



# ABSENCE OF HUMANITY: THE HOLOCAUST YEARS

An Exhibition of The William Breman Jewish Heritage & Holocaust Museum



## History and Historical Precedents

**B**etween 1933 and 1945, in Germany and other European countries, six million men, women, and children were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators. These people did not die because they were soldiers in battle. Neither were they guilty of any crimes. They died for one reason only: they were Jews.

In 70 C.E., the Romans destroyed the Second Temple and Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, the thriving Jewish nation. Many Jews fled, while others were forced to leave the land, and were dispersed throughout Europe and North Africa.

In fourth century Rome, upon declaring Christianity the state religion, the Christian church began its attack on Judaism, and attempted the forced conversion of Jews. The dominance of the Christian church in Europe, along with the rise of Islam in northern Africa, created situations for Jews that were to be precedents for some elements of the Holocaust:

**Identification badges:** As early as the seventh century, some Moslem countries ordered Jews and Christians to wear special clothing to distinguish them from “true believers.” The Fourth Lateran Council (1215), which sought to establish the visible power of Christianity, made the wearing of a badge obligatory for Jews in many European countries. The badge fell into disuse in the eighteenth century, and was revived by the Nazis in the form of the yellow star.

**Ghettos:** As early as the twelfth century, many Christian European communities confined Jews to special parts of towns. The first compulsory, walled ghetto was created in Poland in 1266 by the Church Council of Breslau. Many European cities had Jewish ghettos through the middle of the nineteenth century.

**Massacres:** In 1241, the entire Jewish community of Frankfurt am Main, Germany, was massacred. Twenty-four survivors were saved from death by accepting forced baptism. The Crusaders, on their holy mission to reconquer the “Land of the Bible,” massacred Jewish communities along the way. Blood libels, the false accusations that Jews take the blood of Christian children for religious purposes, and other trumped up charges were used to justify *pogroms*, violent actions, which often resulted in the massacre of entire Jewish communities.

**Anti-Jewish laws:** In most European countries, Jews were subject to economic restrictions, barred from owning land, and prohibited from certain jobs and professions.

**Expulsions:** The expulsion of Jews from an entire country began with England in 1290, followed by France, large areas of Germany, and then Spain, Portugal, and Italy. In the 1700s, Jews were expelled from parts of Russia.

The murder of six million Jews put into motion by the Nazis was the culmination of Christian and state anti-Jewish policies, and German nationalism:

The Christian missionaries said: “You cannot live among us as Jews.”

The secular rulers who followed them continued: “You cannot live among us.”

And, finally, the Nazis decreed: “You cannot live.”

Anti-Semitic poster, “The String-Puller,” Germany, 1924. Courtesy of Yad Vashem, Jerusalem



*My father wouldn't give up  
... He didn't want to come in  
1933 or '34 to the United  
States, because, he said, ... "I  
am not going to start over again  
from scratch. I am going to wait.  
This is not going to last." How  
wrong can you be?*

JOEL HECHT

**Cover photograph:** Surviving children, Buchenwald, Germany, c. April 11–June, 1945. American troops liberated the camp on April 11, 1945. *Federation Nationale des Deportés et Internes Résistants*, courtesy of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum



**Fabric stamped with Jewish badges. *Jude* is the German word meaning Jew. Germany, c.1939. Loaned by The Wannsee Museum, Germany**

## Jewish Life in Europe

**B**y the twentieth century, the Jews of Western Europe were emancipated from restrictions and prohibitions that had segregated them from the culture and commerce of the non-Jewish society. Although the nature of Jewish life was altered, anti-Semitism was not necessarily reduced. Most lived in the larger cities and towns, talked and dressed like their non-Jewish neighbors, and participated in the political, cultural, scientific, and educational life of their communities. Some assimilated into Christian society, while others retained their religious traditions and practices.

