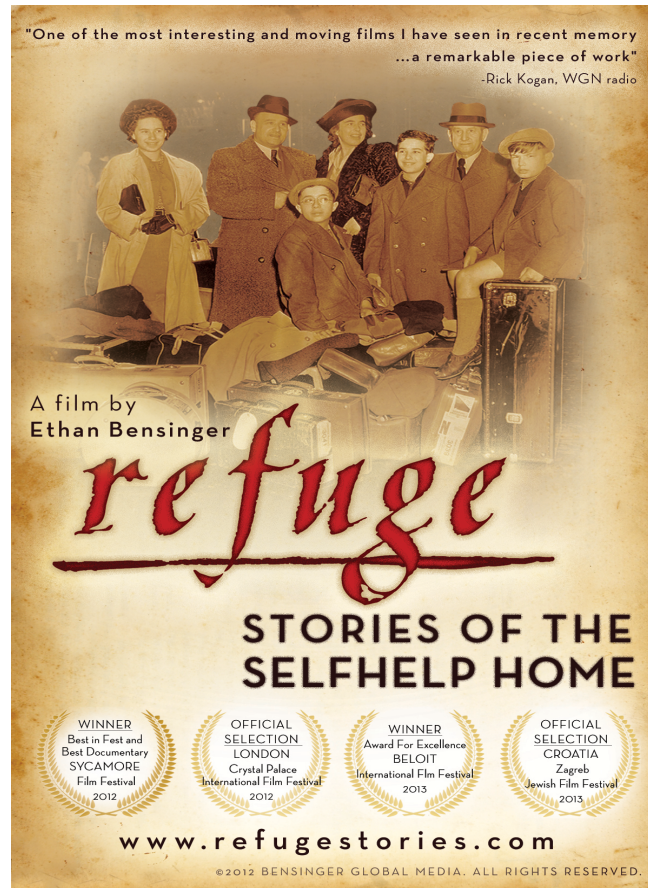


# A Guide for Educators to the Film *REFUGE: Stories of the Selfhelp Home*



Prepared by Dr. Elliot Lefkovitz

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## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank the Holocaust survivors residing at the Selfhelp Home who graciously shared their stories. Their resilience, strength of character and accomplishments in this country are truly inspirational. The founders of Selfhelp shown in the film, fall under the survivor rubric, and they deserve a great deal of admiration for their vision and determination in establishing the Selfhelp organization and the home. Their decades-long commitment to and engagement with Selfhelp is remarkable.

The Selfhelp residents deserve thanks, as well, for permitting the use of their photographs and personal documents in this Study Guide.

A special word of thanks goes to the Board of Directors of the Selfhelp Home for underwriting the preparation of this Study Guide.

Hedy Ciocci, Executive Director of the Selfhelp Home, offered valuable insights and observations about this outstanding institution, especially concerning current developments. Thanks also to Lisa Pevtzow, and Elizabeth Bensinger who helped edit the Study Guide.

I especially want to express my appreciation to Ethan Bensinger, who created and directed the documentary "*Refuge: Stories of the Selfhelp Home*," which so movingly tells the important story of this last generation of Holocaust survivors and refugees from Central Europe. The commitment and dedication he displayed regarding the film, promoting its use, and the study guide are truly commendable.

Dr. Elliot Lefkowitz

## Introduction to the Study Guide

*“Refuge: Stories of the Selfhelp Home”* is a documentary film that teaches some key aspects of the history and the lessons of the Holocaust through the stories of six of its last survivors.

The stories of these then young men and women, who were saved through luck, resiliency and forethought, illustrate the human tragedy behind the statistics of the Holocaust—the annihilation of approximately six million Jews and millions of others by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933-1945. The sheer variety of their accounts demonstrate that it is really only possible to understand the scope of the Holocaust “story by story” and that there is no “typical” survivor. The warmth, courage and deep humanity of the survivors in the film also provide the student with an insight into individuals with whom they can emotionally connect and empathize. This facilitates openness to learning more about the world in which the survivors lived and about the losses they endured.

The film also explores how, after losing many in their families, their homes, their possessions, their innocence and in reality their entire world, a number of survivors created new lives in a new country. Although the traumas they endured remain permanently embedded in their memory, the survivors nevertheless were able to build productive post-Holocaust lives in the United States. Their stories reflect the resilience and fortitude with which human beings are endowed and which can be called upon to overcome severe challenges and obstacles in life.

The survivors’ postwar lives in the United States also are a vivid testament to the opportunities this country can provide. The survivors express profound gratitude for the liberty and freedom they found in America.

The film seeks as well to tell the story of the creation and growth of Selfhelp. This not-for-profit organization started as a mutual aid society in Chicago in the late 1930s for German Jews fleeing Nazi Germany, helping them to learn English, and to find housing and employment. Beginning in the early 1950s, the organization opened the Selfhelp Home, a residential community that has provided a caring and nurturing environment where Central European survivors and refugees could spend their last years. Through the decades, the Selfhelp Home has been a home to more than 1,000 Jewish victims of Nazi persecution from Central Europe. Selfhelp owes a great deal to the many devoted local volunteers who gave of themselves, enriching both the lives of those they helped as well as their own lives.

Further on in this Introduction, there are several suggestions for activities before students view the film. These activities will help the student understand the film’s context, as well as help them develop empathy for the men and women who are telling their stories. The main portion of the study guide focuses on each of the six survivors. Each survivor account begins with a brief historical overview of a key aspect of the Holocaust (e.g., Kristallnacht, Auschwitz, American liberators of concentration camps) found in the study guide. The

survivor stories come next.

The stories of survival begin with Horst Abraham. Mr. Abraham endured six extremely trying and at times terrifying years in Nazi Germany before fleeing to Shanghai, China, the entry in which was controlled by Imperial Japan. A brief historical narrative about Kristallnacht, which he vividly speaks about in the film, begins his story.

Marietta Ryba's account is next. At age 13, Mrs. Ryba escaped from Czechoslovakia to England, shortly before the outbreak of World War II, on the Kindertransport, the British rescue of nearly 10,000 mainly Jewish children. She did not realize as she said goodbye to her parents at a Prague railroad station that she would never see them again. Information on the Kindertransport introduces Mrs. Ryba's story.

The guide goes on to recount the story of Hannah Messinger. Mrs. Messinger and her husband were transported to the Czech ghetto of Theresienstadt before being deported to Auschwitz. Mrs. Messinger was liberated by Soviet troops from a forced labor camp. Her husband was killed on a death march just prior to the war's end. A historical overview of Theresienstadt begins her account.

The next story is that of Edith Stern, Mrs. Ryba's sister. Mrs. Stern, a Czech Jew like Mrs. Messinger, was deported to Theresienstadt with her family and then to Auschwitz. Mrs. Stern, like Mrs. Messinger, survived Auschwitz, but her parents were both killed. She was liberated in eastern Germany by Soviet troops. Her story is preceded by historical information concerning Auschwitz.

Paula Tritsch's story follows. Mrs. Tritsch, her husband and their small son survived the Holocaust in France, on the run from the Nazis and their Vichy French collaborators for three years. They lived in constant fear of being caught, the penalty of which would have been detention and transportation to a concentration camp. As was the case with other Jews who survived through escape and hiding, she, her husband and young son, had a number of close calls. Observations on the fate of Jewish children during the Holocaust precede Mrs. Tritsch's story.

The final survivor story addressed in the study guide is that of Hal Strauss. Mr. Strauss and his family escaped from Nazi Germany in 1937 and settled in Monroe Louisiana. He returned to Germany with the American Army as one of the famed "Ritchie Boys" who interrogated captured German soldiers and German civilians, providing valuable information to the armed forces of his adopted country. Mr. Strauss was at the Dora-Nordhausen concentration camp just after its liberation. His story is preceded by information on GI liberators.

The survivor narratives end with historical timelines that seek to place the accounts within a larger historical framework. This contextualization will aid students in interpreting the survivors' stories.

The Study Guide continues with a brief history of the Selfhelp organization and the Selfhelp home, unique and essential undertakings that bettered human lives. Embedded in this

history are brief accounts of four survivors who also appear in the film. They are: Gerald Franks, Dr. Rolf Weil, Leni Weil and Herbert Roth. Each of them, in his or her own way, made valuable contributions to Selfhelp. Their decades-long involvement with this organization gives evidence of their admirable sense of responsibility and concern. They provide role models to students, which will help motivate them to explore their own opportunities to volunteer.

Each survivor story in the Study Guide is accompanied by sought learning objectives, as well as key questions, designed to aid the instructor to promote student understanding of significant elements of the account and to pinpoint important goals to be achieved.

The sought learning objectives and key questions are followed by a variety of learning and enrichment activities. These activities may include: 1. Suggestions for stimulating class discussions calling for critical thinking. 2. Suggestions for eliciting empathy. 3. Suggestions for creative exercises . 4. Suggestions for student group and partner activities. 5. Suggestions for student research projects.

Given the variety of learning and enrichment activities, there is no one rubric that would aid in teacher evaluation of the effectiveness of the activities. Their assessment must be judged on an individual basis related to the level of student intellectual and emotional involvement with the activity and the quality of the response produced.

The Study Guide then includes a message from Ethan Bensinger, the Director of the film, which inspires students to examine the documentary's filmmaker's objectives both to memorialize and to instruct. There are also learning objectives focused on the wider film project.

At the conclusion of the Study Guide there is a glossary that centers on an explanation of significant terms found in the film, as well as information about various resources that are pertinent to the material.

*"Refuge: Stories of the Selfhelp Home"* and its accompanying Study Guide are most appropriate for use in high school classes. The film and study guide can also be used productively in college classes dealing with the Holocaust and genocide, and in adult education classes dealing with these topics and with the history of Chicago and the history of the Chicago Jewish community.

### **Pre-Viewing Activities**

As noted, the primary focus of the film is on six survivor stories, the survivor founders of the Selfhelp organization and the home itself. These elements of the film are expertly interwoven. The instructor should provide students with an overview of the Holocaust before showing the film and employing its study guide. Such an overview will give students a valuable foundation before viewing the film. The following are several suggestions for how to do so:

1. *Teaching About the Holocaust: A Resource Book for Educators* published by the United

States Holocaust Memorial Museum provides information as to how topics dealing with the Holocaust can be effectively integrated into various existing courses in the high school curriculum.

<http://www.ushmm.org/education/foreducators/guideline/>

2. The film, “*Genocide, 1941-1945*,” which is Part XX of the “World at War” series should then be screened. It is available from Zenger Video located in Culver City California. This film relates the story of the annihilation of European Jewry through testimonies of the perpetrators, victims and bystanders, as well as through archival footage. It is a most worthwhile overview.

3. An admirable Holocaust timeline may be found on the website constructed by the Florida Center for Instructional Technology at: [www.fcit.usf.edu/holocaust](http://www.fcit.usf.edu/holocaust). Click on, “Teachers Guide to the Holocaust,” and then on Timeline. This teachers’ guide also includes a section labeled, “People” that discusses the various categories of Holocaust participants, e.g., victims, perpetrators, bystanders and so on. Of particular interest to students might be the category “Children.”

4. Finally, students should be encouraged to examine the significant questions and answers arising from the Holocaust, which are formulated by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. <http://www.ushmm.org/education/foreducators/question/> and by Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, the center for Holocaust research and documentation in Israel.

[http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/holocaust/resource\\_center/faq.asp](http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/holocaust/resource_center/faq.asp)

# KRISTALLNACHT

## Introduction

*"The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing"*—Edmund Burke

A number of historians regard the Kristallnacht pogrom of November 9 and 10, 1938 as the beginning of the Holocaust.

