

FROM BROKEN GLASS

MY STORY OF FINDING HOPE IN
HITLER'S DEATH CAMPS TO INSPIRE
A NEW GENERATION



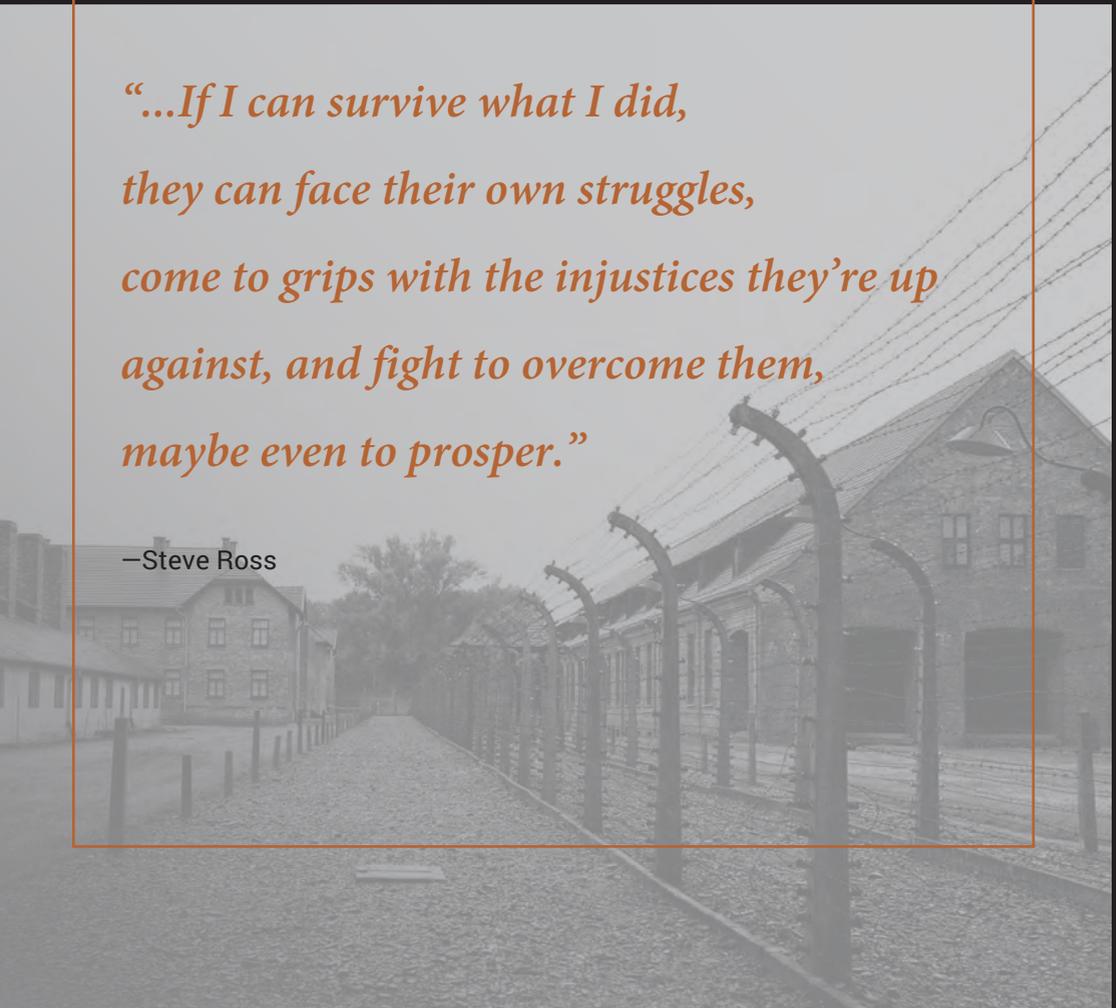
A STUDY GUIDE FOR
HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOMS

Steve Ross was eight years old when the Nazis invaded his Polish village, forcing his family to flee. He spent his next six years in a day-to-day struggle to survive the notorious camps in which he was imprisoned, Auschwitz-Birkenau and Dachau among them. When he was finally liberated, he no longer knew how old he was, he was literally starving to death, and everyone in his family save for his brother had been killed.

During his years as a public youth counselor in Boston, Steve Ross told his story to students who would listen to show that...