But conditions were different in Eastern Europe. There, the largest Jewish populations were concentrated in Poland, Russia, Hungary, and Romania, and anti-Jewish sentiments continued to result in outbreaks of violence. Many Jews lived in predominantly Jewish towns or villages called *shtetls*, separated from the majority culture. They spoke their own language, *Yiddish*, which combines elements of German and Hebrew. There was a vital and culturally rich society, full of fervent religious expression on the part of some, and enthusiastic embrace of ideological movements such as communism, socialism, and Zionism on the part of others. In the larger cities and towns, such as Lodz, Warsaw, or Vilna, some younger Jews began to adopt modern ways and dress, but the older generation continued to dress in the traditional garb of their grandparents.

Despite the presence of anti-Semitism and certain social restrictions existing in Germany before the Nazis came to power, it was there that intellectual and cultural life was most open to Jews. Although less than one percent of the country's population, Germany's Jews had enormous impact on its culture. Of the thirty-eight Nobel Prizes won by Germans between 1905 and 1936, fourteen were received by Jews.

## 1933: The Takeover of Power in Germany

**H**umiliated by defeat in World War I, Germany experienced rampant inflation, economic depression, and social unrest. The harsh conditions and the high reparations set by the Treaty of Versailles that followed Germany's defeat in World War I caused additional national bitterness. Millions were without work, worried about their future, and mistrustful of their government.

Against this background, an extreme right-wing, or conservative, party called the National Socialists (Nazis) and their leader, Adolph Hitler, began to rise to power. The Nazis won almost thirty-seven percent of the vote in the July 1932 presidential election, then, in November, suffered a setback upon losing thirty-four seats in the *Reichstag*, Germany's parliament. The two major parties, the Social Democrats and the Communists, lacked the foresight to work together. As a result, a coalition was formed with Hitler at its head, and on January 30, 1933, he was appointed Chancellor, head of Germany's government.

**Gisela and sister Erica Meyer (first and second from left) with three friends, Berlin, 1934. Gift of Gisela Meyer Spielberg**



*I think (my parents) probably began to think about leaving in 1936. But in order to leave you had to have a place to go. Most of the European countries did not allow Jews to enter unless they had relatives . . . America had a quota and you had to have a number to get in on that quota.*

GIA MEYER SPIELBERG

*How do you take fifty-five thousand people and fit them into an area where there were maybe four thousand or five thousand people? But when the gun is at your back and in your front, you find a space.*

BETTY GROSSMAN GOODFRIEND

On the night of February 27, the *Reichstag* building was set ablaze. Hitler blamed the Communists, and used the incident to invoke emergency constitutional provisions, suspending civil liberties and dissolving the parliament. It was the end of constitutional democratic government in Germany.

Hitler used the Jews and Communists as scapegoats and held them responsible for Germany's ills. A spellbinding speaker, he inspired Germans to rid Germany of "undesirables" and leave it for the "ethnically pure." Racism became the cornerstone of the Nazi regime, and Hitler's first hundred days in power were marked by government-orchestrated policies of discrimination against Jews.

The official Nazi campaign of persecution began on April 1, 1933 with a one-day boycott of Jewish-owned businesses and shops. On April 7, the Civil Service Law dismissed all non-ethnic Germans from government jobs. This was the first of four hundred separate laws enacted between 1933 and 1939 that defined, isolated, excluded, segregated, and impoverished German Jews.

## 1934–1939: The Assault on German Jews

### The Terror Begins

**T**he Nazis used newly enacted laws and terror to force Jewish emigration. Many German Jews fled to South America, the United States, or Palestine. Most, however, were trapped in other European countries.

The thousands of refugees trying to leave Germany, coupled with the tendency in the United States and elsewhere to advance the interests of native born citizens rather than those of immigrants, caused the tightening of immigration laws worldwide. The gates of the world were closed to Jews.

Inside Germany, life changed gradually for German Jews, while foreign-born Jews were expelled. They were removed from the civil service, then from the press, then from cultural guilds.

In 1935, with the passage of the Nuremberg Laws, Jews were excluded from German citizenship and prohibited from marital, business, or other relationships with non-Jews. For the first time in history, they were defined, not by religious belief, but by racial identity transmitted through the blood of their grandparents.