- 30,000 Jews were rounded up and sent to concentration camps;
- 7,500 Jewish stores were smashed and looted;
- 267 synagogues burned to the ground and many others were attacked and damaged;
- 100 Jews killed, and countless others beaten; There were some Jewish suicides;
- Many Jewish institutions were vandalized.

These Nazi-sponsored attacks, on Kristallnacht, the Night of the Broken Glass, took place throughout Germany, Austria and the Sudetenland in full view of neighbors of Jewish victims, most of whom stood by. Though there were instances of courageous support, Kristallnacht ended the possibility for any continuing viable Jewish existence in the Third Reich.

The German pretext for the attacks of Kristallnacht was the spontaneous reaction to the shooting of a German diplomat in Paris on November 7, 1938 by 17-year-old Herschel Grynszpan. But Kristallnacht was a planned and coordinated action. Its purpose was to terrify Jews still remaining in the expanding Nazi empire into leaving. The problem was that for many there was nowhere to go.

On October 28, 1938, the Nazis forcibly deported 17,000 Jewish men, women and children with Polish citizenship from Germany. Among them were the parents of Herschel Grynszpan, who had been living in Germany since 1911. The Jews were thrown out of the country with no warning and with great brutality, and the largest number were left stranded near the Polish/German border town of Zbaszyn without adequate food, water and shelter. They were unable to enter Poland, because the Polish government had previously banned Polish Jews living abroad from returning.

When Herschel, who was living with his aunt and uncle in Paris, heard what had happened to his parents, he went to the Germany Embassy in Paris and shot diplomat Ernst vom Rath.

In his pocket was found a postcard to his parents. It read: "With God's help. My dear parents, I could not do otherwise, may God forgive me, the heart bleeds when I hear of your tragedy... I must protest so that the whole world hears my protest, and that I will do. Forgive me."

Vom Rath died two days later, on the afternoon of November 9. That evening Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's propaganda minister and a fanatic Nazi, obtained permission from Hitler to launch a pogrom against the Jewish communities in Germany, Austria and the German-occupied Sudetenland, formerly a part of Czechoslovakia. Publicly, the Nazi propaganda machine claimed it was a spontaneous uprising by German people in revenge for the murder of vom Rath. That night, rioting Nazi Storm Troopers, SS men, party members and others set fire to synagogues. Fire companies stood by, allowing the synagogues to burn. They stepped in only when the flames threatened to spread to "Aryan" property.

Several hundred synagogues were destroyed or heavily damaged along with Torah scrolls, prayer books and Bibles. The attackers looted and destroyed some 7,500 Jewish businesses. Many Jewish homes, schools, orphanages, hospitals and cemeteries were vandalized, and 30,000 Jewish men were thrown into concentration camps. There they were starved and beaten.

Following Kristallnacht, Jews were completely driven out of the German economy. They were compelled to sell their businesses and their valuables at a fraction of their worth. Jewish children remaining in German schools were expelled. Jews were forbidden entry to all public places. Jewish organizations were abolished or thoroughly stripped of their autonomy. The Nazis speeded up coercive measures to promote emigration.

The Jewish community was fined one billion Reichsmarks as "reparations" for the murder of vom Rath, and the government confiscated the proceeds from all insurance claims paid to Jews from the damage to their homes and businesses. Hermann Goering, Hitler's second in command at the time, declared, "I would not like to be a Jew in Germany."

Jews imprisoned in concentration camps were released if they could demonstrate that they had a valid visa to another country. Quickly, the search for refuge became desperate, but doors everywhere were closed to the Jews of Central Europe. As many as 1,000 of them died in concentration camps due to maltreatment, malnutrition, lack of adequate sanitation, disease, the bitter cold, and despair.

German public opinion did not, generally speaking, approve of the excesses of Kristallnacht, which brought people face-to-face with violence and brutality. From this, the Nazi government learned to plan attacks on Jews and other "enemies of the Reich" with more care and carry them out in greater secrecy. There were very few in Germany, however, who openly condemned what had occurred. The German churches were largely silent.

The reaction of Western powers was one of shock and dismay, but little or no retaliatory action. There was widespread condemnation of the pogrom in the American press, and President Roosevelt recalled the American ambassador to Germany and ordered that current refugee quotas be filled. But existing policies and attitudes did not undergo any fundamental change.

In the wake of Kristallnacht, Nazi Jewish policy fell more and more under control of the SS, which was to become the key instrument in the Nazi destruction of European Jewry. With

Kristallnacht, the Nazis crossed the line from segregation, humiliation and fitful expropriation of Jews to outright physical assault and total expropriation.

The explosion of Nazi sadism in Kristallnacht vividly revealed the Nazis' bottomless hatred for the Jews and lust for violence. It became an ominous harbinger of the coming genocide.

### **Horst Abraham's Story**

The morning of November 10, 1938, Horst Abraham, then 20, stepped out onto the balcony of his family's apartment in Berlin to check the weather.

"I smelled smoke so I went to my parents' bedroom. I said, 'Papa, turn on the radio, I smell smoke outside.' " Horst heard that the synagogues of Berlin were burning.

"At that moment, I decided that we cannot stay in Germany," he said.

Horst Fritz Abraham was born on December 27, 1917 in Berlin. His family lived in a working class neighborhood in the eastern part of the German capital. His father worked fulltime for the Jewish community of Berlin and part-time as a shoemaker. His mother managed the shoe repair shop.

Soon after the Nazis came to power on January 30, 1933, Mr. Abraham got his first experience of anti-Semitism. On April 1, the Nazis announced a one-day boycott of all Jewish stores. "Shop windows of Jewish-owned shops were painted with Star of David signs," Mr. Abraham remembered. His family's shop was among them. "Uniformed Nazi Storm Trooper guards stood in front of the entrance to keep people from entering our shop," he said. Brown shirted SA Storm Troops marched down the Berlin streets. They sang: "When Jewish blood flows from the knife, it tastes twice as good."

With the family business in decline, and the Nazi creation of quotas for Jewish students in German schools, both Mr. Abraham and his younger sister, Vera, had to leave school and find jobs. He was 16 at the time and she was 14.

As anti-Semitic restrictions mounted and the Nazi drive to expel Jews from Germany accelerated, Horst and his sister, like many young German Jews, explored ways to leave Germany. Horst tried to get to England. His sister had the chance to go to Argentina when a young man, whose family received permission to emigrate there, proposed marriage. However, Mr. Abraham's parents refused to allow Vera to leave. Near the end of his life, Horst Abraham said: "This was the biggest mistake because if she had gone, all of us might have been saved."

After the destruction and devastation of Kristallnacht, Mr. Abraham knew they all had to get out of Germany as soon as possible. He had heard that the Chinese city of Shanghai, large parts of which was occupied by Imperial Japan, permitted Jews to come without any kind of

official papers as long as they could pay for their passage there. At the time, Shanghai was China's largest port and commercial center with a population of about four million people. It was a city of great contrasts with a wealthy elite, especially in the international settlement area of the city, and a large, impoverished underclass. Shanghai, at the time, was a city rife with crime and vice and crowded with Chinese refugees from the ongoing war with Japan and China. But with most countries in the world denying significant asylum to Jews, Shanghai became the last hope for many desperate Jews attempting to flee Nazi terror.

On May 25, 1939, a couple came to the moving company, at which Mr. Abraham worked, to arrange shipment of their luggage. They told him about friends who were supposed to travel to Shanghai in six days with their son, who had died suddenly. They suggested that Mr. Abraham take the young man's ticket.

At first, his parents refused to let him leave, but he and his sister finally convinced them of the wisdom and necessity for doing so. Mr. Abraham remembered his sister saying: "Let him go. He will save our lives." His parents finally agreed, and his father borrowed against his salary as a Jewish communal worker to pay for his son's passage.

Mr. Abraham left Germany with the equivalent of \$4 in his pocket. His passport read, "Horst Fritz Israel Abraham," to comply with the Nazi directive that all Jewish men in Germany add "Israel" to their name. All Jewish women had to add "Sarah." His passport was also marked with the red letter "J" for "Jude" Jew, who by that time had become a pariah people.

Mr. Abraham became one of the 282,000 German Jews and tens of thousands of Austrian Jews who emigrated from the Third Reich before the outbreak of World War II in September 1939. About 17,000 of them found refuge in the Hongkew district of Shanghai.

## **Life in Shanghai**

Once in Shanghai, after an 8,000 mile ocean trip, Mr. Abraham, like other German-Jewish refugees, had to find a way to make a living in a city where the language and culture was completely unfamiliar. He found work as a tailor and tried desperately to bring the rest of his family to Shanghai.

However, he was able to secure only two permits from the Japanese for his family. It was decided that his parents should come. His parents went to the Japanese consul in Hamburg who gave them transit visas to Shanghai. But, they had to go by land since Germany was then at war. His parents crossed the Soviet Union (then non-belligerent) to Manchuria, then in Japanese hands, and from there to Shanghai. They left Germany on September 12, 1940 and arrived in Shanghai after an arduous journey 20 days later.

Four days before his parents left for Shanghai, Mr. Abraham's sister Vera married a young Berlin Jew, Norbert Neufeld. Of the seventeen people at the wedding ceremony, only Mr. Abraham's parents and one cousin survived. In Shanghai, Mr. Abraham tried desperately to save his sister and her husband. For a time, Mr. Abraham and his parents were able to continue corresponding with Vera, who was still in Berlin. This ended in early 1943.

After the war, Mr. Abraham found that on February 3, 1943, his sister, 22 year-old brother-in-law and their 17-month-old son, Denny, were deported to Auschwitz. They were gassed; their bodies were burned and their ashes were blown out of the chimney of the crematorium into the wind and disappeared.

Their deaths haunted Mr. Abraham and his parents throughout their lives.

In Shanghai, Mr. Abraham and his parents lived in cramped, squalid quarters in the Japanese controlled Hongkew district of the city. They shared a single, small room, with no toilet, no bathing facilities and no kitchen—only one small stove and a sink. Like many other refugees, they sold their possessions to buy food. They were helped by funds from the well-established local Sephardic Jewish community, by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and by private charity.

Mr. Abraham held a variety of jobs in Shanghai, from tailor to deliveryman to sign painter. His father worked as a shoemaker. Eventually, they were able to rent space for a small shoe repair shop and hung a curtain to separate it from their sleeping quarters behind the shop. Mr. Abraham survived bouts with severe diseases in Shanghai including amoebic dysentery, dengue fever and scarlet fever. Mr. Abraham also survived a poisonous scorpion bite.

Despite the difficult living conditions in Shanghai, the refugees managed to organize educational, social, cultural and religious activities. There was also a strong Zionist organization, a German language press, including three dailies, and a radio station, which broadcast Jewish cultural programs. Children attended school.

After the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, and the war with the United States began, opportunities for the refugees to leave Shanghai grew slim and food shortages became more severe. With the outbreak of war, the Japanese occupied the entire city. Still, while Japan's German ally persecuted the Jews in Europe, the Japanese left them largely alone. The Japanese believed the stereotype that Jews wielded colossal international financial and economic power, and so they did not wish to antagonize Jews abroad by mistreating the Jews in Shanghai. The Japanese also remembered the crucial financial assistance of Jacob Schiff, a prominent American Jewish banker, during their war with Russia in 1904/1905.

