

## CHILDREN OF THE HOLOCAUST

### Who Were They?

They were young, they had dreams, but they faced a world turned upside down. The events of the Holocaust stole the dreams and childhoods of many. Many were forced from their roles as children into early adulthood, losing their innocence either by what they witnessed or experienced.

Some of the Jewish children were able to survive with help from their families or others who were sympathetic to their plight. The experiences of children who were victims of Nazi hatred varied widely. Factors such as age, gender, family wealth and where a child lived affected their experiences under German domination. Generally, babies and younger children deported to ghettos and camps had almost no chance of surviving. Children in their teens, or younger children who looked more mature than their years, had a better chance of survival since they might be selected for slave labor rather than for death. Some teens participated in resistance activities as well.

Children who were victims of the Holocaust came from all over Europe. They had different languages, customs, and religious beliefs. Some came from wealthy families; others from poor homes. Many ended their schooling early to work in a craft or trade; others looked forward to continuing their education at the university level. Still, whatever their differences, they shared one commonality: by the 1930s, with the rise of the Nazis to power in Germany, they all became potential victims and their lives were forever changed.

### What is the Holocaust?

**Holocaust.** The word alone has come to stand for the ultimate in horror. The Holocaust was Nazi Germany's plan to destroy every last Jew in Europe—perhaps in the world .It came horribly close to succeeding.

The Holocaust was the state-sponsored, systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jewry by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945. Jews were the primary victims—six million were murdered—two-thirds of the Jewish population of Europe. In 1933, when Adolf Hitler was named Chancellor, the most powerful position in the German government, there were nine million Jews who lived in Europe. Roma (Gypsies), the handicapped, and Poles were also targeted for destruction for racial, ethnic, or national reasons. Millions more, including homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Soviet prisoners of war, and political dissidents, also suffered severe oppression and death under Nazi tyranny.

Hitler's antisemitic ideas only succeeded because millions of Germans found it easy to accept these ideas. This was surprising because Germany was one of the most educated and enlightened countries in the world. Its universities were world famous. German music, arts, and literature were also appreciated around the world. In science and technology, Germany was second to none. Jews had been not only accepted citizens, but influential ones. Many German Jews fought for Germany during World War I.

But the first World War took a terrible toll on the German people. Germany suffered total defeat. Six million Germans lost their jobs. Desperation spread. People longed for someone to blame. Centuries-old hatred of Jews in Europe made them the easiest target. Jews were often seen as outsiders even though many Jewish families lived in Germany for hundreds of years.

There may be no more succinct description of the Holocaust than the statement issued by the Vatican on March 12, 1998:

This century has witnessed an unspeakable tragedy, which can never be forgotten: the attempt by the Nazi regime to exterminate the Jewish people, with the consequent killing of millions of Jews. Women and men, old and young, children and infants, for the sole reason of their Jewish origin, were persecuted and deported. Some were killed immediately, while others were degraded, ill-treated, tortured and utterly robbed of their human dignity, and then murdered. Very few of those who entered the [Concentration] Camps survived and those who did remained scarred for life. This was the Shoah.

### **What Were the Lives of Children Like During the Holocaust?**

During the Holocaust, children were subjected to many injustices and cruelties. At first, Jewish and Roma (Gypsy) children were restricted from going to school, and German children were taught that the Jews and Roma (Gypsies) were racially inferior. One of the methods used to teach Gentile children about this inferiority was to have Jewish children come to the front of the classroom while the teacher pointed out their distinguishing features. Shortly, restrictions were placed on the Jews and later they were forbidden to go to German schools at all.

Later, the Jews were forced to live in ghettos with their families. The conditions in these ghettos were very bad and children often risked their lives to smuggle food into the ghetto in order to help feed their families. Many children were left homeless in the ghettos as their parents were either killed or deported to concentration camps.

Children were also deported to concentration camps where in some cases medical experiments were performed on them or they were forced to do slave labor. Some of the most notorious examples of experiments were performed by a man named Josef Mengele who focused on children and adults who were twins and those with unusual features or handicaps.

Approximately one-and-a-half million children were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators between 1933 and 1945. The overwhelming majority of them were Jewish. Thousands of Roma (Gypsy) children, disabled children, and Polish children were also among the victims.

The deaths of these children were not accidental: they were the deliberate result of actions taken by the German government under the leadership of Chancellor Adolf Hitler. The children were killed in various ways. Many were shot; many more were suffocated with poisonous gas in the gas chambers of the concentration camps. Others perished

from disease, starvation, exposure to harsh weather, torture, and/or severe physical exhaustion from slave labor.

### **How Did Children's Lives Change During the Holocaust?**

Soon after the Nazis gained power in Germany, Jewish children found life increasingly difficult. Due to legislation prohibiting Jews from engaging in various professions, their parents lost jobs and businesses. As a result, many families were left with little money. Jewish children were not allowed to participate in sports and social activities with their "Aryan" (the term the Nazis took to define themselves as the Aryan race that was superior to all other groups of people) classmates and neighbors. They could not go to museums, movies, public playgrounds, parks, or even swimming pools. Even when they were permitted to go to school, teachers often treated them with scorn and encouraged the other students to humiliate them. Frequently, Jewish students were subject to being taunted and teased, picked upon and beaten up. Eventually, Jewish and Gypsy children were expelled from German schools.

The Nazi government passed laws that discriminated against Jews, including Jewish children. Jews lost their citizenship rights. They were marked by the Nazis so they could be easily identified: at first, they carried identity cards with the letter J stamped on them, and later, they were required to wear a yellow patch in the shape of a six-pointed star, called the Star of David. In November 1938, a violent anti-Jewish attack, called the "Night of Broken Glass," or *Kristallnacht* in German, took place where gangs of Nazi vandals destroyed the property, synagogues, homes and businesses of Jewish people.