*In 1939, they came. I think it was between August and September. They came exactly when it was the Jewish New Year, and hell broke out.*

CLARA EISENSTEIN

**An SA man paints the word *Jude*, the German word for Jew, and a yellow star on the window of a Jewish-owned shop, c.1933–1938. Courtesy of the Wiener Library, London**





**Synagogue in flames, Sieger, Germany, November 10, 1938. Courtesy of Yad Vashem, Jerusalem**

The Nazis were emboldened by the failure of the Evian Conference, where thirty-two nations were represented and charged with the task of deciding how to react to the increasingly life-threatening situation of the endangered Jews of Germany and Austria. A government orchestrated *pogrom*, or violent attack, took place on November 9 and 10, 1938. Later called *Kristallnacht*, or “Night of Broken Glass,” by the Nazis, the violence destroyed more than one thousand synagogues in Germany and Austria, and thousands of Jewish businesses were vandalized in the midst of killing in the streets and mass arrests.

## 1939–1941: The Assault on European Jewry

**H**itler’s determination to increase the size of the *Reich* was realized, without a fight, until the September 1, 1939 invasion of Poland. Between 1935 and 1938, Austria, and the *Saarland*, which once belonged to Germany, willingly joined the *Reich*. In March of 1939, Hitler was able to overrun Czechoslovakia after it was abandoned by its allies, France, Italy, and Great Britain, who all feared being drawn into war with Germany.



**Doll, Lodz, Poland, c.early 1930s. Gift of Freida Yoskowitz Lefkowitz**

The doll was purchased as a baby gift for her newborn niece by Freida Lefkowitz before emigrating from Poland to the United States. After 1939, Freida’s sister and brother-in-law were arrested, taken to the Lodz ghetto, and made to work in a labor camp. A Nazi patrol rounded up all the children in the ghetto, including Freida’s niece and nephew, took them into the nearby forest and shot them all. Eventually Freida’s entire family was murdered. Some twenty years after the war, during a trip to Poland to revisit her past, Freida discovered the doll in a closet of her girlhood home, now occupied by the Polish family who had been paid to baby-sit her niece and nephew.

*You can't imagine how  
we felt when we gave away  
the children.*

RACHEL WISE

**Rachel Visgardiski holding baby Chaim following his *brit milah* (circumcision) at the hospital, Kovno, Lithuania, 1938. The Nazis murdered Chaim during the liquidation of the Kovno ghetto, 1943. Rachel survived the concentration camps. *Gift of Isaac and Rachel Wise***



## 1941–1945: The Killing

**W**ith the invasion of the Soviet Union, Hitler and the Nazis turned their policy of forced emigration, imprisonment, and sporadic killing of Jews to mass murder. Central to the new policy was the systematic destruction of entire Jewish communities throughout Europe.

Special killing squads, *Einsatzgruppen*, moved rapidly on the heels of the advancing German armed forces as they overran Soviet cities. *Shtetls*, small predominantly Jewish towns and villages, were totally destroyed, and, often, Jews were made to dig their own mass graves before the Nazis shot them. Jews in larger cities, after the initial killings, were forced into sealed ghettos.

The Nazis began refining plans for more efficient and clandestine methods of mass murder. Fifteen high-ranking Nazi and German government leaders met on January 20, 1942 at Wannsee, on the outskirts of Berlin, to discuss what they called the “Final Solution” to the Jewish question, mass gassing.

Representatives of German business and industry had been brought in to design and construct six killing centers which would implement the genocide that had become Germany’s state policy. Each of the killing centers, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Majdanek, Sobibor, Belzec, Chelmno, and Treblinka, was located on a main railway line in Poland. Systematic deportation, followed by mass killing, involved collaboration on many levels of German society and by most governments of German-occupied and Axis nations as well.

