

Jewish Life During the Holocaust

Jewish Emigration

Even before the Holocaust, Jewish people -- in particular European Jews -- had to flee their homelands due to discrimination and anti-Semitism. They most often emigrated to Palestine, the United States, and England. A small number also went to other countries such as Argentina and South Africa.

Emigration took a sudden leap when the Nazis, under Hitler's leadership, began to actively restrict Jews in Germany and then in the German-occupied neighboring countries. More than 60,000 Jews chose to go to Palestine, which already had a population of 300,000 Jewish settlers and was under British rule. Another 180,000 German Jews left Germany; however, Jews in other countries were trapped by the Nazi invasion.

An overcrowded Palestine forced the United States to open its doors to Jewish refugees. President Roosevelt, concerned with the Nazis' actions against the Jews, permitted approximately 27,300 refugees to come to the U.S. However, the 1924 quota limited the number of people; therefore, many who tried to get out of Europe had no place to go. Another large number of Jews opted to immigrate to neighboring Western European countries, particularly Belgium and Denmark.

Despite its strong isolation from the outside world and its alliance with Germany, Japan played a significant role in helping out Jewish refugees. Japanese diplomats in Europe, China, and Manchukuo issued visas to refugees to allow them to settle in Shanghai. 24,000 Jews escaped via China and Japan between 1938-1941 on their way to United States, Canada, Palestine and other countries that would accept them.

Jews in Hiding

The Holocaust claimed the lives of approximately 6 million Jewish men, women, and children. There were about 1.6 million Jewish children, ranging from infants to teens, living in Europe at the start of World War II. Of these, only about 11 percent survived the war. Some left their homes to seek refuge in other countries. Many parents chose to hide their children in order to save them.

Hiding a child was much less difficult than hiding an adult. Unlike adults, children were not required to carry any forms of identification. In addition, they could easily blend in with the groups of non-Jewish children who became orphans of war.

In most cases, arrangements to hide these children were made through personal contacts. Some non-Jews, motivated by moral concern and good will, risked their lives in order to save the lives of Jewish children. They later became known as

"righteous Gentiles."

Hiding places for Jewish children included convents, boarding schools, and orphanages. These places were often located far from the children's homes. Being sent to these hiding places was a terrifying experience for children -- they were made to travel under difficult conditions to unknown destinations. Yet, they were aware that they were in danger, and leaving their families and homes would save their lives.

Those who were most visible had to give up their Jewish identities by changing their names and converting to Christianity, at least temporarily, to avoid being discovered by the Nazis. They had to be extremely cautious in their everyday lives, not speaking of their past or their families for fear they might reveal that they were Jewish.

Children hiding with their families, such as Anne Frank, were cut off from the world, sometimes for years. But most of them spent their childhood with strangers. A few found it necessary to move to a number of different homes as they encountered problems staying in a single location. The families keeping them often worried that the Germans would discover they were hiding Jews or that a doubtful neighbor could suspect the children's true identities and turn the families and the Jewish children over to the Nazis.

A great concern among hidden children was that their true families would not survive the war, and even if they did survive, that they may not be able to find and reunite with their parents. Since many children were taken in by complete strangers, it was very possible that these children would never see their parents or siblings again.

Life in the ghettos

During the Holocaust, a ghetto was an isolated section of a city in which Jews were forced to live. The conditions the Nazis created in the ghettos were horrible and unhealthy - - usually cramped, dirty, and with little food. There were many ghettos throughout Europe during the Holocaust period. Some of these were the Amsterdam Ghetto, the Lodz Ghetto, and the Minsk Ghetto. However, the largest was the Warsaw Ghetto in Poland, with about 400,000 people crammed into an area of about 2.5 square miles.

The Warsaw Ghetto was created by the Nazis in October of 1940. They forced the Jews of Warsaw to live in this very confined space and built 19-foot walls around the ghetto to separate it from the rest of the city which was designated only for non-Jews. As the Nazis consolidated their power throughout Poland, they ordered Jews from other nearby areas to transfer into the Warsaw Ghetto, thus making the ghetto unbearably crowded.

To differentiate between Jews and non-Jews, the Nazis forced the Jews to wear Star of David bands on their coat sleeves. A death penalty was enforced on any Jew caught trying to escape the ghetto, or any Pole who tried to help Jews in any way. Although there were Jews who tried to fight against the Nazis, they quickly ran out of supplies, were swiftly caught and punished, killed or taken to prison.

The Nazis, by design, made the living conditions in the Warsaw Ghetto as horrific as possible. There were curfews and guards on duty at all times along the walls to make sure no Jews crossed over to the non-Jewish side. Many Jews suffered from disease, which spread rapidly in such close quarters. For example, a typhus epidemic broke out about a year after the ghetto was created, killing many. Due to low food rationing, Jews inevitably starved to death.