When World War II broke out in 1939, life became even harder for children all over Europe. Children of all European backgrounds experienced hardships because of the war. However, only certain groups of children were singled out for "extinction." As Elie Wiesel once said, ". . . although all the victims of the Holocaust were not Jewish, all Jews were victims of the Holocaust."

With the onset of war, Jewish children in Germany suffered increasing deprivations. Nazi government officials confiscated many items of value from Jewish homes, including radios, telephones, cameras, and cars. Even more importantly, food rations were made smaller for Jews as were clothing ration cards. Jewish children felt more and more isolated. Similarly, as Germany conquered various European countries in their war effort—from Poland and parts of Russia in the east, to Denmark, Norway, Belgium, France, and the Netherlands in the west—more and more Jewish children came under German control and, with their parents, experienced persecution, forced separations, and very often, murder.

Throughout Europe, Jewish families were forced to give up their homes and relocate into ghettos—restricted areas set up by the Nazis as "Jewish residential districts." People were sent far away from the cities that had been their homes for as long as they could remember. Families had to decide what essentials to bring with them as they were restricted to bringing only what they could carry. The trains that carried the Jews away were overcrowded with people and suitcases. The Nazis did not tell the Jews where they

were going. Moving under these circumstances brought with it fear and uncertainty about the future.

Most of the ghettos were located in German-occupied Poland; most were established in the poorer, more dilapidated sections of towns and cities. Ghettos were fenced in, typically with barbed wire or brick walls. Entry and exit were by permit or pass only; like a prison, armed guards stood at gates. Families inside the ghettos lived under horrid conditions. Typically, many families would be crowded into a few rooms where there was little if any heat, food, or privacy. It was difficult to keep clean. Many people in the ghettos perished from malnutrition, starvation, exposure, and epidemics. Typhus, a contagious disease spread by body lice, was common, as was typhoid, spread through contaminated drinking water. There were no telephones and little mail delivered, making communication with the outside world nearly impossible.

In order to survive, children had to be resourceful and make themselves useful. In Lodz, healthy children could survive by working. Small children in the largest ghetto in occupied Poland, Warsaw, sometimes helped smuggle food and medicines to their families and friends by crawling through narrow openings in the ghetto wall. They did so at considerable risk, as smugglers who were caught were severely punished.

### **Concentration Camps**

The concentration camp is most closely associated with the Holocaust and remains an enduring symbol of the Nazi regime. The first camps opened soon after the Nazis took power in January 1933; they continued as a basic part of the Nazi rule until May 8, 1945, when the war and the Nazi regime ended. The events of the Holocaust occurred in two main phases: 1933-1939 and 1939-1945.

When Jews arrived in the concentration camp, the Nazis took away all of their remaining possessions. Those who were deemed fit for work began a new, harsh existence inside the camp. Their heads were shaved, they were given identity numbers that were sometimes tattooed on their arms, and they were forced to wear prison uniforms. They were given barely enough food on which to survive. People were constantly dying of hunger, exhaustion, and disease. They worked all day at hard physical labor and slept at night in crowded barracks.

Those who could not work--the sick, the old and young children--were separated from family members upon their arrival to the concentration camp. Often, these individuals would be immediately killed or sent to the gas chambers in the death camps.

### **Children in Hiding**

Some children managed to escape deportation to ghettos by going into hiding with their families or by hiding alone, aided by non-Jewish friends and neighbors. Children in hiding often took on a secret life, sometimes remaining in one room for months or even years. Some hid in woodpiles, attics, barns or even sewers; others were locked in cupboards or concealed closets, coming out infrequently and only at night. Boys had it more difficult, because they were circumcised and could therefore be identified. With identities

disguised, and often physically concealed from the outside world, these youngsters faced constant fear, dilemmas, and danger. Theirs was a life in shadows, where a careless remark or the murmurings of inquisitive neighbors could lead to discovery and death.

Children were often forced to live lives independent of their families. Many children who found refuge with others outside the ghettos had to assume new identities and conform to local religious customs that were different from their own in order to survive. Some Jewish children managed to pass as Catholics and were hidden in Catholic schools, orphanages, and convents in countries across Europe.

### **Orphan Children**

Everyday, children became orphaned and many had to take care of even younger children. In the ghettos of Warsaw and other cities, many orphans lived on the streets, begging for bread and food from others in the ghetto who likewise had little or none to spare. Exposed to severe weather, frostbite, disease, and starvation, these children did not survive for long. Many froze to death.

### **Kindertransport**

Following *Kristallnacht*, the Night of the Broken Glass, on November 9, 1938, groups of Jewish children were transported to Britain for sanctuary via a program called *Kindertransport*. Although all countries were asked to give aid to Jewish children, only the United Kingdom agreed to help. The children had to be between the ages of 3 and 17 and they had to leave Germany alone, without their parents. Ten thousand children were transported to the United Kingdom on trains via Holland. Only about 20% of these children were reunited with their families.

### **Freedom (1945)**

As Germany began losing the war, the Nazis retreated from the advancing Allied soldiers, taking prisoners with them and stopping at camps along the way. In each of the camps, the prisoners were forced to work, and their hunger and exhaustion grew worse. In April 1945, the American Army liberated concentration camps in Germany. The survivors were freed and allowed to leave the camp. Many of the people who survived had lost their families, friends, and communities. They had to try to rebuild their lives from almost nothing. Over one million Jewish children and millions of adults were killed during the Holocaust.