### **Living in the Shanghai ghetto**

Conditions worsened even more for the Jewish refugees in Shanghai when the Japanese ordered the establishment of a ghetto in a two square mile area in the heart of Hongkew on February 18, 1943. The ghetto was in the poorest and most crowded section of that area. It was called "The Designated Area for Stateless Refugees," and refugees who had arrived in Shanghai after 1937 had to move into it. The Japanese strictly controlled entrance into and out of the ghetto. Like other Jewish men, aged 21 to 45, Mr. Abraham had to patrol the ghetto's border twice weekly with a Japanese policeman.

For a time, Mr. Abraham ran a small flea market in the ghetto. His family continued to receive a meager amount of food from the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, which

consisted of tea and bread or soup. This had to be supplemented by potatoes, rice or noodles from the local Chinese market in the ghetto.

On one trip to the market, a Japanese military truck struck Mr. Abraham's mother, Dora. Though she suffered serious head trauma, she survived. Ghetto life was indeed difficult for Mr. Abraham's parents who were in their fifties, Mr. Abraham remembered:

“I was better able to cope with ghetto life. I felt as if I became the family leader, urging them daily, ‘Don't give up.’ In retrospect, given the Holocaust, the refuge that we found there was heaven-sent.”

At least, in Shanghai, they survived.

In Europe, ghettoized Jews were subjected to forced labor, indiscriminate terror and then to industrialized mass murder with their deportation from ghettos to extermination centers. Despite ghettoization in Shanghai, the refugees were able to continue social and religious activities. They created artworks, wrote plays and published poetry in Shanghai's Jewish newspapers. Jewish youngsters were able to receive some education.

On July 17, 1945, an American aircraft accidentally bombed the ghetto while conducting a massive air raid on Shanghai. The bombing killed hundreds of Chinese and 31 Jewish refugees, among them some of Mr. Abraham's best friends.

Less than a month later, the war in the Pacific ended after the U.S. dropped atomic bombs on Japan. The Chinese Nationalist army officially liberated the ghetto on September 3, 1945. Shortly thereafter, the refugees began to learn the horrendous news about the Holocaust.

### **Immigration to the United States**

The Abraham family remained in Shanghai for several years after the war. During this time, Mr. Abraham worked as a bartender and waiter. Finally, in May 1949, with the Chinese communists close to victory, Mr. Abraham and his mother received permission to enter the United States under the German quota, although not his father, who was born in a part of Germany, which after the war became part of Poland. Thus, he was placed under the Polish quota, which was full.

They struggled over what to do, but soon, events dictated their decision. With Mao Tse-Tung and his Chinese communist armies close to occupying the city, Mr. Abraham and his mother fled China, leaving his father behind. They arrived in San Francisco on June 9, 1949. After a month's stay, they journeyed to Chicago because Mr. Abraham had a good friend from Berlin there.

Mr. Abraham's strenuous efforts to bring his father to the United States were finally rewarded a year and a half later when his father, Kallmann Abraham, was reunited with his wife and son in Chicago. By the mid-1950s, almost all of the Jewish refugees remaining in Shanghai had managed to leave.

Once in the United States, Mr. Abraham discovered that many members of his extended family, as well as friends, had been murdered; a total of 95 people. He mourned them and, to the end of his days, lived with the guilt that he had not been able to save his sister and her family.

### **Becoming established in this country**

Mr. Abraham first got a job as a shipping clerk. He then went to work for the Armour Dial Company, and due to his competence and conscientiousness was sent by the firm to Northwestern University to earn a degree in accounting. He became general manager of the company's cost accounting department. He remained with Armour Dial until 1981. In addition, he pursued his interest in classical music and opera, and for a time, he was a member of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's chorus. Mr. Abraham lived with and cared for his aging parents for many years. His father passed away when he was 75 and his mother at the age of 83. Shortly before her death, she said to him in German, "Horst, you are a good son."

Mr. Abraham went back to Germany in 1967. His family's former home was in a bombed-out section of East Berlin. As he looked at his old home, he saw an elderly woman looking out a window. "I recognized her face after 32 years. Her son Kurt had been one of my boyhood playmates. She asked, 'Who are you?' " When he told her his name, she responded: "I thought you had been killed."

But he had survived.

Mr. Abraham also visited Auschwitz where his sister and her family had perished. He collected some soil from Auschwitz and upon his return to this country placed a tin of it in his parents' grave. He also journeyed to Lobzenica Poland, his father's birthplace.

In the 1970s, Mr. Abraham opened an antique store, Fritz Gallery, in St. Charles, Illinois, which he ran along with his partner and long time friend Alex Revering. He later found out that the building that housed his store had been a way station for slaves escaping on the Underground Railroad before the Civil War. Mr. Abraham recalled:

"I immediately recognized the desperation and fear they must have felt. I too had been a refugee for many years surviving in an insecure situation with an uncertain future."

Although he was never enslaved during the Holocaust, each day was a struggle to survive.

### **Later years and death**

In 2006, Horst Abraham moved into the Selfhelp Home. The Jewish religion continued to play a significant role in his life. "I never lost my religious belief, just the opposite," he said. "In many cases, survivors don't believe; don't pray any more because of all that happened to them." Every day Mr. Abraham prayed.

In 2009, Mr. Abraham published his autobiography, *Berlin-Shanghai-Chicago: Never Give Up*, in the hope that it would help teach the lessons of the Holocaust, as well as express what the values of caring, perseverance, resourcefulness, hard work and faith can accomplish.

The closing words of the book resurrected the memory of his beloved sister Vera:

“An angel welcoming me into heaven. She embraces me in a close hug and whispers to me the words I have longed to hear for so many years ‘Shalom my brother’. Finally, there is peace. Finally there is closure.”

Horst Fritz Abraham passed away quietly in his sleep on January 11, 2013 in the Selfhelp Home at the age of ninety-five.

\*The quotations in Mr. Abraham’s story are taken from an interview with him conducted by Ethan Bensinger at the Selfhelp Home on July 17, 2007 and from Mr. Abraham’s self-published autobiography cited above.

## **Sought Learning Objectives**

Students will:

- \* Grasp the importance of Kristallnacht in the history of the Holocaust and why many historians view it as the start of the catastrophe.
- \* Analyze the motives of the perpetrators of Kristallnacht and the reactions of the victims, bystanders and rescuers.
- \* Understand why Imperial Japan would allow Jews to immigrate to Shanghai, then under its control, and why this refuge was so unique.
- \* Empathize with the feelings of loss experienced by Mr. Abraham and his parents.
- \* Derive inspiration from the ways in which the Jewish refugees in Shanghai retained their humanity.
- \* Differentiate between Jewish life in the Shanghai ghetto and Jewish life in Eastern European ghettos under Nazi rule.
- \* Value the personality and character traits that helped Mr. Abraham rebuild his life in this country and the freedom and opportunity offered him by the United States to do so.
- \* Describe Mr. Abraham’s commitment and dedication to his family.

## **Key Questions**

1. What were the causes and results of Kristallnacht?
2. Why did so many Jews still living under Nazi rule, including Mr. Abraham and his family, seek to flee after Kristallnacht, the pogrom of November 9-10, 1938?
3. Why did the city of Shanghai present itself as a possible destination for so many Jews attempting to flee Nazi persecution and violence, and why did so many flock to it?
4. What was the impact on Mr. Abraham’s life of his failure to save his sister, Vera, and her family?

5. What were the living conditions for the Jewish refugees in the Shanghai ghetto and how, despite these conditions, did the refugees manage to retain their humanity?
6. How did Jewish life in the ghetto of Shanghai compare and contrast with Jewish life in the Nazi ghettos of Eastern Europe?
7. What were the personality and character traits that helped Mr. Abraham rebuild his life in this country, as well as the opportunities to do so?
8. Why, very shortly before her death, did Mrs. Abraham say, “Horst, you were a good son?”

## Learning Activities

1. Request that class members make a poster depicting the various phases of Mr. Abraham’s eventful life. For each of the following phases of his life, draw a picture that would represent it. For example, for phase two (living under Nazi rule) there might be a figure standing in the shadow of the swastika. Here are the phases: a. Phase One–Early Years, 1917-1933. b. Phase Two–Living under Nazi Rule, 1933-39. c. Phase Three–Journey to Shanghai, May-June, 1939. d. Phase Four–Life in Shanghai, 1939-early 1943. e. Phase Five–Life in the Shanghai Ghetto, early 1943-August, 1945, f. Phase Six–Immigration to the United States, August, 1945-May, 1949, g. Phase Seven–Success in the U.S., 1949-1981, h. Phase Eight, Later Years and Death, 1981-2013.
2. In pairs, ask students to trace the journey, which was made by Mr. Abraham from Berlin to Shanghai in the late spring of 1939, on a world map. Show his progression from one port of call to the next by labeling the port and then drawing a line from it to the one following. On a separate sheet of paper, students should indicate the direction (north, south, east or west) taken by Mr. Abraham’s ship. Students should begin with Genoa, Italy, then go on to Naples, to Palermo in Sicily, then across the Mediterranean to Port Said Egypt at the head to the Suez Canal, then through the canal to the port of Aden in what is today Yemen, then across the Indian Ocean to what was then called Bombay and is today Mumbai India, then from Mumbai to Columbo in what was then called Ceylon and is today Sri Lanka, then from Columbo to the strategic port of Singapore, then from Singapore to Manila in the Philippines, then from Manila to Hong Kong and finally from Hong Kong to Shanghai, China.
3. Throughout his life, Mr. Abraham was shadowed by the death of his beloved sister Vera. He had done everything he could to save Vera and her family, and did all that he could to preserve her memory. His autobiography, which he published at age 91, was dedicated to her. The dedication read, in part:

“This book is dedicated to my beloved sister Vera Abraham Neufeld. She was like a violet in the meadow–modest and pure–and not like the proud rose that always seeks admiration. She has always remained a source of light for me.”

Nevertheless, Mr. Abraham lived with survivor guilt, the guilt that he had not done enough to save his sister and that he, not she, had survived. Ask the students: Why do you think that throughout his life, Mr. Abraham felt guilt about his sister’s death even though he had been powerless to save her?

4. Mr. Abraham recalled that he had tried to encourage and keep up his parents' spirits, while they were in the Shanghai ghetto. Let us assume that we are in the year 1944. Mr. Abraham's parents were well into middle age. They had endured seven years of persecution under the Nazis. They had been forced to flee the land of their birth and the culture in which they had been raised to a foreign city thousands of miles from their home, where they arrived destitute. There, they had to survive in squalid conditions eking out a meager living on the edge of starvation. They had lost contact with their beloved daughter and her family, as well as with other relatives who had remained in Germany, and had no idea what had happened to them. However, they did have their son Horst, and they did have each other.

Ask students to put themselves in Horst Abraham's place in the Shanghai ghetto in 1944 when he saw that his parents had become depressed and had begun to despair. Compose a short speech by Horst Abraham to his parents in which he seeks to inspire them to go on living, to have faith in themselves and in their son, and not to lose hope in the future. Mr. Abraham called them mama and papa.

5. One of the themes that run through Mr. Abraham's life is his commitment to his parents. Ask students to examine Mr. Abraham's story focusing on how this commitment was illustrated. How did he demonstrate his dedication to his parents? Ask the students: Do you believe that you will be as devoted and committed to your parents throughout your life, as Mr. Abraham was to his?

6. At the conclusion of Mr. Abraham's autobiography, there is a free association poem. Each segment begins with a word followed by several words that Mr. Abraham associated with it.

For example:

Jew—a human being; heart, face, brain, eyes, nose, lungs, ears, hands, feet, the same as other human beings.