*They put barbed wire across  
the street with policemen  
watching. We couldn't get in  
and out of the ghetto. The  
ghetto gates were closed;  
suddenly food shortages began  
to appear. The rations . . . were  
very small and you began to see  
young children with swollen  
stomachs, begging on the  
streets and looking for food.*

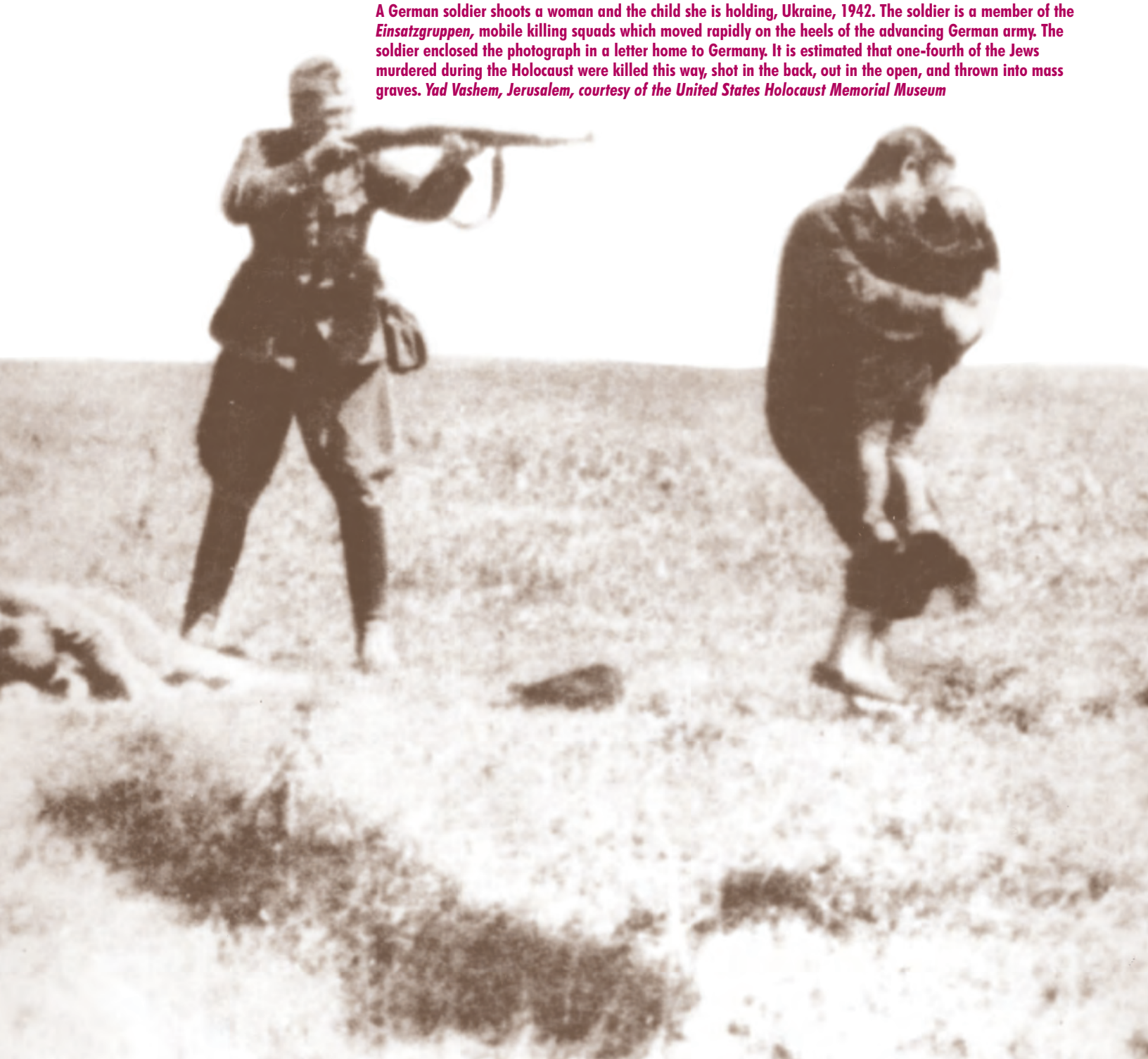
TOSIA SCHNEIDER



**Jews on a deportation train from Westerbork camp, Westerbork, Netherlands, c.1942. Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz, courtesy of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