*“...If I can survive what I did,
they can face their own struggles,
come to grips with the injustices they’re up
against, and fight to overcome them,
maybe even to prosper.”*

—Steve Ross



INTRODUCTION

Learning about the Holocaust goes beyond understanding the historical fact that six million Jews were brutally murdered along with other innocent victims of the German regime during World War II. The Holocaust is a lesson in what can happen when anti-Semitism, extreme prejudice, and discrimination are allowed to flourish, and when individuals, institutions, and governments fail to take a stand against injustice. Learning about the Holocaust is also an opportunity to translate statistics into personal stories—stories of individuals who had a life before the rise of the Nazi Party, who attempted against all odds to retain their humanity in the face of dehumanization and horror during the Holocaust, and who, if they were fortunate to survive, had a life after the Holocaust.

From Broken Glass: My Story of Finding Hope in Hitler's Death Camps to Inspire a New Generation is the story of one such individual. It is the story of Steve Ross (born Smulek Rozental) and his life as a young boy in Lodz, Poland, his experiences during the Holocaust, and the life he built after liberation—a life that was dedicated to the poor and disenfranchised youth of Boston and to ensuring that those who perished in the Holocaust would never be forgotten. Steve Ross's memoir is a glimpse into the horrors of the Holocaust, but also a testament to the human spirit and the continuity of life.

About This Guide

This Study Guide was developed as a resource for high school teachers who are using *From Broken Glass* in the classroom. In addition to discussion questions and suggested activities to use with the text, vocabulary and principles for effective Holocaust instruction are included, along with handouts from Echoes & Reflections. These supplemental materials provide context to achieve a greater understanding of Steve Ross's experiences during the Holocaust. Used together, the materials allow students to put a human face to history while connecting what they are learning to their own lives. **Due to mature subject matter, this memoir is recommended only for older students.**

Echoes & Reflections—a partnership of the Anti-Defamation League, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, and Yad Vashem—provides professional development to equip educators with strategies for teaching about the Holocaust as well as a comprehensive array of print and digital content to use in the classroom. For more information about Echoes & Reflections, visit echoesandreflections.org.

Throughout this Study Guide, "anti-Semitism" may appear as "antisemitism." ADL's editorial style is to write, "anti-Semitism"; however, we have not changed alternate spellings in copyrighted materials.

TEACHING ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST

In order for students to understand the importance of the Holocaust as a historical event and as part of our shared human story, it is critical for teachers to have a sound pedagogy for instruction. Echoes & Reflections recommends pedagogical principles for teachers to apply to their planning and implementation of Holocaust-related units of study. Application of these principles allows students to study this complex topic in a meaningful way and to ultimately apply what they have learned to their daily lives.

1 DEFINE TERMS

In addition to key terms like antisemitism, Holocaust, and genocide, review key terms and phrases necessary to fully understand the content being studied.

2 PROVIDE BACKGROUND ON THE HISTORY OF ANTISEMITISM

Ensure students understand the role that antisemitism played in allowing the Holocaust to occur.

3 CONTEXTUALIZE THE HISTORY

Help students understand what happened before and after a specific event, who was involved, where the event took place, etc; this helps to reinforce that the Holocaust wasn't inevitable but rather the result of choices and decisions made by individuals, institutions and nations over years.

4 TEACH THE HUMAN STORY

While connecting people and events to the larger story, educators should:

- Translate statistics into personal stories; use survivor and witness testimony whenever possible; emphasizing, however, that survivor voices are the exception.
- Highlight examples of how victims attempted to retain their humanity in the face of dehumanization (efforts to maintain identity and continuity of life, expression of values/beliefs, forms of resistance).
- Stress the “choiceless choices” of the victims with limited or no power or escape.
- Introduce victims' prewar life/return to life to provide context for their choices, dilemmas, and actions.

- Focus on small and large decisions made by individuals who had the ability and the opportunity to choose between morally right and morally wrong decisions prior to, during, and after the Holocaust, including bystanders, collaborators, perpetrators, and rescuers.

5 USE PRIMARY SOURCE MATERIALS

Enrich students' understanding of the Holocaust by providing an abundance of print and digital resources from a variety of perspectives.

6 MAKE THE HOLOCAUST RELEVANT

Connect what students are learning to contemporary events, while distinguishing between the unique history of the Holocaust and what can be learned from this history.

7 ENCOURAGE INQUIRY-BASED LEARNING AND CRITICAL THINKING

Support students' sharing of ideas and asking questions of themselves and others.

8 FOSTER EMPATHY

Challenge students to understand people and their attitudes and actions in a historical context using sound approaches and strategies, refraining from the use of simulation activities.

9 ENSURE A SUPPORTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Guide students "safely in and safely out" of this study; use age-appropriate materials and always be mindful of the social and emotional needs of individual students.

