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Meet the Young Climate Activist Whose Story About His Survivor Grandparents Went Viral

Jeremy Ornstein, 18, was part of a sit-in outside of Nancy Pelosi's D.C. office last week, during which he emotionally recounted his family's Holocaust history: 'What I do know is that everyone has a story to share,' he tells Haaretz

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Jeremy Ornstein speaking about his survivor grandparents during a sit-in protest by climate activists outside of Rep. Nancy Pelosi's office in Washington, November 14, 2018. Olivia Freiwald

His cheeks flushed, his voice hoarse, 18-year-old Jeremy Ornstein delivered an emotional plea outside of Democratic Rep. Nancy Pelosi's Washington office last week, as seen in a video that has since been viewed 9 million times online.

He linked his motivation to fight for action on climate change to the story of his [survivor](#) grandparents. He said their experiences in the [Holocaust](#) had forced him to “grow up” and recognize the power of politicians' rhetoric to do good or unleash terrible harm.

Ornstein asked the [Democratic leadership](#) to also “grow up,” and join him and the dozens of other young protesters who had crammed into the hallway outside of Pelosi's office, as part of a sit-in demanding that she support a Green New Deal.

The Green New Deal has been receiving a lot of media attention in recent days. It is spearheaded by Rep.-elect [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez](#), a Democrat of New York. She also attended the sit-in organized by Ornstein and his fellow members in Sunrise, a movement of young people uniting to tackle global warming.

The teenager from Massachusetts is the former chair of the High School Democrats of America, and earlier this year deferred his acceptance to Harvard University to become a full-time climate activist.

In his speech outside of Pelosi's office, Ornstein recounted being a child and watching his brother being gently scolded by their parents for reading their grandmother's Holocaust memoir. The boys were told they were too young to read it.

“I remember asking myself: When will I be old enough to read those stories?” he says in the video, recalling the devastation he later felt after learning details of the Nazi genocide. “[I] read that the Nazis pretended that the gas chambers were showers [in order] to kill the Jews. And I remember that I was devastated by that fact. ... And before I left that room, I had to grow up. So many times in the past few years I have had to grow up. Like the first, second and third time I read about kids being shot in schools.

“And every time that I read or see about the aftermath of climate-fueled disasters, like the fires that are killing people, record fires, I read that and my resolve is so shaken and I have to grow up,” he continued.

He recounted the most recent time he had needed to “grow up”: Hearing his own father break down while he told his son a live shooter was in a synagogue in Pittsburgh. “My grandparents knew that when politicians plant seeds of fear and hate, those seeds turn into bullets and blood,” Ornstein said.

He then pivoted to Pelosi and the Democratic leadership, asking them, “When will you confront the roots of division and hatred? When will you come up with a plan to stop the climate crisis?”

Speaking to Haaretz by phone from Watertown, the Boston suburb where he lives, Ornstein says he was arrested at the sit-in after he and his fellow activists refused to leave until they met with Pelosi.

He came up with the idea of telling what he calls his “story” after he and other young activists met with Marshall Ganz last year, and the senior lecturer at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government asked them: “Why are you involved?”

“None of us had good answers,” admits Ornstein. So, he began working with one of Ganz’s doctoral students and started focusing on his call to activism being connected to his Hungarian-born grandparents’ story of surviving the Holocaust, and the hope they instilled in him through their own fight.

He honed his story – which feels like a mix of spoken word and public confession – over time, including on the drive down to Washington last week, he says.

His Jewish identity has played a role in his activist identity in other ways, too. “Thinking about my connection to this one group, Judaism and Jews, allows me to be connected to a bigger group,” Ornstein says.

“Part of what I was thinking of in my story was that our president and politicians inspire fear when they talk about a caravan of invaders,” he says. “And I think about my grandparents, who cried when they saw the Statue of Liberty. How can I remain a Jew whose family faced very

specific persecution by Nazis and [anti-Semitism](#), and not fight for someone else to have a home?”

For Ornstein, climate activism was the obvious problem upon which to focus. “It’s so big, it is going to affect every corner of our lives,” he says. It is also tied to the story of his grandparents as refugees, he says, citing the argument that a drought in Syria led to internal migration in that country, exacerbating tensions that ultimately led to the country’s civil war.

“I am scared of the way politicians who profit from gas money will shift the blame and make us scared of migrants, instead of the drought they help foster,” he says.

Ornstein admits to being taken aback by how many people have watched and shared the video of him presenting his story (nearly 5,000 comments and [over 80,000 shares on Facebook](#)). “But what I do know is that everyone has a story to share. And the more people share our stories, the better decisions our leaders will be forced to make,” he says.

“I am doing this because my grandparents fought to survive and I want my kids to get to have this world too,” he continues. “When I think of this line of generations, I am doing it for us – but for more than us. When I think about that, the stakes get so much higher. This moment becomes even more crucial.”