*When we came in the Vilna ghetto, we know that this is not a place to stay, as we have to do something to save our lives.*

BORIS ULMAN



**A German soldier shoots a woman and the child she is holding, Ukraine, 1942. The soldier is a member of the *Einsatzgruppen*, mobile killing squads which moved rapidly on the heels of the advancing German army. The soldier enclosed the photograph in a letter home to Germany. It is estimated that one-fourth of the Jews murdered during the Holocaust were killed this way, shot in the back, out in the open, and thrown into mass graves. Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, courtesy of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

*She was a very religious woman. She was a Catholic, and she believed that G-d would help her save us . . . She put her life for us. Nobody can do anymore . . .*

POLA BIENSTOCK ARBISER

**Jewish partisans in the woods around Vilna, Lithuania, 1944. Boris Ulman is sixth from left, standing. Gift of Boris Ulman**



## The Rescuers

**M**ost individuals in Nazi-occupied Europe accepted the role of bystander, neither actively collaborating with the Nazis in the roundups, deportations, or killings, nor acting to stop the carnage or help the Jews. Some did nothing because they believed the Nazi persecution of the Jews had nothing to do with them. Others feared for their own safety should they become involved.

The indifference of the bystanders left the Jews with no allies and strengthened the Nazis' resolve. While the bystanders were silent and turned away, a small minority of non-Jews were resolute enough to act.

The commitment to do whatever was necessary to save Jewish lives took many forms. Some rescuers acted on their own, others worked in cautious cooperation with family, friends, or neighbors. In several instances, those of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon in France and Nieuwlande, a town in northeast Holland, entire communities hid Jews and, in two instances, that of Denmark and Bulgaria, entire nations thwarted mass deportation of their Jewish citizenry.

*I had a way to get weapons from the Germans. I was trusted. And I found an opportunity to get a few revolvers, a few guns. Once I smuggled some out. I didn't tell anybody.*