TERMS USED

The terms listed below that appear in *From Broken Glass* may be unfamiliar to students; it is recommended that they be reviewed in advance of reading the text.

bimah

The podium or platform in a synagogue

Budzyn

A Nazi work camp outside of Krasnik, Poland

Capo

SS appointed prisoner who was the head of a labor squad; he or she retained this privileged position by terrorizing subordinate prisoners

dysentery

Inflammatory disorder of the lower intestinal tract

Gestapo

Official secret police of Nazi Germany and German-occupied Europe

Hassidic

A Jewish religious group

Juden

German for Jew or Jewish

Muselmanner

A slang term used among captives of Nazi camps to refer to those suffering from a combination of starvation and exhaustion and who were resigned to their impending death

parocheth

A curtain of richly ornamented material hung before the holy ark in a synagogue

Purim

Jewish festival held in spring to commemorate the defeat of Haman's plot to massacre the Jews as recorded in the book of Esther

Reich

A German word literally meaning "realm"; the German state during the Nazi regime (1933-1945) was most often referred to as "the Third Reich"

Rosh Hashanah

The Jewish New Year

shul or synagogue

Jewish house of prayer

shtreimel

A fur hat worn by many married Jewish men, particularly members of Hasidic groups, on Shabbat, Jewish holidays, and other festive occasions.

Star of David

A six-pointed figure consisting of two interlaced equilateral triangles, used as a Jewish and Israeli symbol

tallit

A fringed garment traditionally worn either under or over one's clothing by Jewish males

Torah

The law of God as revealed to Moses and recorded in the first five books of the Hebrew scriptures

typhus

A bacterial disease spread through contaminated food and water or close contact

yarmulke

A skullcap worn in public by Orthodox Jewish men or during prayer by other Jewish men

Yiddish

A language used by Jews in central and eastern Europe before the Holocaust; originally a German dialect with words from Hebrew and several modern language

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Some or all of the following questions can help guide discussion about *From Broken Glass*:

1. What picture does Steve paint for readers of his family and community before the war? How, if at all, does this information add to the overall story of his experiences during and after the Holocaust?
2. Steve's memoir goes back and forth in time between events in Poland and events after the war in Boston. Why do you think the author organized his story this way? Was the structure effective? Why or why not?
3. Throughout his memoir, Steve taps into all of his readers' senses to help them imagine his experiences. What were some of the sounds, sights, tastes, and smells that he describes? What are the effects of such descriptions on the reader?
4. Throughout his memoir, Steve shares instances where individuals were confronted with moral dilemmas. Identify one such moral dilemma—who was faced with the dilemma and how did she or he respond? Being faced with a moral dilemma is always difficult; how did the circumstances of the Holocaust make such decisions even more difficult?
5. Was there a moment in Steve's story that you would identify as a turning point for him? What did this turning point represent?
6. What is anti-Semitism and what role did anti-Semitism play in allowing the Holocaust to occur? Identify a specific example from the memoir of deep-seated anti-Semitism.
7. The expression "Never Again" has been used by survivors since the end of the Holocaust; today it is also used by other groups who hope to express their strong hope or resolve that a particular event not be repeated. What are your thoughts about this phrase? Do you think it is meant to be aspirational or has it become an empty slogan in that tragic events, including genocides, have continued to take place?

8. Why did Steve say he began to tell his story to students? Steve explains that as he told his story to the young people in Boston, they in turn began to tell him their stories. What is the importance of “story”?
9. Steve was a little boy when he went through the events of the Holocaust; later when he was working with young people in Boston, he refers to children killed in hit-and-run accidents as “the forgotten people.” Do you believe society has a moral obligation to protect its children? What are the short- and long-term dangers to a society that does not protect and care for its children?
10. In very challenging times, the importance of remaining hopeful and the persistent belief that one’s situation will improve is crucial. However, this outlook and attitude is difficult to maintain over a long period of time. Do you believe there is a certain point when people begin to lose hope? If so, what do you think that point is? Do you think it is the same for everyone? Has the loss of hope ever happened to you? Have you witnessed it in others? How does a person restore hope?

ACTIVITIES

Below are two suggested activities to use in conjunction with *From Broken Glass*:

1. Introduce students to the “Pyramid of Hate.” After reviewing terms that may be unfamiliar, briefly discuss how prejudiced attitudes might, if left unchecked, eventually lead to violence and genocide as the pyramid depicts. Divide students into small groups and have them draw a large “Pyramid of Hate” on chart paper, labeling each section. As a group, instruct students to work together to identify Steve Ross’s Holocaust experiences that represent each section of the pyramid. Encourage students to also identify where individuals and/or groups attempted to interrupt the escalation of hate as well as those instances where interrupting the escalation was possible had people chosen not to be bystanders.
2. Steve Ross had a very specific vision for a memorial to honor the victims of the Holocaust. Have students create their own classroom/school memorial by creating a tile mural. Students will need 4” x 4” ceramic tiles (one per student) and permanent markers in assorted colors. Each student will think about what they learned from reading Steve Ross’s memoir or how they feel after learning his story, and design a tile that captures those feelings. When finished, have students engage in a silent gallery walk to study one another’s tiles. After tiles are thoroughly dry, they can be mounted on a hard backing and displayed in the classroom or other area of the school as a mural honoring the life and work of Steve Ross.