Ghetto—dirty, unsanitary, hemmed in, marked out.

Holocaust—genocide, extermination, death of innocents, meaningless death.

What words come quickly to your mind that you would associate with Jewish refugees from Nazi oppression?

What words come quickly to mind that you would associate with the Shanghai ghetto?

What words come quickly to mind that you would associate with Mr. Abraham's parents?

What words come quickly to mind that you would associate with Vera Abraham?

What words come quickly to mind that you would associate with Horst Abraham?

What words come quickly to mind that you would associate with yourself?

## Enrichment Activities Focusing on Kristallnacht

1. Jews had lived in the German city of Worms since Roman times. Its synagogue, which was built in 1034, was the oldest in Central Europe. On Kristallnacht, Herta Mansbacher, the assistant principal of the Jewish school in Worms, put out a fire in the synagogue, but hoodlums soon arrived to light it again. In a gesture of defiance, Herta Mansbacher barred the entrance. As much as they sought to put a Jewish house of worship to the torch, she was equally willing to stop them even at the risk of her life. Herta Mansbacher was eventually pushed aside, and the synagogue was burned to the ground. She survived until the Jewish deportation from Worms on March 20, 1942.

Found in: *The Holocaust: A History of the Jews of Europe During the Second World War*, by Martin Gilbert (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1985) pgs. 72-3.

Ask students to research the history of the Jewish community of Worms, the illustrious Jewish scholars it produced, the trials and tribulations it endured over the centuries, and its fate during the Holocaust.

2. The date, November 9, figures prominently in 20<sup>th</sup> century German history. On November 9, 1918, Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany was forced to abdicate as a result of the imminent German defeat in World War I. A republic was declared and Germany agreed to sign an armistice. November 9, 1923, was the date of the failed Nazi “Beer Hall Putsch” in Munich when Hitler and his followers attempted to overthrow the Bavarian state government and seize power. Hitler received only mild punishment for this thwarted coup, and while in prison wrote *Mein Kampf*, which became the “Nazi Bible.” On November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall dividing West Berlin from Soviet-controlled East Berlin came down, ending the division between the two Germanies.

Ask students to conduct research into these “November 9” dates and provide additional historical background about them.

3. How does the following letter sent by a Nazi official from Neustadt, a town near Nuremberg, seek to rationalize on the basis of pseudo scientific “racial theory” Nazi hostility towards the Jews? The letter was sent to Fritz Kestler, a German farmer and grocery store owner. His wife, the mother of their four children, was expelled from the town of Uhlfeld and was temporarily staying with relatives in Nuremberg.

Regarding your request concerning the residence permit for your wife, I have to inform you of the following. Your wife, born Else Rindeberg, is a full-blooded Jewess. That is why she has repeatedly shown to all members of her race, through personal contact and all possible help, that she belongs to them. She has given shelter to Jews who felt threatened. I am not astonished that you were not enough of a man to put an end to this, since someone who admits that he has been happily married to a Jewess for 25 years shows that he is badly contaminated by this evil Jewish spirit. If, at the time, you were oblivious enough of your race to marry a Jewess against the warnings of your parents, you cannot expect today that an exception be made for your Jewish wife (to be allowed to return to her family).

Found in: *Nazi Germany and the Jews, Vol. I* by Saul Friedlander (New York: Harper Perennial, 1997), p. 294.

It should be noted that the Jews are not a race. They are members of a religion and a people. Nazi racial theory has absolutely no basis in scientific fact.

4. The following are events during Kristallnacht in the German town of Bremen and were gleaned from a report to his government by the British consul in the city, T.B. Wildman. Ask students to read the following account and then to make an illustrated montage of the scenes depicted in it as they imagine them:

“The Burgermeister (mayor) of Bremen, Heinrich Bohmoker, whom British consul T.B. Wildman described as a typical Nazi drunkard and bully, decided that he did not have enough Storm Troopers to carry out the job in an appropriate manner, so he bussed men in from the surrounding country districts. They started work at 2 a.m. on November 10. The mayor had also arranged for a detachment of the local fire department...to be standing by at the synagogue and its administrative building...hoses at the ready in case the blaze looked about to spread. Once the synagogue was burning nicely, the storm troopers then turned their attention to the administrative building next door and thoroughly ransacked the place. A party of them then set fire to the funeral chapel at the Jewish cemetery in Hastedt, a suburb of Bremen, tore up tombstones and desecrated a number of graves.

At about 4 a.m. Storm Troopers turned their attention to Jewish shops and businesses in the city itself. In one instance, they used a truck to smash the windows of a number of shops. After these had been looted and stripped of everything of value, they put up their prewritten placards bearing the approved slogans: “Revenge for the murder of vom Rath by international Jewry” and “No dealing with nations under the sway of Jews.”

At about 5 a.m. the Storm Troopers began to arrest Jews, both men and women and even children. In some cases where the women were old and infirm they were allowed to remain in their houses. The rest, however, were taken off to the Misslerhaus, a former hostel for emigrants. Two hours later the women and children were released. One Jew, a man named Rosenberg, resisted. He was shot dead. There were also reports of a number of suicides.

Later that morning, in a grotesque spectacle, the Jews who had been arrested, most of them still in their nightclothes with just an overcoat thrown over their shoulders, were made to file past Burgermeister Bohmocker in a long column.”

Found in: *Kristallnacht: The Unleashing of the Holocaust* by Anthony Read and David Fisher (New York: Peter Bedrick Books, 1989) pgs. 78-9.

5. The following Kristallnacht episode took place in Wittlich, a small town in the Moselle valley in the western part of Germany. As in many other towns, the synagogue was destroyed first. “The intricate lead crystal window above the door crashed into the street and pieces of furniture came flying through doors and windows. A shouting Storm Trooper climbed to the

roof of the synagogue waving the scrolls of the Torah: 'Wipe your asses with it, Jews,' he screamed as he hurled them down.

Jewish businesses were vandalized, Jewish men beaten up and taken away. 'Herr Marks, who owned the butcher shop down the street, was one of the half dozen Jewish men already on the truck...The SA men were laughing at Frau Marks who stood in front of her smashed plate glass window with both hands raised in bewildered despair. 'Why are you people doing this to us?' she wailed at the circle of silent faces in the windows, her lifelong neighbors. 'What have we ever done to you?' " Found in: Saul Friedlander, *op.cit.* p. 278.

Discuss with students:

How would they respond to the questions shouted out by Frau Marks on Kristallnacht?

6. Marguerite Strasser experienced the events of Kristallnacht in Munich where the Nazi movement was born. Her mother had died shortly before her birth, and her father had fled to France. Marguerite lived with her elderly grandmother. The following is an excerpt from her account of the pogrom:

"On November 10, I didn't want to go to school because I already had the feeling that something was up. In my class, it was doubly difficult because I was already a complete outsider there. And on November 10, it was worse still. I was harassed more often, and the looks were even more hateful. In the first period, we had calisthenics, and the teacher humiliated me more than usual. Then my schoolmates hid all of my clothes, and I completely dissolved into tears. I had to search every nook and cranny for them...In the middle of math class, a pupil came in with an order from the director that Jewish pupils had to leave immediately. I packed up my things. My classmates made very merry: they clapped and shrieked as I crept towards the door. But the mathematics teacher called after me, 'And don't forget your extra assignment!' With this he showed that he didn't approve of the expulsion. It was very nice of him, and, until this day, I have never forgotten it.

I was afraid to go straight home and went first to the home of a friend who was half Jewish. She was not home yet, however, and her parents were in complete despair. She came home half an hour later, sobbing, with torn clothing and covered with bruises. She had been so cruelly treated by her fellow classmates. Her parents were so distressed that they sent me home immediately.

The synagogue on Kanalstrasse was still giving off clouds of smoke. The windowpanes were shattered. On the street among the shards of glass lay singed prayer books and religious objects. Many people were standing before the synagogue, most of them in uniform yelling, 'Jews drop dead.'

When I arrived home crying...my grandmother told me that my uncle had been taken to Dachau. The Gestapo had been to the house, had ransacked the place and ordered that we leave the apartment immediately. Our loyal housekeeper, Afra, was indignant that an old lady and a little girl should simply be thrown out of their apartment. So she went in the

afternoon to Gestapo headquarters...and declared how inhumane they were. In any case, we were allowed to remain in the apartment.

My grandmother had always said I must be proud that I am Jewish, but that was incomprehensible to me. I had always been ashamed that I belonged to this terrible people (as depicted in Nazi propaganda)...I felt like an inferior being...and at some point I came to accept that I was less of a human being than other people.”

Found in: *Children During the Holocaust* by Patricia Heberer (Lapham Md: AltaMira Press, 2011), pgs. 26-7.

Ask students to compose a letter to Marguerite in which they seek to assure her that she is as worthy a person as anyone else. What could they write to her that would increase her self-esteem and attempt to convince her that she should not buy into the Nazi propaganda about Jews?

7. Gerald Franks, one of the founders of the Selfhelp Home, and his family were in Berlin when the Kristallnacht pogrom was launched. Mr. Franks was raised to be both a good Jew and a good German. Because his father had been awarded an Iron Cross First Class, a military medal as a result of his service in World War I, Mr. Franks was allowed to attend a gymnasium, the academic high school that prepared students for university study. He was a member of his synagogue's youth group, Bund Deutsch-Judischer Jugend, that also believed one could be a good Jew and a good German.

Mr. Franks related his experiences on Kristallnacht in an interview conducted by Ethan Bensinger on September 26, 2007. “It started on the night of November 9. I heard they were smashing the Jewish stores in the central part of West Berlin. I got on my bike and rode down there and watched exactly how it was done. They had a whole system worked out. A couple of Storm Troopers would walk down the street and would use white paint in the corner of the window to designate Jewish stores. And then Storm Troopers (as well as) a lot of civilian people too would break the windows and loot the stores and smash the stores on the inside.

And I watched all this, and I saw one of my schoolmates pick up a chair and throw it into a huge chandelier hanging in the window of a Jewish store. And I was terribly shocked because this fellow was not an out and out Nazi. I considered him a decent guy. And when I saw this, when the chandelier broke, something broke within me as far as being a German is concerned. It just really killed that. And when I came home that night, I said to my parents, ‘I think we have to get out of this country.’ And they came around to this conclusion in their own way also.

Then, the next morning I decided to go to school. The synagogue was across the street from the school. I met the rabbi, and I stood there with him and watched the synagogue burning. The fire department was there, and used their hoses to dampen the adjacent buildings so that they wouldn't catch fire, but they let the synagogue burn. While we were standing there, we watched the school kids go by, and also some of the teachers. And most of them were embarrassed. When they saw us, they just looked the other way.”

Ask the class what Mr. Franks meant when he said, “Something broke within me as far as being a German is concerned. It just really killed that.” Explain how the “Night of the Broken Glass” helped to shatter Mr. Franks’ German identity.

8. Divide the class into groups for the following activity. Each group should address the following questions and then report back the responses of its members.

Why do you think that while many Germans disapproved of the violence they witnessed on Kristallnacht, the great majority did nothing to help the victims? Given the fact that they were living in a totalitarian state and saw violence organized and carried out by agents of that state, did they have any choice other than to stand by?

These are some of the emotions that may have been experienced by the bystanders: shock, fear and terror, despair, powerlessness, bewilderment, numbness, shame, greed, envy and sadism.