BETY GROSSMAN GOODFRIEND

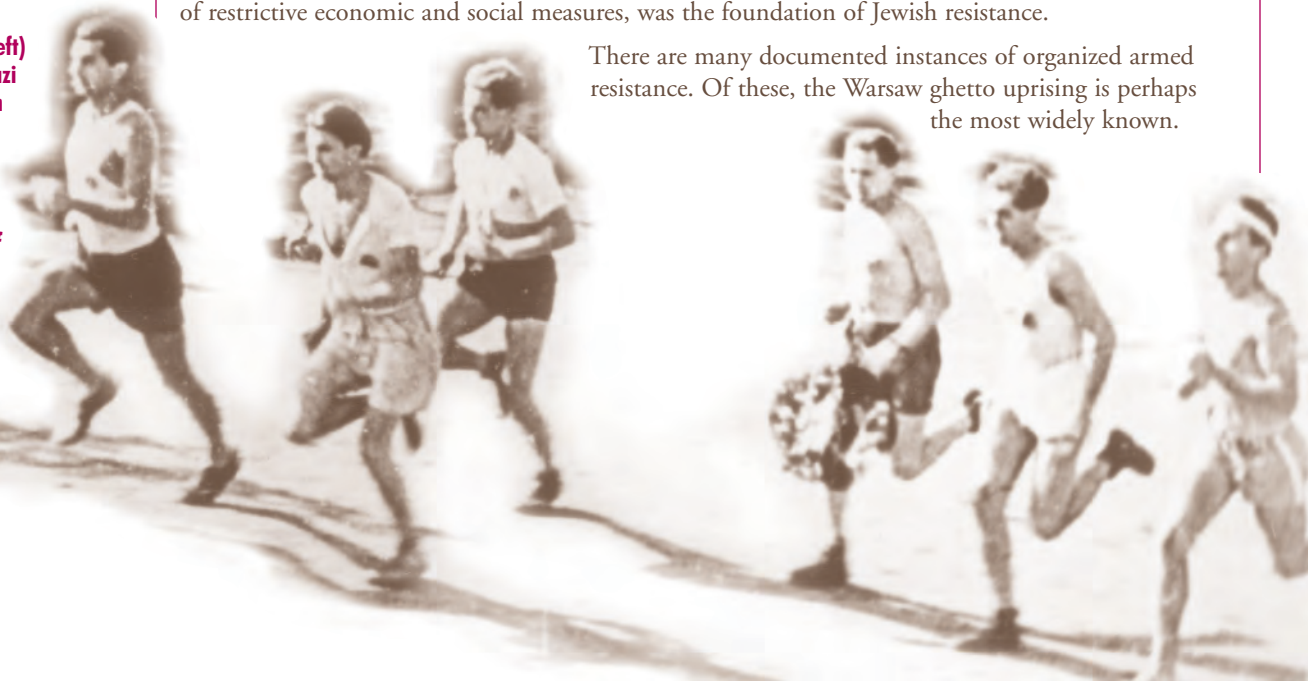
## The Resisters

**R**esistance can be looked upon as any act that opposed the Nazis' process of the dehumanization of Jews which ultimately led to death. The Jews' courage and the will to resist the Nazis in the face of death can be seen in the ghettos of Poland, in the forests of eastern Europe, and even in the killing centers of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka, and Sobibor.

Like rescue efforts, resistance took many forms. At first, it was largely spiritual in nature: keeping to religious practice, organizing cultural and educational events to feed the spirit, or asserting and retaining individual dignity. The struggle for physical existence, finding ways to circumvent the Nazi web of restrictive economic and social measures, was the foundation of Jewish resistance.

There are many documented instances of organized armed resistance. Of these, the Warsaw ghetto uprising is perhaps the most widely known.

**Walter Beer (third from left) as he appeared in the Nazi propaganda film made in Theresienstadt showing how Jews were leading a new life under the "protection" of the Nazi regime, July 1944. Gift of Walter Beer**



In several camps, Jewish members of the *Sonderkommando*, the units who were made to remove bodies from the gas chambers for cremation, initiated uprisings.

Partisans, resistance groups operating behind enemy lines, for the most part welcomed Jews as participants. The partisans lived and operated in densely wooded areas, moving constantly, and staging “hit and run” attacks on the enemy. Sometimes they were given food and supplies by the local population; however, more often than not, it was a harsh and dangerous life.

## Liberation

In the spring of 1945, the six years of war came to an end, and the Nazi regime had been defeated. Allied soldiers from the West and the East met over the smoking ruins of Berlin, and people danced in the streets. For the Jews of Europe who had survived the twelve years of the Holocaust, the victory was tinged by awareness of the extent of the tragedy.

Allied and Soviet troops pursuing the German army stumbled upon the Nazi concentration camps in Poland and Germany. The Soviet soldiers were the first to encounter a major Nazi camp when they reached the killing center at Majdanek, just outside the Polish city of Lublin, on July 23, 1944. Shocked and sickened by the dead and dying they encountered, the soldiers undertook desperate efforts to save the survivors.

With the Red Army’s rapid advance, the Germans tried to destroy the evidence of mass murder by blowing up the crematoria and burning records, but were unsuccessful. They began to move the camp populations from the east, into what was left of the *Reich*. The prisoners, evacuated by foot across ice and snow, or crammed into open and unheated railway cars, were to provide forced labor to advance the German war effort. Thousands died in the terrible cold, or were shot by the Germans if they weakened.

The Soviets and Allied troops, horrified by the condition of the camp survivors, launched a massive relief effort. Yet thousands of newly freed prisoners died. For them, the liberation came too late.