PYRAMID OF HATE



SUMMARY OF ANTISEMITISM

Antisemitism is the term used for hatred of Jews as a group or Jews as a concept.

It is an archaic term conceived in the latter part of the nineteenth century when the social sciences were trying to develop “scientific” terms to match those of the pure sciences. In practice, however, the hatred of Jews has deep roots in history. As far back as ancient times, Jews were often seen as outsiders and a stubborn people who were unwilling to assimilate, primarily because of their religious beliefs.

With the **beginning of Christianity**, there was an inherent clash between Judaism and Christianity. Christianity grew out of Judaism, but at the same time was competing with it. Early Church fathers believed that the Jews had failed in their role in the world and that Christians had inherited it. In addition, although the Romans crucified Jesus, the blame was put on all Jews everywhere and forever (a false blame that was condemned by the Catholic Church in the 1960s). Jews were also said to be in league with the devil, which both dehumanized and demonized them. For these reasons, not only were Jews seen as outsiders, but they were also regarded as a people who should be eternally punished.

By the **Middle Ages**, Jews were living in Europe not as an integrated part of society, but as outsiders and on the sufferance of local rulers. Popular antisemitism prevailed partly to win favor with the ruling Romans. Jews could live only where the rulers allowed them and practice only certain trades and professions that generally were shunned by the rest of the population. As a result, Jews often engaged in trade and banking, which led to negative stereotypes that Jews care only for money and engage in shady business practices. When crisis struck, primarily the massive death caused by the “Black Death” in the 1300s, Jews were falsely accused of having caused the sickness by poisoning the wells—they were made the scapegoats for the tragedy.

Other accusations included the patently false blood libel—the belief that Jews use the blood of Christians for ritual purposes. As a result of these many layers of anti-Jewish stereotypes, Jews were frequently massacred, expelled, or forcibly converted to Christianity.

By the **nineteenth century**, a constellation of antisemitic stereotypes was deeply rooted in the Western World. Nevertheless, under the influence of the Enlightenment and modern thought, the process of giving Jews equal rights unfolded in much of Europe. As Jews integrated more, there were some in the general society who applauded these changes and hoped that by assimilating,

the allegedly bad characteristics of Jews would disappear. There was a paradox that even among the greatest champions of Jewish rights, there were those who still had many antisemitic beliefs, and Jews frequently faced social discrimination even where they had been granted legal equality.

Especially as the modern nations of Europe took shape, there was heated discussion about whether or not Jews, who were often viewed as a separate group or nation, could really be a part of the broader nation. In light of all the antisemitic stereotypes attributed to them, many people believed Jews were simply not capable of being part of “the nation.”

New stereotypes also arose at this time. It was said that Jewish elders plotted to take over the world. A fabricated record of the supposed Jewish conspiracy was published as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which nevertheless a great many people believed was true and many still believe is accurate today. Jews were also accused of being unpatriotic, despite much evidence to the contrary.

Most significantly during the last third of the nineteenth century, racism as a pseudoscience first surfaced. Racism grew out of the emerging sciences of biology, genetics, and anthropology, and it held that human civilization could be best understood through biology. Moreover, it held that different national and ethnic groups were defined by their biological characteristics, and some groups were superior to others. With the long history of antisemitism as the background, Jews were seen by many racial thinkers as the worst race—strong, yet very dangerous. In other words, all the negative stereotypes Jews supposedly had were now explained as being the result of Jewish biology, or in language of the time, “Jewish blood.” With earlier forms of antisemitism Jews could escape hatred, at least in theory, by converting to Christianity or shedding their alleged bad characteristics by assimilating. As soon as anti-Jewish prejudice was linked to racism, Jews could do nothing to change themselves or the hatred directed toward them.

Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party did not invent antisemitism, but it was central to their ideology. They embraced a racial ideology that stated the Germans were the master race in the world. Their goal was to make Germany a superpower by conquering lands of supposedly lesser people and restructuring society according to racial principles. For the Nazis, the Jews were the racial archenemy. They saw them as a demonic force that aspired to dominate the world, and they believed that the Jews’ victory would spell the end of the world. The Nazis believed that Jews were behind Bolshevism (Communism), exploitative capitalism, and democracy, all of which supposedly threatened mankind. Nazi ideology also argued that Christianity had been weakened by Jewish ideas, such as that all

human beings are created in the image of God. In short they blamed Jews for all of humanity's shortfalls and troubles. Not only did they believe that Jews had no place in a racially restructured Europe, they felt that they must put an end to the "Jewish menace" lest the Jews destroy them.