These are several Kristallnacht scenes reported by witnesses that would help in responding to the question: of why ordinary Germans did not do more to help.

a. “The American consul in Leipzig reported that ‘having demolished dwellings and hurled most of the movable effects into the streets, the insatiably sadistic perpetrators threw many of the trembling (Jewish residents) into a small stream that flows through the Zoological Park, commanding the horrified spectators to spit at them, defile them with mud and jeer at their plight. The slightest manifestation of sympathy evoked a positive fury on the part of the perpetrators, and the crowd was powerless to do anything but turn horror-stricken eyes from the scene of abuse, or leave the vicinity. These tactics were carried out the entire morning of November 10 without police intervention, and they were applied to men, women and children.” Found in: Saul Friedlander, *op. cit.* p. 277.

b. “The Freyhans had an apartment in Berlin opposite the synagogue in Levetzowstrasse. Both the Freyhans were teachers, and although she was already seven and a half months pregnant, Kate Freyhan was still teaching at the Jewish girls’ primary school in nearby Auguststraasse. When she came home from school on November 10, she found hordes of school children bombarding the synagogue with stones. She stood at the window of the apartment, watching as the children tore up cobblestones and threw them through the windows of the synagogue. The children were there all afternoon: The vandalism went on for hours. The police just stood by and watched, making no attempt to interfere.

When Kate Freyhan went to the corner shop to get some milk, she found it full of people watching the stone throwing. Many of them shook their heads in silent disapproval. The young woman who owned the shop was indignant. It was disgraceful, the police just standing there and doing nothing. ‘After all, it is private property,’ she declared.” Found in Anthony Read and David Fisher, *op. cit.*, pgs. 74-75).

c. “British Consul General J.E. Bell in the city of Cologne reported that many middle-class Germans disapproved of what had happened, but were too frightened to say anything. One

German woman who did so 'in a tram which runs past my house was arrested at the first stop by Nazi guards.' But other people Bell spoke to, local industrialists for example, insisted that 'they had no influence with the Party who have made such a point of racial purity that the Fuhrer must carry his theories to their logical conclusion.' Bell's own conclusion about the pogrom was depressing. 'I have been more shocked,' he wrote, 'by the cold blooded and calculated manner in which the action was taken than by anything else about the recent events. Yet I am inclined to think that the Fuhrer knows his Germans. Amongst the mass of Germans who have nothing at stake, there is observable a certain amount of Schadenfreude (joy in mischief). Our German cook, for instance, observed to me a few days ago that it was high time a certain neighboring Jew was 'washed up.'" (Found in Read and Fisher, *op. cit.*, p. 92.)

9. Below are several examples of help given by ordinary Germans to Jews on Kristallnacht. These examples are taken from the already cited work, *Kristallnacht: The Unleashing of the Holocaust* by Anthony Read and David Fisher. Ask the class to speculate on the motives of Germans who aided Jews during this pogrom. Note that the motives of those who engaged in altruistic behavior during the Holocaust are noted in the "Learning Activities" section associated with the story of Marietta Ryba. Pose the question to students: Do these examples of rescue efforts change your thinking about the choices German bystanders had during the Kristallnacht?

a. "Richard Stukerts was a chauffeur employed by Dr. Carl Loesten of Berlin. He persuaded his parents to hide his Jewish employer in their home at Wittenau during the pogrom. In another case, a postman spent the night walking up and down the street in front of the home of two elderly Jewish ladies, his uniform successfully affording them protection." (p. 76).

b. "In Leipzig, Alfred Glaser remembered his traumatic experience of going into the city center the morning of November 10. 'Everywhere, there were crowds of men, standing there, some sympathetic, some indifferent. I rushed across to the market square leaving the broken window glass behind me. I wanted to get to my girlfriend...Then I saw how SA and SS men were leading groups of Jews, all in lines...I went no further, but returned to the market. Then along came the driver for the fish merchants, Grospsitsch, where I worked. He drove to the edge of the curb and called to me to get on board. That was dangerous for him, a non-Jew. He took me home.

My mother stood waiting outside our house, anxiously asking me why I had stayed out so long. The Gestapo had already been there asking for me. I told my mother that I would leave Germany illegally, as I had no passport...I never saw my mother again.'" (p. 86).

c. "Eichstatt is a pretty little town...midway between Nuremberg and Munich. By November 1938 there was only one Jewish family left in the town. At 5 a.m. on November 10, the county clerk, Dr. Georg Roth, who was a member of the Nazi party, learned that the SA was planning to cleanse the town of the last remaining Jews. On hearing the commotion in the streets, he called the local police to restore order immediately. The police found a group of twenty men trying to break into the home of the Jewish family and put a stop to it. Clearly the family could no longer stay in Eichstatt, but where were they to go? It transpired that they

relatives in Augsburg, so county clerk Roth arranged for them to go there. However, he failed to consult the Eichstatt stationmaster, who refused outright to sell them train tickets. In the end, Roth himself was forced to hire a taxi to drive them the 100 kilometers to their relatives' home in Augsburg." (p. 103).

d. "Emil and Charlotte Rotschild lived in the small town of Tiefenort in central Germany. On the night of November 9 to 10, they were aroused from their beds by the sounds of breaking glass and shouting and the crunch of hobnailed on the street below. Suddenly there was a loud banging on the front door of their building. At any moment, the mob would break in. Then the door of the apartment above opened, and their neighbor Herr Huter leaned over the banister and told them to come up to their apartment. Still in their bare feet, the Rotschilds ran upstairs.

A moment later, the front door was smashed, and the mob poured into the building. They broke into the Rotschild's apartment and began to smash everything. Frau Huter ran to the window and shouted to the crowd. She recognized someone and yelled, 'Ah, I see the mayor's son is also taking part.'

In the face of Frau Huter, the crowd soon departed." (pgs. 103-04).

e. A few Christian clergymen spoke out publicly to condemn the National Socialist regime. "On the Sunday following Kristallnacht, Pastor Julius von Jan preached to his Lutheran congregation denouncing the pogrom. 'Houses of worship, sacred to others, have been burned down with impunity-men who have loyally served our nation and have done their duty have been thrown into concentration camps...Our nation's infamy is bound to bring about divine punishment.' The sermon brought instant and far from divine punishment for Pastor Jan. He was dragged from his Bible class by a Nazi mob, beaten up and thrown on the roof of a shed. Then his house was wrecked, just as so many Jewish homes had been, and he was jailed." (p. 125).

10. Leni Weil, another Selfhelp founder, lived with her parents and two younger sisters in the city of Stuttgart, Germany. Her family considered themselves Germans, who were Jewish.

The events of Kristallnacht came as a shock to Mrs. Weil's family. "The worst thing was that we had no idea that this could happen," she said. They watched in horror as a Stuttgart synagogue went up in flames. Mrs. Weil's father, Arthur Metzger, was one of the 30,000 Jewish men arrested in the wake of Kristallnacht. He was interned in the Dachau concentration camp, which became the administrative model for all Nazi concentration camps. Theodore Eicke, the second commandant of Dachau, instituted a regime of systematic terror and brutality. In Dachau, punishments were mercilessly carried out. For example, any prisoner who failed to show proper respect to an SS guard was condemned to eight days of solitary confinement on starvation rations and twenty lashes. Any prisoner who was a "political agitator" or who attacked an SS guard was hanged.

Jews were locked up in Dachau and other camps after Kristallnacht to drive them into leaving Germany. Those, whose families were able to secure visas for travel to a foreign

country, were released. Before their release, prisoners were told that if they ever disclosed what they had undergone in the camps, they would be sent back and never leave again.

Mrs. Weil remembered vividly the day her father was released from Dachau: “We heard four weeks after his arrest that my father would come home. I said to my mother, ‘I think I better go to the railroad station with you. I don’t want you to go alone.’ It was a terrible surprise. He was totally bald. He was frostbitten, and he was emaciated. His body was swollen, and he looked like a ghost.” The family left for the U.S. in April 1939.

The information about Leni Weil, a founder of the Selfhelp Home, comes from an interview conducted with Mrs. Weil by Ethan Bensinger on August 29, 2007.

For discussion: Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS, which operated the concentration camps, ordered that Jewish males incarcerated in them after Kristallnacht were not to be “unduly mistreated.” Why do you think that Himmler might have issued such an order? Why, given the nature of the concentration camp system, was there little chance that this order would be obeyed?

11. Divide students into groups. Ask each group to discuss the lessons that Kristallnacht can teach. What insights have students gained about human behavior, the impact of state-sponsored violence, the vulnerability of minorities and the ways in which prejudice can be fanned into hatred? What can be done to prevent such a terrible event from reoccurring? Each group should select one of its members to share its findings with the class as a whole.

### **Enrichment Activities Focusing on the Response of the Outside World and the Shanghai Ghetto**

1. After the Nazi occupation of Austria in March 1938 and the brutal assault on Austria’s Jewish community, the Jewish refugee problem assumed greater proportions. U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, in response to political pressure by Jewish refugees, convened a conference of 32 nations in Evian-les-Bains, France. The ostensible purpose of the conference was to find a solution to the growing Jewish refugee problem. Nazi policy at the time was still centered on forced Jewish emigration.

Saul Friedlander in his important work, *Nazi Germany and the Jews, Volume One: The Years of Persecution, 1933-1939* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), writes that:

“The outcome of Evian was decided before it convened. The invitation to the conference clearly stated that ‘no country would be expected to receive a greater number of emigrants than is permitted by existing legislation’ ” (p. 248). In the United States, the restrictive immigration quota system, instituted by the immigration law of 1924, governed admission into this country.

Of all 32 nations present, only the tiny Dominican Republic expressed interest in providing refuge for the persecuted Jews of Germany and Austria. None of the three great democratic nations at the time—the United States, Great Britain or France—were interested in absorbing

the refugees. The Australian delegate stated, “As we have no real racial problem, we are not desirous of importing one.” No one was bold enough to remind the delegate that there were native aborigines in his country who had been treated deplorably.

Friedlander writes that as a consequence of the conference: “Nazi sarcasm had a field day. The *Volkischer Beobachter* (an authoritative Nazi mouthpiece) featured the headline: ‘Nobody Wants Them.’ For Hitler this was not an opportunity to be missed. He stated:

They complain in these democracies about the unfathomable cruelty that Germany--and now Italy--uses to get rid of their Jews. But it does not mean that these democratic countries have become ready to replace their hypocritical remarks with acts of help. (p. 249).

The Nazis were emboldened by the Evian Conference to continue and increase their anti-Semitic measures. Their fear of world public opinion diminished, and the Nazi shadow on the European continent lengthened.

Pose the following questions to students:

A. How did the outcome of the Evian Conference contradict the sentiments expressed by the seventeenth century poet, John Donne:

“No man is an island, entire of itself;  
every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;  
if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less,  
as well as if a promontory were,  
as well as if a manor of your friend’s  
or of your own were;  
any man’s death diminishes me,  
because I am involved in mankind;  
and therefore never send to know  
for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for you.” John Donne, *Devotions XVII*, 1623.

B. Given the outcome of the Evian Conference, is it possible to understand why the city of Shanghai accepted more Jewish refugees than Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa combined?

C. Can you think of an example of when you or someone you know was an “upstander” rather than a bystander and acted in a positive way to help someone in need while others stood aside?

For additional information on the Evian Conference, students should read the article on the conference from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

<http://www.ushmm.org/outreach/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007698>

Students should bear in mind that while Nazi official policy stressed forced Jewish emigration, they created major obstacles to this by restricting the amount of property and

currency that Jews could take with them. Prospective immigrants who were impoverished and faced more difficulties in rebuilding their lives were much less likely to be welcomed by foreign countries.

