge cultural events

HCNC sponsors teacher training, lectures, films, and educational and cultural events throughout the year, demonstrating that the lessons of the Holocaust are relevant in our pluralistic society and complex world.

121 Steuart St. San Francisco, CA 94105  
415.777.9060  
[www.hcnc.org](http://www.hcnc.org)