One would think after the Holocaust antisemitism would have disappeared. Unfortunately it has continued to exist. Today a constellation of antisemitic stereotypes and motifs still may be found, some elements with older ideas and some with newer variations, chief among them hatred of Jews linked to a demonic image of Israel and Zionism.

THE PROTOCOLS OF THE ELDER OF ZION

In 1903, a newspaper in Czarist Russia published a false document that allegedly described a secret action plan by which "the Jews" were plotting to take over the world. Although the Russian secret police quickly proved the document to be a forgery, *The Protocols* was distributed across Europe. The first version in German came out in 1911, in Berlin. In 1937, a court in Switzerland declared this myth of global Jewish conspiracy to be groundless. This finding, however, did not stop the dissemination of *The Protocols* worldwide, including throughout the United States, or its translation into dozens of languages. For instance, in the 1920s, the famous American car manufacturer Henry Ford financed the translation of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* into English. No other antisemitic text has been—and continues to be—so widely distributed.



THE GHETTOS

Invasion of Poland

In September 1939, the Germans invaded Poland. Poland lost its independence, and its citizens were subjected to severe oppression. Schools were closed, all political activity was banned, and many members of the Polish elite, intellectuals, political leaders, and clerics, were sent to concentration camps or murdered immediately. Jews were subjected to violence, humiliation, dispossession, and arbitrary kidnappings for forced labor by German soldiers who abused Jews in the streets, paying special attention to religious Jews. Many thousands of Poles and Jews were murdered in the first months of the occupation, not yet as a policy of systematic mass murder, but an expression of the brutal nature of the occupying forces.

On September 21, 1939, just after the German conquest of Poland, Reinhard Heydrich, Nazi head of the SIPO (security police) and SD (security service) issued an order to the commanders in occupied Poland. The first, immediate stage called for several practical measures, including deporting Jews from western and central Poland and concentrating them in the vicinity of railroad junctions and forming *Judenraete* (councils of elders or Jewish councils) that would be responsible for these actions.

Establishment of Ghettos

Guided by ideological principles and striving to establish a "New Order" in Europe based mainly on racial doctrine, Nazi Germany separated Jews from the rest of the population by establishing ghettos. A ghetto was a section of the city in which Jews were confined and restricted to live behind walls, fences, or barbed wire. The Germans wanted to isolate Jews and completely disconnect them from the world around them, from Jews in other places, and from everyday life. This gave them great control over the Jews.

Soon after the ghettos began to be established, the Nazis tried to remove the Jews from their midst through population transfer. At first they sought to drive Jews into Soviet territory, but when that strategy

SECRET

Berlin: September 21, 1939
To: Chiefs of all Einsatzgruppen of the Security Police
Subject: Jewish question in the occupied territory

I refer to the conference held in Berlin today... For the time being, the first step toward the final goal is the concentration of the Jews from the countryside into the larger cities. This is to be carried out with all speed....

In each Jewish community a council of Jewish Elders is to be set up.... The councils of Elders are to be informed of the dates and deadlines.... They are then to be made personally responsible for the departure of the Jews from the countryside.... For general reasons of security, the concentration of Jews in the cities will probably necessitate orders altogether barring Jews from certain sections of the cities, or, for example, forbidding them to leave the ghetto....

proved unworkable, the Nazis developed a plan to send the Jews to the island of Madagascar. This plan also proved impractical. Only later, once the Nazis began to implement a policy of systematic mass murder of Jews through deportation to extermination camps, were the Jews who had been concentrated in the ghettos deported and murdered. A minority of Jews was also deported from the ghettos to a myriad of labor camps to be exploited as slave labor. As such, ghettos were a means to an end and not an end in and of themselves.

Ghettos were set up almost exclusively in Eastern Europe for two main reasons. First, in many Eastern European cities, as opposed to Western Europe, there already was a large Jewish district and so confining all Jews to those districts made the process of establishing ghettos more practical. Second, because of perceived cultural and “racial” differences (Western Europeans were seen by the Nazis as being on a higher racial level); the Nazis refrained from antagonizing Western Europeans and did not concentrate Jews in ghettos in Western Europe.