2. As Mr. Abraham was setting out on his long voyage from Genoa to Shanghai, another ship, the German trans-Atlantic liner, the SS St. Louis, was nearing the end of its voyage. It sailed on May 13, 1939, from Hamburg, Germany, with 937 Jewish refugees on board, most of them from Germany. They were desperately seeking a sanctuary from Nazi persecution. The ship was bound for Cuba where the refugees on board planned to stay until they could enter the United States. But the passengers did not know that Cuban President Laredo Bru had issued a directive revoking their Cuban landing permits, which had been issued by a corrupt Cuban official. Laredo Bru was also under pressure from Cuban right wing anti-immigrant and anti-Semitic groups and from negative public opinion that had been stirred up by Nazi propaganda. In addition, the country was still feeling the effects of the Great Depression, and there was fear that the refugees would take jobs away from Cubans even though the vast majority were planning on going to the United States.

After Cuba denied entry to 908 of the refugees on board the St. Louis, the story of their rejection received broad media coverage worldwide. SS St. Louis Captain Gustav Schroeder, sympathetic to the refugees' plight, headed the ship north towards the Florida coast while some refugees sent cables to President Roosevelt, pleading for entry into the United States, to no avail. The annual German-Austrian immigration quota of 27,370 had been filled. American public opinion, influenced by isolationist and xenophobic voices, was overwhelmingly opposed to admitting more refugees. 1940 was an election year, and American politicians did not wish to risk their popularity by letting in the refugees.

The St. Louis was forced to sail back to Europe where, due to the efforts of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, the countries of Great Britain, France, the Netherlands and Belgium each accepted some of the refugees. The refugees disembarked in Europe between June 16 and June 20, 1939, just weeks before Mr. Abraham arrived in Shanghai. A total of 254 St. Louis refugees were killed in the Holocaust.

The story of the St. Louis symbolizes the American responses to the Holocaust. It was a response, seen also at the Evian Conference, marked largely by apathy and indifference, and fueled by narrow self-interest, anti-Semitism, nativism and the impact of the Great Depression. Yet, there was a minority of Americans who favored admission of the refugees.

Divide the class into groups. Ask each group to write a newspaper editorial setting forth the arguments for admitting the refugees to this country. Remember that no one could know at this time about the Final Solution. The Nazis did not decide on genocide as a solution to the "Jewish Question" until the late summer of 1941.

Each member of the group should first write his or her editorial. Then the group will combine ideas and wording from each piece into a group collective editorial that will be presented to the class.

Note: A very fine documentary on the story of the St. Louis is “*Double Crossing: The Story of the St. Louis.*” It can be ordered from: Ergo Media Jewish Video catalogue, [www.Jewishvideo.com](http://www.Jewishvideo.com)

3. The documentary film, “*Shanghai Ghetto*” by Amir Mann and Dana Janklowicz-Mann provides a serious and thoughtful overview of the history of the Jewish refugees who flocked to Shanghai to escape Nazi persecution. It can be purchased from: <http://www.shanghaighetto.com/> and is also held by many public libraries. Screen the DVD in class. As students are viewing it, they should respond to the questions below, which are listed in chronological order. After the screening, students should have the opportunity to fill in missed responses to the questions and to discuss any they wish, especially the last two opinion questions.

1. What do the survivor accounts illustrate about their lives in pre-Nazi Germany?
2. Why did non-German Jews view Jewish contributions to German life differently from German Jews?
3. How did the Nazis act on their racist ideology once they came to power?
4. Why did some Jews decide to remain in Germany despite Nazi persecution?
5. Why did Great Britain especially benefit from the results of the Evian Conference?
6. Why did so many Jews under German control seek to flee after Kristallnacht?
7. What were the International Settlement and the French Concession in Shanghai?
8. Which two Jewish communities were already in Shanghai when the refugees began to arrive?
9. What were the initial results of the Sino-Japanese war that began in 1937?
10. Why was it so emotionally and psychologically difficult for many Jews to leave Germany?
11. Why did the refugees experience such a sense of shock upon their arrival in Shanghai?
12. Where did the refugees receive assistance after their arrival?
13. How many refugees did the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee aid in Shanghai?
14. What were the “Heime,” the homes for Shanghai Jewish refugees?
15. How did the Jewish refugees in Shanghai attempt to support themselves?
16. What do the survivor witnesses in the film relate concerning relations between them and Shanghai’s Chinese population?
17. What does the film convey about the motivation of the Japanese for letting Jews into Shanghai?
18. What were some of the positive aspects of Jewish life in Shanghai for Jewish young people?
19. What does the film illustrate about the flourishing Jewish social and cultural life in Shanghai?
20. Why did the refugees’ feeling of living in relative safety under Japanese rule change?
21. How did Laura Margolis persuade the Japanese to allow the Joint to continue to operate after Pearl Harbor?
22. Why were the war years from 1942 to 1945 so difficult for the refugees?
23. Why during these years did greater responsibility for helping the refugees fall on the Russian Jewish community of Shanghai? (Note: Until very late in the Second World War, the Soviet Union and Japan were not at war with each other).

24. What important event occurred in the life of the Jewish refugees on February 18, 1943, and why did it come about?
25. How were the Jewish refugees and the general Chinese population affected by the American bombing of Shanghai on July 17, 1945?
26. Why was the end of the war and its immediate aftermath a bittersweet experience for the refugees?
27. Where did the refugees go after the war's end?
28. Was there any question about the film that you believe was omitted?
29. Who, for you, was the most memorable witness in the film?
30. What rating would you give the film on a "four star" basis and why?

4. One person can make a difference for good or for evil. Concerning the latter, there are many names that come to mind such as three genocidal 20<sup>th</sup> century dictators, Joseph Stalin, Adolph Hitler and Mao-Tse-Tung. But there have been many people who have made a difference for the good, among them the "Righteous Among the Nations," non-Jews who saved Jewish people during the Holocaust. Some Jews were also instrumental in saving other Jews during the Holocaust. One Jewish person who made a difference for the good was Laura Margolis, the first female overseas representative of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. She played a pivotal role in securing aid for the Jewish refugees in Shanghai.

But this was not her only accomplishment in the field of international Jewish humanitarian service. For extra credit, assign a pair of students to do a report on the significant humanitarian accomplishments of Laura Margolis. An extensive discussion of her life and work may be found online at <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/jarblum-laura-margolis> . At the conclusion of the article, there is a bibliography that may be consulted for additional information on this remarkable woman.

5. The online multi-media exhibit, "*Flight and Rescue*" from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum tells the story of 2,100 Polish Jews who fled to safety from the Nazis. It can be found at: [www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/flight\\_rescue](http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/flight_rescue).

The refugees overcame enormous odds and surmounted many challenges to find safety abroad. They first fled to Lithuania where they were helped by the courageous efforts of two foreign diplomats, Chiune Sugihara of Japan and Jan Zwartendijk of the Netherlands. Through the selfless acts of these two "Righteous Gentiles," they were able to secure documents that allowed them to travel across the Soviet Union to Kobe, Japan. About half were then able to flee elsewhere. After Pearl Harbor, however, the Japanese deported the rest of the Polish refugees to the Shanghai ghetto.

Ask students to look at the part of the website exhibit that focuses on the experiences of the 1,000 Polish Jews who lived in Shanghai from 1942 to 1945, thus bringing the total Jewish population to approximately 18,000. The students should compare and contrast the experiences of the German and Austrian Jews in Shanghai with the experiences of the Polish Jews in Shanghai. In what respects were their experiences similar and in what respects were they different? Were there more similarities or more differences or visa versa? Explain.

It should also be noted that there is a companion book to the “*Flight and Rescue*” exhibit. Chapter seven of this volume, entitled “*Exile*,” (pgs. 145-179) is devoted entirely to the Polish refugees’ experiences in Shanghai and contains a wealth of useful and worthwhile illustrative material on the topic.

6. One of the best memoirs about Jewish life in Shanghai from a child’s point of view is written by Sigmund Tobias, who became a distinguished professor of educational psychology. It is called *Strange Haven, A Jewish Childhood in Wartime Shanghai* (Urbana and Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2009). Professor Tobias was lucky enough as a child to flee Hitler’s Germany and find refuge in Shanghai. During his time in the city, he studied at the Mir Yeshiva established by the Polish Jews who had been deported there from Japan. His memoir describes his family’s trip to Shanghai and their life there, as well as the life of the local Chinese community.

Assign students to do a book report on this work by asking them to:

- A. Write a short summary of the contents of the work.
- B. Describe the central character in the work, noting especially the variety of Tobias’ childhood experiences in Shanghai.
- C. Explain what they liked and did not like about the book.
- D. Compare and contrast their (the students’) childhood with that of the author.
- E. Summarize the most important points they learned from reading the book.

The historian David Kranzler is a recognized expert on the life of the Jewish community of Shanghai during World War II. His scholarly and informative, yet readable, work, *Japanese, Nazis and Jews: The Jewish Refugee Community of Shanghai, 1938-1945* (New York, 1976), is well worth examining for insights into Jewish communal life in the city and for the motivation of the Japanese in allowing Jews to live in Shanghai.

Students also may analyze aspects of the book, focusing on the questions of: A. What insights does the author provide about Jewish communal life in Shanghai? B. What insights does the author provide about Japan’s motivation for accepting Jewish refugees in Shanghai?

7. The following is another comparison and contrast question. It focuses on the Shanghai ghetto and the ghetto of Kovno, Lithuania. The Kovno ghetto is noted in the “Enrichment Activities Focusing on Jews in the Kovno Ghetto and Nazi Occupation of France” section of Paula Tritsch’s story. After the German invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, Lithuania, which had been occupied by the Soviets, was quickly overrun. Mass murder of the local Jewish population of Kovno was carried out first by local Lithuanians and then by the Germans. Initially, about 30,000 Kovno Jews were confined in the ghetto. However, by the fall of 1941, the Jewish population of the Kovno ghetto was reduced to 17,412, just a bit less than the Jewish population of Shanghai at the time.

The Kovno ghetto was located in a poor area of the city. Jews had to wear a yellow star and suffered from overcrowding, lack of sanitary facilities, and constant hunger and harassment. The adults were used by the Germans as forced laborers, and subsisted on starvation

rations. They suffered from exhaustion and tremendous stress. The Germans closed all synagogues in the ghetto and outlawed public prayer and all education, except for limited job training in industries they needed. Life in the ghetto was administered by a Judenrat, a Jewish Council, that had to obey German commands and fulfill German demands. The Judenrat was responsible for ghetto security, overseeing a Jewish ghetto police force of about 150, and for providing health, welfare and cultural services to the population.

The Kovno ghetto Judenrat ran clandestine schools, allowed secret prayer services and sought to aid the ghetto underground. The Jewish police supported the underground, which was able to establish communications with Soviet partisans in Lithuanian forests. Some Jewish underground members were able to escape from the ghetto and join the fight against the Germans, although a number were killed.

On June 21, 1943, SS chief Heinrich Himmler declared the Kovno ghetto to be a concentration camp, and a harsher regime was imposed. On March 27, 1944, the Germans dragged about 1,800 ghetto residents, including infants, children and elderly men and women, from their homes and murdered them. On July 8, 1944, with Soviet forces advancing, the Germans decided to liquidate the Kovno ghetto. Many Jews resisted and about 2,000 were killed. Survivors were sent to concentration camps in Germany where a number died. Of the 29,760 Jews who had been first incarcerated in the Kovno ghetto, only about 2,000 survived the war.