Jews began to emerge from their hiding places, and from the forests, and to give up their false identities. The revelation of the horrors of the Holocaust, and the ruin of Jewish life in Europe was a terrifying experience for those who had survived.

*The Russians liberated us . . .  
now you are free. We went out.  
It was nothing left in our hearts.  
It was such an emptiness. We  
knew we lost everybody.*

CLARA EISENSTEIN

*The way I always figured  
the Germans . . . I felt they  
were a superhuman people.  
Always as a kid, I grew up being  
afraid of them as they were just  
like G-d; they can kill or do  
whatever they want. They  
couldn’t die. But after they were  
taken prisoners and were  
hungry, I seen them . . . being  
hungry and praying for their  
lives, for you not to beat them.  
Just like we did.*

JACOB KAHANE

**Isaac Wise (third from left, second row) and other former prisoners, celebrating the liberation of the Dachau concentration camp, 1946. Gift of Isaac and Rachel Wise**



Survivors of the camps tried to return home. Polish Jews returning to their villages were greeted by townspeople who were unwilling to give back the properties they had confiscated, and who did not want the Jews to remain in their communities. After having survived the camps, hundreds of Jews returning to look for their families and their homes were murdered by their former neighbors, sometimes with the help of the local police. Jews throughout Poland understood that they were not safe there; the future, for them, lay elsewhere



**Young men working in the detention camp, Cyprus, c.1946. Gift of Penina Weisz Bowman**

## Displaced Persons Camps

In the weeks following liberation, thousands of people uprooted by the war were classified by the Allies as displaced persons (DPs). These included former prisoners of war, forced laborers, and concentration camp survivors.

The survivors began to look for their families. During the summer of 1945, they joined a great migration that took place throughout Europe. Tens of thousands returned to their homes, only to find the Jewish world they once knew had been destroyed, and that they themselves were unwelcome.

Many Jewish survivors had no choice but to live in Displaced Persons (DP) Camps, some of which were set up on the very sites of former concentration camps. While world opinion was sympathetic to the plight of the survivors, nations remained closed to Jewish immigration.



**Sam Silbiger, in his Israeli army uniform, Palestine, c.1948. Sam was a fighter for the Irgun, an underground organization opposing the British rule of Palestine. Gift of Sam Silbiger.**

*Each of us knew we wanted to go back to our hometown, but there really wasn't anybody there to go back to.*

HANA KRAUS BEER

## Israel

Between the early 1800s and 1932, immigrants from Russia and Poland arrived in Palestine. Some were driven by anti-Semitism, poverty, and despair. Others were motivated by Zionist ideology, a movement to establish a national homeland for Jews in Palestine.

Beginning in 1922, Palestine was ruled by the British under a mandate given by the League of Nations. This arrangement was to last through World War II.

The new immigrants strongly influenced the community's character and organization by laying the foundation for a comprehensive social and economic infrastructure. Many toiled at draining swamps, developing agriculture,

**Lucy Sotto (second from right, rear), Eliezer Sotto (third from right, front), and Rachel Sotto (fourth from right, front) on the Italia, en route to the United States, 1952. Gift of Eliezer Sotto**



establishing *kibbutzim* (collective villages) and *moshavim* (agricultural villages), and providing the labor for housing and road construction.

Others settled in Tel Aviv, Haifa, and Jerusalem, and were instrumental in developing and enriching urban life. They established small businesses, built factories, and light industry.

In the 1930s, following Hitler's rise to power, more than 160,000 Jews, mostly from Germany, constituted the first large influx of immigrants from western and central Europe. They brought educational skills and business experience, and also broadened the country's cultural life.

These early pioneers were in constant danger of attack from their Arab neighbors. In 1939, responding to growing Arab demands, the British issued a White Paper limiting Jewish immigration to 15,000 immigrants a year over a five-year period. The White Paper was enforced until 1948, and effectively closed Palestine to Jewish refugees throughout World War II.

After the war ended, about 70,000 Jewish Holocaust survivors risked the trip across the Mediterranean in an attempt to enter Palestine. In 1946, to halt the "illegal" immigration, the British began intercepting the refugee ships and deporting the survivors to detention camps on the island of Cyprus.