Relatively little time was generally allotted for moving into the ghettos. Jewish families who in some cases had lived in their homes for decades had to gather their belongings and find shelter in a defined area that was extremely crowded. Motor vehicles were not available, and even horse-drawn carts were rare; therefore, many people moved their belongings in baby carriages or on their backs. Jews had to painfully decide what to take with them to the ghetto although they had no information about how long they would have to stay or what life would be like there.

In the ghettos, the *Judenraete* were held fully responsible for compliance with German policy. Members of the *Judenraete* were exposed to German abuse and many were murdered for not obeying German orders. The *Judenraete* were required to act as municipal authorities and to provide a full range of services that Jewish communities had not provided in the past. The *Judenraete* were not only responsible for re-establishing systems of education, culture, and religious services in the ghettos and maintaining health and welfare institutions; they also had to arrange for garbage removal and postal services.

Of course, the German authorities did not allocate resources for these purposes, and this put the *Judenraete* in an extremely difficult situation. They had to provide community services to a needy population without any infrastructure or financial resources. Therefore, members of the *Judenraete* were constantly forced to contend with moral dilemmas and make crucial decisions in unprecedented situations. As restrictions, shortages, hunger, and diseases worsened in the ghettos, the dilemmas of the members of the *Judenraete* became increasingly more extreme. The most difficult dilemma came when the German authorities demanded that the *Judenraete* supply lists of Jews to be deported from the ghettos, often to death camps.



Two Starving Women on a Rickshaw, Warsaw Ghetto, Poland, September 19, 1941. Yad Vashem Photo Archive (2536/85)

Conditions in the Ghettos

Conditions in the ghettos were influenced by many factors, among them whether the ghetto was hermetically sealed or was open to some extent; the size of the ghetto and its location, since ghettos in the countryside often had access to more food; and the personality of the Nazis who were in charge of the ghetto. In many ghettos, a large number of Jews died of starvation or various epidemics that raged due to the harsh conditions. Lack of medication presented a constant dilemma in the ghettos. Doctors faced with shortages of medication had to decide which patients to treat.

In the shadow of chaos and terror, many Jews attempted to retain their humanity and operate relief organizations just as they had done before World War II broke out. Despite the deteriorating conditions and extreme deprivation, a refugee aid network was established in many places. For example, children gathered in special kitchens, where, in addition to receiving food, they were kept busy with educational activities. Frequently, relief center staff recruited unemployed but highly educated people to work with youth in the ghetto. In most cases, the relief centers had to figure out how best to distribute their limited resources, which raised many moral dilemmas.

Commonly the Jewish family unit underwent a major change during the ghetto period. The prewar situation, in which the father of the family had been the main breadwinner, was altered unrecognizably because the father could no longer work in the ghetto, or was absent because he had been killed or sent to a labor camp. As a result, the women and children had to share in the financial burden. In ghettos where it was still possible to sneak through the barriers and reach the world outside, many small children became smugglers, clandestinely bringing back food for their families. Smuggling was very dangerous: a Jew found outside the ghetto walls was generally killed immediately. Starving parents, therefore, confronted an awful dilemma.

Life in the Ghettos

Education was outlawed by the Germans in many of the ghettos; schools were closed and learning was punishable by death. Despite this prohibition, in some ghettos an underground educational system was set up by the Jews, though many young people had to help support the family and could not afford to sit in class. In addition to the underground educational system, some *Judenraete* set up vocational school systems in ghettos where this was permitted. The idea was to enlarge the ghetto labor force and to give youth a practical means of earning a living during the war.

Cultural activity took place within some ghettos and the extent varied from ghetto to ghetto. Some of the activities were secret, held at the initiative of underground organizations; they included literary evenings, gatherings to mark the anniversary of a Jewish artist, and concerts. Jewish authors, directors, and poets produced works in the ghettos, and there were secret libraries. Some of the cultural activities were based on works written before the war (in the Theresienstadt ghetto, for instance, works by Shakespeare, Moliere, and Chekhov were presented, while theaters in Warsaw staged Yiddish classics by S. An-ski, Sholem Asch, and Sholem Aleichem, among other things); others drew on the situation in the ghetto. The cultural activities helped people temporarily forget the worries of ghetto life and were a source of encouragement. However, there was also criticism; some people argued that these events were inappropriate in a place where so many people were dying every day.



The Library, Theresienstadt, Czechoslovakia. Yad Vashem Photo Archive (2977/471)

Ultimately, once the Germans developed a plan for the “Final Solution of the Jewish Question,” they embarked on a process of closing down and liquidating the ghettos, deporting most of the Jews who remained alive. The vast majority of Jews deported from the ghettos were murdered in the extermination camps; only a small percentage were taken to concentration and forced labor camps in the late stages of the war. By the end of the war when Europe was liberated, except in Budapest, not a single ghetto, neither in its entirety, nor in part, remained.