Additional information on the Kovno ghetto can be found at: [Holocaust Prelude  
www.Ho#48FFA6](http://www.Ho#48FFA6)

In addition, the United Holocaust Memorial Museum has published an admirable book on the ghetto entitled, *Hidden History of the Kovno Ghetto* (Boston: Little and Brown, 1997).

Ask students to compare and contrast the experience of Jewish refugees in the Shanghai ghetto from 1942 to the summer of 1945 with the experience of Jews in the Kovno ghetto from 1941 to the summer of 1944. In what respect were these ghetto experiences the same and in what respect were they different. Were there more similarities or more differences or visa versa? Explain.

### **Horst Abraham's Timeline**

1914-1918-World War I. 100,000 German Jews out of a population of 600,000 served in the German armed forces including Kallmann Abraham, Horst's father. Twelve thousand were killed and many more were wounded.

June 18, 1919-Germany signed the Treaty of Versailles concluding the war. It was considered by many Germans as a humiliating peace and engendered a sense of bitterness and rage among many Germans. It exacerbated political divisions and created a climate in which extreme, vengeful nationalists could thrive.

August 14, 1919-The Weimar Republic was established. Much of Horst Abraham's childhood and adolescence were spent during the Weimar years, 1919-1933. Jews enjoyed full civil rights and made enormous contributions to German cultural, intellectual, economic and political life. A number of Jewish organizations flourished.

1919-The party that was to become the National Socialist German Workers Party (Nazi Party) was founded. Adolf Hitler joined it and rose to become its leader. In February 1920, its racist, anti-Semitic authoritarian platform was written. For the Nazis, the Jews served as a handy scapegoat for all of Germany's ills and would be vilified and demonized in Hitler's autobiography, *Mein Kampf*, written in 1924.

June 1, 1922-A right-wing anti-Semitic extremist murdered German-Jewish foreign minister Walter Rathenau.

1922/23-Germany experienced terrible inflation that wiped out the savings of many citizens, including Jews.

1924-1929-The German economy stabilized, and anti-Semitic strength appeared to ebb.

1929/1930-The Great Depression struck Germany and political extremism on both the right and the left rose. In particular, the electoral strength of the Nazis rose dramatically.

September 18, 1931-Japan launched the military takeover of the strategic Chinese province of Manchuria. The Japanese occupation of Manchuria brought great destruction to Shanghai as a result of anti-Japanese rioting.

January 30, 1933-Due to the machinations of a right wing cabal around aged President Paul von Hindenburg, Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany just as the Nazi electoral appeal seemed in decline. Within the first month of his rule, freedom of speech and of the press were ended and freedom of assembly was restricted. The Nazis first arrested political opponents- communists, Social Democrats, trade unionists and other political dissidents. In the following months, they gained total control of the German state in which pervasive regimentation, terror and anti-Semitic propaganda flourished.

March 20, 1933-The Nazis established their first concentration camp at Dachau, northwest of Munich. It became a training ground for the SS, the Nazi "racial" elite praetorian guard that was to run other camps. Theodore Eicke, commandant of Dachau, set forth detailed camp regulations that would be instituted in other camps. Large numbers of Jews would arrive in Dachau following Kristallnacht.

March 24, 1933-The Enabling Act was passed giving Hitler and the Nazi government comprehensive legislative power. It provided a veneer of legality for Nazi edicts throughout the life of the Nazi regime.

April 1, 1933-Hitler proclaimed a one-day boycott of all Jewish shops. The Abraham's shoe repair shop was among them. A number of acts of violence against individual Jews occurred.

April 7, 1933-The first anti-Jewish law was passed: all Jewish civil servants, with the exception of those who had fought in World War I, were forcibly retired. This was the first of several hundred pieces of anti-Jewish legislation, the so-called Cold Pogrom, that would relentlessly ostracize German Jews, cruelly restrict their lives and turn them into social pariahs.

April 25, 1933-The Law Against the Overcrowding of German Schools was passed. It severely restricted the number of Jewish students in German schools and universities. Those who remained were increasingly subject to insults and discrimination. The law impacted both Horst Abraham and his sister Vera. In response, the Jewish community established more Jewish schools attended by growing numbers of students. The percentage of students in Jewish schools rose from 14 percent in 1932 to 60 percent in 1934.

May 10, 1933-Josef Goebbels, Hitler's propaganda minister, conducted the public burning of "degenerate books" including a number of Jewish ones. A century earlier, the German-Jewish poet, Heinrich Heine, had prophesied, "Where one burns books, one will in the end burn people." In less than ten years following the book burning, Vera Abraham along with her husband and young son would be burned in the ovens at Auschwitz.

Summer/Fall, 1933-The Nazis "cleansed" the universities and the arts of Jewish influences. Jewish writers and artists were prohibited from practicing their professions.

July 1933-The Kulturbund, the Cultural Society for German Jews was founded. It served as the cultural center for German-Jewish life and strove to find employment for Jewish artists and intellectuals who had been discharged from their posts. In its first year of operation, the Kulturbund staged 69 operatic performances and 117 musical concerts. It supported three theatrical groups, two symphony orchestras and numerous choirs.

September 1933-The Reichsvertretung, the national representative body of German Jewry, was established. It was headed by Rabbi Leo Baeck and Otto Hirsch. The Reichsvertretung engaged in a wide variety of activities on behalf of the German-Jewish community, especially in the realms of social welfare, education and preparation for emigration. It sought to strengthen Jewish dignity thereby enhancing moral resistance.

October 1933-Jews were barred from journalism. In response, Jewish journalists successfully expanded the German-Jewish press that raised Jewish morale. Sixty-five Jewish newspapers and periodicals and 45 organizational bulletins with a total monthly circulation of 956,000 were published before they were banned at the end of 1938.

April 1933-September 1934-The German Zionist movement grew dramatically. It was especially attractive to a number of German-Jewish youth. The number of German-Jewish immigrants to Palestine rose. Barred from Nazified German youth organizations, German-Jewish youth formed their own.

End of 1933-By this time some 63,000 Jews had emigrated including some great artistic and scientific luminaries. Unfortunately some of these emigrants had sought sanctuary in continental European countries such as France and the Netherlands that would later be

conquered by Nazi Germany.

June 30, 1934-“Night of the Long Knives”, SA (Nazi storm troopers) leaders were arrested and murdered by the rival SS. By doing so, Hitler eliminated potential opposition to his rule from within the Nazi party.

August 2, 1934-President von Hindenburg died thereby allowing Hitler to declare himself both President and Chancellor of the Third Reich. He became the “Führer” (supreme leader). All officials and soldiers in the armed forces swore a personal oath to Hitler pledging loyalty and total obedience to the “Führer.” In May of the following year, all Jews were dismissed from the armed forces of Germany.

September 1935-At the annual Nazi party rally in Nuremberg, two laws were promulgated that became the centerpieces of Nazi German anti-Jewish legislation. They were the Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor and the Reich Citizenship Law. Marriages and sexual relations between Jews and “citizens of German or related blood” were prohibited. Jews could no longer be citizens only “state subjects.” These laws became the basis of broad discriminatory measures and were imposed on the countries overrun by Nazi Germany during World War II.

November 1, 1935-A supplement to the Reich Citizenship Law defined categories of Mischlinge or part Jews. Whereas a full Jew had three or four Jewish grandparents, a Mischling of the first degree, for example, had two Jewish grandparents but did not practice Judaism and was not married to a Jew. So-called “racial scientists” spent months working out these absurd categories based on “Jewish blood.” Horst Abraham and his family were classified as “full Jews” under these laws.

March 7, 1936-Germany occupied the Rhineland in open defiance of the Treaty of Versailles. Great Britain and France did nothing to halt the occupation signaling their ongoing appeasement of Nazi Germany.

August 1, 1936-The Olympic games opened in Berlin. The Nazis temporarily suspended their anti-Semitic campaign in order to present a misleading picture to foreign tourists and court international approval. Marty Glickman and Sam Stollar, two Jewish American Olympic stars, were benched by U.S. Olympic president Avery Brundage in order not to further embarrass Hitler who was upset that African American Jesse Owens had won four gold medals.

November 25, 1936-Japan concluded the Anti-Comintern Pact with Germany, an anti-communist alliance that marked the existence of better relations between Japan and Germany. Ultimately, Germany, Japan and Italy would join together as the Axis powers and launch World War II.

July 7, 1937-Japanese aggression against China resumed with Japan seizing most of northeast China including the port of Shanghai and an area of the city. The Sino-Japanese war would continue until the end of World War II. Already in Shanghai, there were extra-territorial European and American concession areas previously wrested from China with each governed by its own consul. This so-called International Settlement and the French

Concession contained some 60,000 foreigners. The situation in all of Shanghai deteriorated with the arrival of one million Chinese war refugees. Shanghai's economy plummeted, and a number of foreigners left the city for their home countries.

July 16, 1937-Buchenwald concentration camp was established near Weimar Germany. The notorious Karl Koch, commandant of Sachsenhausen concentration camp, established the year before, was transferred to Buchenwald.

July 24, 1937-Jews were ordered to be separated from other guests in German resorts and public baths. The Reichsvertretung continued to call upon Jews to demonstrate courage and self-confidence in the face of Nazi political and legal persecution and efforts to dehumanize them.

Fall 1937-The process of "Aryanizing" Jewish businesses, that is robbing Jews of their businesses, was accelerated.

March 11, 1938-German forces invaded Austria and were welcomed by much of the native population. Two days later the union of Austria and Germany (the Anschluss) was announced. The full brunt of Nazi anti-Semitic persecution struck the 185,000 Jews of Austria many of whom sought to flee. The inaction of the 32 nations at the July 1938 Evian conference on refugees demonstrated the difficulties in doing so.

March 23, 1938-The Nazi assault on German Jewry quickened as Jewish community organizations in Germany lost their official legal status. The government no longer recognized them.

June 15, 1938- Fifteen hundred Jews were arrested and sent to concentration camps. The following month the great synagogue of Munich was destroyed and in August the great synagogue of Nuremberg was torn down.

July 6, 1938-President Franklin Delano Roosevelt convened an international conference on refugees at Evian-les-Bains in southeastern France consisting of 32 nations. The conference failed to take meaningful action to provide a haven for persecuted German and Austrian refugees. It thereby impeded the attempts of Mr. Abraham's and other Jewish families under the control of the Third Reich to find refuge from Nazi persecution and encouraged the Nazi belief that the Western powers were indifferent to the fate of European Jewry.

September 30, 1938-The Munich Conference resulted in the Anglo-French decision to cede the Czech Sudetenland to Germany. This was the culmination of the policy of appeasement and the death knell for the independent Czechoslovak republic.

November 9/10, 1938-The Kristallnacht pogrom took place throughout the Third Reich bringing about the destruction of 267 synagogues and 7,500 Jewish businesses, the vandalizing of many Jewish institutions, the deaths of 91 Jews, the wounding of many more and the incarceration of 30,000 Jewish males in concentration camps. There were some Jewish suicides. On November 12, 1938, a collective fine of one billion marks was imposed on the Jewish community. Jews were decisively driven out of the German economy. In the

wake of Kristallnacht, the Abraham family along with other Jews in the Third Reich, became desperate to leave.