By 1948, there were 50,000 refugees housed in tents or tin huts in twelve camps. The flood of immigrants continued. World opinion began to turn against the British. They faced increased international pressure to allow unrestricted Jewish immigration to Palestine and to create a Jewish homeland.

On November 29, 1947, the United Nations General Assembly voted to partition Palestine into two new states, one Jewish and the other Arab. In April 1948, the British began to withdraw their troops. On May 14, 1948, David Ben-Gurion, a prominent Zionist leader, announced the establishment of the State of Israel, and declared that Jewish immigration to the new state would be unrestricted.

## New Lives

Jewish survivors, in numbers still limited by strict immigration quotas, began to arrive in the United States in 1946. Some felt great joy at being here. Some felt they should have gone to Palestine. However, before 1948 when it became the State of Israel, immigration was illegal, and, if one managed to succeed running the British blockade, life was very difficult and involved the prospect of war with the Arabs.

Those survivors who chose to come to America, for the most part, settled where they had relatives or friends. A network of organizations supported the newcomers, notable among them was the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) which found housing and employment. Individual local Jewish communities, including Atlanta, organized to offer interest-free loans, English-as-a-second-language classes, and basic services such as counseling, and job training.

Like other immigrant groups before them, some survivors entered smoothly into American society, while others did not. Many who had lived through the camps were convinced that they had survived in order to bear witness.

For the most part, Americans were either unwilling or unable to listen to survivors' tales of the horrors they experienced, and the losses their families sustained. As a result, survivors felt that Americans were not interested in hearing about their suffering, and so they kept silent as they focused on rebuilding their lives.

As the years passed, many survivors began once more to feel a responsibility to bear witness: for their children, for future generations, and for the sake of their loved ones who were victims of the Holocaust. They began to realize that their voices could speak for the murdered six million, their testimonies could ensure remembrance of the lost generations, and their courage to bear witness could serve as a call to action for all people to coexist peacefully, despite religious, ethnic, racial, or political differences.



Outside the courthouse for the civil wedding ceremony of Bela and Leo Neuhaus (right) witnessed by their friends, Sam and Ida Wise, Munich, Germany, 1947. Gift of Bela Neuhaus



Rella and Bernard Sloman (first and second from left, rear) with the Shapiro family on the train going to the port of Bremen to meet their ship to the United States, 1950. Gift of Rella Solsky (Saul) Sloman

*I don't know if this is luck or what, but we been lucky, and they sent us to work and we made it. But six million didn't make it. This is a tragedy, but we will never forget the six million . . . we are the witnesses.*

## **Absence of Humanity: The Holocaust Years**

The William Breman Jewish Heritage & Holocaust Museum expresses its appreciation to the many Holocaust survivors living in Atlanta who have so generously shared their stories and their treasured possessions in order to bear witness to their experiences.

### EXHIBITION DESIGN AND CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT

Benjamin Hirsch & Associates, Architects

### PROJECT DIRECTOR

Jane D. Leavey

### EXHIBITION CURATOR

Sandra K. Berman

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The Museum's Lillian and A.J. Weinberg Center for Holocaust Education offers a broad range of educational programming for people of all ages. Using the exhibition, "Absence of Humanity: The Holocaust Years" as one of its resources, the Center offers guided tours of the exhibition, a school programs guide for teachers, assistance in developing pre- and post-visit activities, and in-school programs with speakers. The Center sponsors yearly summer courses for which teachers may earn Staff Development Credits from the State of Georgia. Throughout the year, teacher workshops and a number of public programs are designed to heighten Holocaust awareness.



THE WILLIAM BREMAN JEWISH HERITAGE & HOLOCAUST MUSEUM  
1440 SPRING STREET NW, ATLANTA, GEORGIA 30309  
WWW.THEBREMAN.ORG | PH: (678) 222-3700 | FX: (404) 881-4009