THE “FINAL SOLUTION”

Introduction

Although the Nazis came to power in 1933, it wasn't until the second half of 1941 that Nazi policy began to focus on the annihilation of the Jewish people. This evolution in policy coincided with Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. Nazi leaders saw the invasion of the Soviet Union not only as a bid to gain territory that they felt was vital for Germany, but as an ideological struggle. The brutality of the invasion coalesced with racial antisemitism to further radicalize anti-Jewish policies since Jews were seen as the racial and ideological archenemy—especially the stereotype that Jews were the creators and primary agents of Bolshevism.

Historians note that on July 31, 1941, Hermann Goering, Hitler's second in command, sent an official order to Reinhard Heydrich, the head of the security branch of the SS, to authorize a “Final Solution of the Jewish Question.” The exact meaning behind this order is still debated among many Holocaust scholars. Current research shows that mass systematic killing of Jewish men in the newly conquered territory of the Soviet Union began in June, and by August included women and children as well. There is no surviving order by Hitler to expand the murderous activities to encompass all Jews under Nazi control, but most scholars believe such an order was given in the autumn of 1941, or at the latest early in 1942. Even if the exact sequence of events regarding the order is unknown, the fact remains that mass murder continued swiftly, and soon spread to Poland and other European countries. By the end of 1941, many hundreds of thousands of Jews had been murdered; eventually approximately six million Jews would be



About Photos

Left: Herman Goering (Göring)

Middle: Reinhard Heydrich

Right: July 31, 1941 letter to Reinhard Heydrich from Hermann Goering.

murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators. The latest research reveals that although the tone of Nazi anti-Jewish policies came from the highest centers of power in Germany (Adolf Hitler and his senior officials), Nazi officials of lower ranks often had much leeway in the actual implementation and even initiated various aspects of policy. This idea of those at lower levels taking initiative has been called by the British historian Ian Kershaw “working toward the Fuehrer” (Hitler). Throughout the Nazi period there is a dynamic between the “center” and the “periphery” regarding anti-Jewish activities— while the responsibility for anti-Jewish activities rested primarily with the top leaders, there were many other people of different levels in Nazi German society who made a choice to serve the regime.

Einsatzgruppen

When “Operation Barbarossa” (German code name for Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union) began, the Einsatzgruppen, special SS killing units, followed the German army, the Wehrmacht. Their job was to search for opponents of the Reich, including Communists and all Jews—and execute them. There were four units of Einsatzgruppen; the largest unit was composed of 1,000 men. These groups alone did not carry out the destruction of Soviet Jewry—wherever they went, ordinary German soldiers, German police units, and local collaborators were active participants. By spring 1943, the Einsatzgruppen and their collaborators had murdered 1.5 million Jews and hundreds of thousands of others, including Soviet prisoners of war and Sinti-Roma.

The Einsatzgruppen killed their victims—men, women, and children—by gathering them along the edges of ravines, mines, ditches, or pits dug specifically for this purpose. First, they would force Jews to hand over their possessions and remove

their clothing. Then they would shoot them and throw the bodies into ditches that often had been dug beforehand by Jews themselves. In this way many Jewish communities were destroyed entirely. Among the bloodiest massacres was that which occurred at Babi Yar, just outside of Kiev, Ukraine in late September 1941. There, close to 34,000 Jewish men, women, and children were murdered over the course of two days.



Einsatzgruppen about to shoot Jews on the outskirts of Kovno, 1941–1942.

Extermination Camps

The mobile killing squads proved to be problematic for the Nazi leaders. They required large numbers of executioners, the men suffered from psychological repercussions, and it was difficult to conceal the killing from the surrounding populace. A new method was therefore devised, aimed at solving a number of these issues. First, instead of the killer coming to the victims, the victims would now be brought to “killing centers.” The new system of murder by gassing served to reduce the direct contact between the killers and their victims, making the murderers’ task easier.

A new phase in the reign of terror was reached when the “Final Solution” was formulated, and extermination camps were constructed with the expressed purpose of killing Jews. Unlike other enemies of the Third Reich, all Jews in Nazi-occupied territory were destined for extermination. In the words of Elie Wiesel, himself a former camp inmate, “While not all victims were Jews, all Jews were victims.”

Six camps were considered to be extermination camps. From across Europe, Jews were deported, most commonly like animals in cattle trains, to be slaughtered en masse at these sites. All of the camps—Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, Auschwitz-Birkenau, and Majdanek—were in occupied Poland which had the largest prewar Jewish community in Europe. For the most part, the Nazis tried to hide their activities from the local population.