Despite all these brutal conditions and the Nazis' attempt to control and degrade them through oppression, the Jews tried to maintain their dignity and some sense of normalcy in a world gone awry. They secretly studied, prayed and conducted religious services, set up schools for their children, put on theatrical plays, wrote diaries and histories in the ghettos. They continued the struggle to self-govern themselves even from within the ghettos.

Similar to the other ghettos in Europe, the Warsaw Ghetto was made smaller and smaller after much of the population died, or was deported to concentration or death camps. The 2.5 square miles of the Warsaw Ghetto were eventually split into two parts -- the Large Ghetto and the Small Ghetto. A pedestrian crossing bridge was built over the street separating the two sections preventing Jews from stepping outside the ghetto.

In 1943, an uprising occurred in the ghetto. Although the Jews in Warsaw fought courageously against the Nazis, after one month of fighting, the Nazis burned the entire ghetto until nothing was left. Those who remained were deported to concentration camps.

Jewish Resistance

In January of 1942 at the Wannsee Conference in Berlin, the Nazis orchestrated "The Final Solution" a policy to murder every Jew in Europe. They created the death camps of Belzec, Chelmno, Majdanek, Sobibor, Treblinka and the largest camp, Auschwitz-Birkenau to carry out the plan. Auschwitz-Birkenau contained two gas chambers as well as four crematoriums used primarily to burn corpses of victims murdered in the chambers. From the outside, this camp seemed like a fortress with barbed wire fences and guards on towers stationed all across the camp. It was nearly impossible for the Jews held in captivity to retaliate.

Despite the fact that Auschwitz was well guarded, several underground resistance groups formed. Active resistance took shape in various forms. Although some resistance efforts were small in scale, others were more elaborate -- such as the

bombing of one of the crematoriums at Auschwitz-Birkenau. On October 7, 1944, a tremendous explosion surprised the prisoners and the Nazis at Birkenau (Auschwitz II). They were startled by an unbelievable sight -- one of the four crematoriums was in flames. This was proof to the outside world that the prisoners could rise in revolt given the leadership and arms. But no one was happier than a young girl by the name of Rosa Robota who had spent months crafting the plan. She helped orchestrate the plan by encouraging women prisoners who worked in the munitions factory to smuggle out very small amounts of gunpowder each day.

Another example is David Szmulewski, a member of an underground movement who was assigned to take several illegal photographs depicting the activities inside the crematorium by Jozef Cyrankiewicz, a top leader of the camp's underground resistance movement. Working as a roofer, Szmulewski had more access and freedom to move around the camp without being suspected by the guards. Szmulewski succeeded in taking three photographs without being observed. Cyrankiewicz said he took the photographs, "to convince the outside world that what we said was happening in Auschwitz was really true."

A more enduring resistance effort occurred when five of the prisoners managed to safely escape from Auschwitz. The first was Siegfried Lederer, who fled on April 5, 1944 in a Nazi uniform together with one of the guards, Nazi corporal Viktor Pestek. Pestek helped Lederer because he had fallen in love with a Jewish inmate. Once he escaped, Lederer told the people in the Theresienstadt ghetto the truth about how the Nazis were mass murdering the Jews in the camps. He also wrote a report to the International Red Cross describing the extermination of the Jews. Two days after Lederer's daring escape, two more Jewish prisoners fled from Auschwitz, and two others fled on May 27, 1944. A common objective of these five escapees was to inform the world of the Nazis' brutal mass extermination of the Jews in Auschwitz. Outsiders did not want to believe that such horrors and inhumanity were real; stories from escapees helped convince them of the truth. Additionally, many victims in other camps had no way of knowing what was happening.

About life and treatment in death camps and concentration camps

Hitler's anti-Semitism grew out of resentment for the German loss of World War I. He blamed the Jews of Europe for Germany's defeat in the war. Hitler also used the Jews as scapegoats for all the problems that Germany was facing in the 1920s and 1930s, such as unemployment, poverty, and starvation caused by massive inflation, and later, the Great Depression.

In order to deport the Jews, the Nazis often led them to believe that they were merely being moved to a different place where life would be better for them. The reality of the situation was that Jews were put on trains that sent them to either concentration camps or death camps. The trains were freight and cattle cars and were horribly crowded. Many people died in the trains before they even reached the camps.

The Nazis built two types of camps: *concentration/labor camps* and *death camps*. In concentration camps, prisoners were forced to become hard laborers and were given very little to eat. They were forced to wear striped uniforms and armbands or labels to identify the type of prisoners that they were. The different colors of the bands represented different groups of people. Due to disease, starvation, and harsh treatment by the Nazis, most people died in the concentration camps or were deported to death camps where they met with the same fate.