About Photos

Left: A Magirus van found after the war, suspected as a gas van used for murder in Chelmno camp, Kolo, Poland. Yad Vashem Photo Archive (1264/2)

Right: Transfer from the deportation trains to cattle cars at the Kolo Station, Lodz, Poland. Yad Vashem Photo Archive (1602/270)

With the exception of Auschwitz-Birkenau and Majdanek—which were also places of detention and labor—the camps had only one purpose: the Jews brought to the extermination camps were to be killed. Jews would arrive at the camp, usually after having spent several days in transit with little or no food or water, and within a few hours after reaching the camp, they would all be dead.

In Auschwitz-Birkenau and Majdanek some transports would go through a selection; however, the vast majority of the arrivals were sent directly to the gas chambers; few were selected for labor. The entire procedure was planned for the greatest possible efficiency. In order to prevent panic, which could impede the killing, the victims were deceived into believing that they were going to have showers. Their personal possessions were taken from them, and they undressed. After their deaths their possessions and even hair and gold fillings were used by the authorities for different purposes. The perpetrators created a system that functioned like an “assembly-line” procedure that has come to be known as industrialized mass murder.

There are few survivors of the four sites that were exclusively extermination camps, since most of the people who reached them were sent immediately to the gas chambers. In these camps, very few prisoners’ lives were spared in order to work in the crematoria and in other camp functions. More prisoners survived Majdanek and Auschwitz since, as slave laborers, they were not killed immediately. As a rule, the Nazi exploited slave laborers to the point of death, whereby they were either selected again, this time to be gassed, or died from exhaustion and related complications. Those who survived did so despite the Nazis’ murderous intentions. Those who did survive the extermination camps tell of the unimaginable horrors they experienced there every day.

The Perpetrators

Hundreds of thousands of people were involved, either directly or indirectly, in implementing the “Final Solution,” the policy of systematically mass murdering Jews. Some actually engaged in murdering Jews. Others played a role in the bureaucratic process of ordering Jews from their homes to the sites of murder and arranging murder operations. Others became guards or transported Jews to the places where they would be killed. A great many people benefited from the worldly possessions left behind by the murdered Jews, and in this way they too became complicit in the murder process.

The core organizers and planners of the annihilation of European Jewry came from the ranks of the Nazi Party and the SS, who in general fervently believed in Nazi ideology. The driving force of the murders was the SS, among whom

were commanders of killing units and Nazi camps; however, it is important to emphasize that the SS members were not the only ones who were actively involved in “carrying out the “Final Solution.” There were many groups involved from Germany, their allies in the war, and from the lands they occupied. In addition to the SS men, soldiers from the Wehrmacht, and the German police forces took part in these activities. Officials from the civil apparatus that the Germans maintained in the occupied lands also participated in implementing the “Final Solution.”

For a wide range of reasons, people from the nations that fell under Nazi domination or were allied with the Nazis also took part in the “Final Solution,” either directly or indirectly. Some were motivated primarily by their acceptance of Nazi ideology; others were of German heritage and willingly took up the offer by the Nazi authorities to become their partners; others collaborated with the Nazis in the hope that it would further their own national political agenda; others joined the Nazis in order to ameliorate their own or their family’s suffering under the brutal occupation; and still others joined the Nazis in order to escape almost certain death as prisoners of war on the Eastern Front. Regardless of how the door to collaboration swung open, many non Germans became full and frequently enthusiastic participants in the mass systematic murder of European Jews.

Because of the broad spectrum of people involved in the murder of the Jews in one way or another, responsibility for the murder rests on society as a whole during this period.

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VIDEO TOOLBOX

Liberators and Survivors: The First Moments

Help students understand the liberation experience that Steve Ross discusses in *From Broken Glass*. This video addresses key historical content about the liberation of concentration camps by the US Army through the eyes of Jewish survivors and liberators.

www.adl.org/SurvivorsandLiberators





About Maps

The maps shown give an illustration of the cities and camps Steve Ross talks about in his book *From Broken Glass*.

Left: A partial map of the Holocaust in Europe during World War II, 1939-1945. (Source: Dna-Dennis/CC BY 3.0).

This map shows three of the locations Steve mentions—Łódź, Dachau and Auschwitz.

Above: A partial map of the General Government for the occupied Polish territories (1941). (Source: XrysD, edited by Poeticbent/CC BY 3.0).

This map provides a focal view of Poland and shows three other locations Steve mentions—Radom, Budzyń and Kraśnik.

LEGEND

-  Extermination Camp
-  Concentration Camp
-  City with Ghetto
-  Transit City
-  Labor Camp

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