December 6, 1938-Japan promulgated a pro-Jewish policy in Shanghai opening the city's harbor that it controlled to Jewish refugees without visas or papers. One reason motivating this policy was belief in Jewish world power reinforced by Nazi propaganda and the impact of this supposed power on Japanese interests at the time especially in the United States and Great Britain. Western powers that still had residents in Shanghai attempted to restrict the flow of Jewish refugees but to no avail. German-Jewish leaders discouraged immigration to Shanghai due the difficulties of earning a living there and the fact that it was in a country at war. However, the Nazi German government supported Jewish immigration to Shanghai. German policy was still forced emigration, and Nazi thinking was that the Jews would not survive in Shanghai. Shanghai had great allure for Jews such as Mr. Abraham who had nowhere else to go.

January 24, 1939-The Nazi government ordered the reformation of the Reichsvertretung, the representative organization of Jews in Germany, into the more tightly controlled Reichsvereinigung (Reich Association of the Jews in Germany). Its main task was to speed Jewish emigration. The Reichsvereinigung also undertook to continue the social welfare and educational efforts of its predecessor. Thus the self-help efforts of German Jewry, although constricted and hindered, did continue.

January 30, 1939-In a speech before the Reichstag (German parliament), Hitler predicted that in the event of war the Jewish "race" in Europe would be destroyed thus once again revealing the lethal nature of his pathological and obsessive anti-Semitism.

May 17, 1939-Bowing to Arab pressure, Great Britain issued the White Paper severely limiting Jewish immigration to Palestine. Thus this potential escape route was cut off for Mr. Abraham and others. Fortunately, he was able to begin his life-saving journey to Shanghai two weeks later.

May 13-June 17, 1939-The doomed voyage of the St. Louis took place. It symbolized the indifference of the world to Jewish refugees attempting to flee from Nazi terror. Both Cuba and the United States refused to give the refugees on board the ship permission to land. The St. Louis returned to Europe where a number of St. Louis passengers were ensnared in the Nazi net once World War II began in September 1939. Two hundred and fifty four passengers on the St. Louis perished in the Holocaust.

May 29, 1939-Mr. Abraham sailed in the opposite direction from the St. Louis traveling to Shanghai. There, he faced a very uncertain future, but at least he was safe for the time being and could attempt to save his family. Mr. Abraham was one of about 62,000 Jews who left Germany in the eight months following the Kristallnacht pogrom. Like many other emigrants, he was male, young and able-bodied. Those left behind were predominantly older and female like Mr. Abraham's parents and sister. By the time of the outbreak of World War II, about 185,000 persecuted and impoverished Jews remained in Germany of the approximately 525,000 when the Nazis came to power.

September 1, 1939-Germany invaded Poland beginning World War II in Europe. Two days later Great Britain and France declared war on Nazi Germany. Soon, the Germans precipitated vicious pogroms against Polish Jews and formulated plans for their concentration and ghettoization.

December 1, 1939-The German Ministry of Food and Agriculture ordered that Jews were to be deprived of any special food allocations during the next ration period; further reductions were ordered for 1941 and 1942. These orders impacted Mr. Abraham's family still in Germany who by 1940 also could not buy shoes and clothing.

Early January 1940-The "Aktion T-4" program went into operation focused on eliminating "life unworthy of life" from the German racial community. This meant the murder by gas, lethal injections and other means of mentally and physically handicapped Germans. This program would claim some quarter million victims.

May 10, 1940-Germany invaded the Netherlands, Belgium and France. All were swiftly conquered, and their Jewish populations came under Nazi rule.

September 12, 1940-Mr. Abraham's parents left Germany on their journey to Shanghai, escaping the Nazi net. Vera Abraham and her family remained trapped in Germany where governmental agencies were subjecting Jews more and more to curfews and to forced evacuations from their homes and into newer more dilapidated, crowded and unheated ones. Some 70,000 Jews remained in Berlin at the time.

September 27, 1940-Japan signed the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy. The pact required the three signatories to assist each other in their involvement in the war in Europe and in the event of their involvement in war in the Far East.

October 2, 1940-Mr. Abraham's parents arrived in Shanghai after an arduous 20 day journey traveling east across the Soviet Union (still at peace with Nazi Germany at the time) and then south to Shanghai through Japanese controlled Manchuria, renamed Manchukuo by the Japanese. Mr. Abraham continued his fruitless efforts to save his sister and her family. Like so many other German-Jewish families, that of Mr. Abraham was torn apart.

June 22, 1941-Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union. SS Einsatzgruppen (mobile killing units) began to murder tens of thousands of Jews in what Hitler had declared would be "a war of extermination."

June 1941-Rabbi Leo Baeck, the leader of the German-Jewish community, expressed satisfaction that German Jewry, despite overwhelming odds, had persevered in its efforts to maintain schools, religious observances and welfare for the needy.

September 19, 1941-All German Jews over the age of six had to identify themselves by wearing a large yellow Star of David with the word "Jude" written on it. Violators of this order could be sent to concentration camps. With the yellow star, Jews could be identified, humiliated and assaulted with impunity. Vera Abraham and her husband had to wear these stars.

October 15 to November 4, 1941-The deportation of German Jewry began “to the East” where most were murdered. Deportations of Jews from Germany in the past had been sporadic. These systematic deportations, and SS chief Heinrich Himmler’s October 23, 1941 order officially ending the Nazi policy of forced emigration illustrated that the Nazis had by then decided upon genocide as the solution to the “Jewish problem.”

October 18, 1941-The first transport of Jews left Berlin on this date. Vera Abraham and her family managed to avoid deportation for more than a year possibly because she and her husband were young and could be used for forced labor. However, Mr. Abraham’s sister and her husband must have felt an increased level of sadness and helplessness as they witnessed the deportations, the despair and increasing levels of depression and suicide among the remaining Jews of the German capital. With their lives reduced to daily survival, they could not help but wonder when the order for their deportation would come.

Fall 1941-As Japan prepared for war with the United States, it expelled some 1,000 Polish Jewish refugees stranded in Kobe Japan to Shanghai thereby swelling its Jewish population to some 18,000. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, wealthy Sephardic Jewish families in Shanghai and other philanthropists continued to provide vital aid to Shanghai’s Jewish refugees.

December 7, 1941-Japan, now dominated by ruthless militarists and imperialists, launched a devastating surprise attack on the American fleet at Pearl Harbor Hawaii that brought the United States into World War II. During the war, the situation for the Jewish refugees in Shanghai, including Mr. Abraham and his family, deteriorated due to wartime shortages. Throughout 1942, Laura Margolis and her colleague Manuel Siegel of the Joint Distribution Committee continued their refugee relief efforts.

1942-During this year, Jews remaining in Germany were subjected to a host of new decrees. They had to hand over any woolen or fur clothing still in their possession. They had to identify their residences with a Star of David. They were forbidden to use public transportation. They were forbidden to keep any pets. They could no longer visit barbershops. They had to turn over all electrical and optical equipment as well as typewriters and bicycles. Any blind or deaf Jews could no longer wear armbands to identify their condition in traffic. They could no longer buy meat, eggs or milk. In short, they were cruelly and systematically debased, degraded and denied their right to live in any way as dignified human beings. They also had to live with the constant threat of death through Allied bombing, with the threat of ever more fiendish enslavement and with the dread of hearing the Gestapo’s knock on their door at any moment.

February 3, 1943-On this date Vera Abraham, her husband and seventeen month old child were deported to Auschwitz and murdered upon their arrival at this deepest circle of the Nazi hell. Some one million Jews and at least one hundred thousand non-Jews would be exterminated in Auschwitz. Just one day before Mr. Abraham’s sister and her family were deported, the German Sixth Army had surrendered to the Russians at Stalingrad thus marking what became the turning point of the war in the Soviet Union.

February 18, 1943-Japanese authorities ordered all “stateless refugees,” who included Jewish refugees from Germany, Austria, Poland and other eastern European countries, into a “designated area” in the Hongkew district of Shanghai. It became known as the Shanghai ghetto. Mr. Abraham and his parents were forced into it. There is no direct evidence linking the establishment of the ghetto to Nazi German efforts, but the Japanese desire to strictly monitor the activities of foreigners under its control in time of war surely was a motivating factor.

June 19, 1943-Josef Goebbels declared Berlin “free of Jews.” He was not exactly correct. There were still some Jews alive in mixed marriages, in hiding with courageous German non-Jews in the city and in Berlin’s Jewish hospital. However, of the some 525,000 Jews in Germany when the Nazis came to power, only about 15,000 German Jews managed to survive within the pre-1938 borders of the country by the end of the war. More than half of the pre-January 1933 German-Jewish population found safe haven including Horst Abraham and his parents. They lived to bear witness.

July 17, 1945-American aircraft accidentally bombed the Shanghai ghetto while conducting an air raid on Shanghai. The bombing resulted in regrettable refugee loss of life and property. Mr. Abraham knew some of the German-Jewish refugees who lost their lives as a result of the bombing. A number of Chinese civilians perished as well.

August 14, 1945-Japan accepted surrender terms offered by Allied forces after the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The surrender document was formally signed on board the battleship Missouri in Tokyo Bay on September 2, 1945.

September 3, 1945-The Chinese Nationalist army liberated the Shanghai ghetto. Jewish refugees were now free to search for new homes and to learn what often proved to be devastating news about the fate of their loved ones, such as Vera Abraham and her family who had been left behind in Nazi occupied Europe. Rationing ended for the Shanghai refugees as food and other goods became more available.

May 14, 1948-The State of Israel proclaimed its independence. It would welcome a number of Jewish refugees from Shanghai who found a home free from anti-Semitism in the Jewish state.

June 9, 1949-Mr. Abraham and his mother arrived in San Francisco. Along with a number of other Jewish refugees from Shanghai who managed to gain entrance into this country, they were poised to begin a new life in the United States. They were followed a year and a half later by Kallmann Abraham.

October 1, 1949-The Chinese Communists under the leadership of Mao-Tse-Tung having defeated their Chinese Nationalist opponents proclaimed the Chinese People’s Republic. By this time, there were only a few Jewish refugees left in Shanghai most of whom were able to depart by the mid 1950’s.

**Maps: German and Austrian Jewish Refugees in Shanghai**

[http://www.usmmm.org/shared/search/main.php?q\\_\\_typ=&q=shanghai+maps&Submit=](http://www.usmmm.org/shared/search/main.php?q__typ=&q=shanghai+maps&Submit=)

## THE KINDERTRANSPORT

### Introduction

*“Here is a chance of taking the young generation of a great people, here is a chance of mitigating to some extent the terrible suffering of their parents and their friends”*– British Foreign Minister Samuel Hoare in 1938.

In December 1938, Nicholas Winton, a young British stockbroker, stopped in Prague on the way to a ski vacation in Switzerland. It was a detour that would ultimately save the lives of nearly 700 Jewish children from Czechoslovakia.

In Prague, he was taken to visit refugee camps crammed with Jews and political opponents of Nazi Germany. On the spot, he decided to organize a committee to send Jewish children to safety in England. A table in his hotel room became his headquarters.

In the days following Kristallnacht, the Nazi assault against Jewish communities in Germany, Austria and the Sudetenland on November 9/10, 1938, the British government decided to allow Jewish children from areas controlled by Nazi Germany into the country on an emergency basis. Spurred by popular British opinion, the government agreed to accept an unspecified number of children ranging in age from two to seventeen, provided that they did not become a financial burden to the United Kingdom. At the time, everyone believed that once the crisis had passed the children would be reunited with their parents. However, most of them never saw their parents again.

The first Kindertransport, (Children’s Transport as it became known), arrived in Harwich, England, on December 2, 1938. It brought 200 children from a Jewish orphanage in Berlin that had been burnt by Nazi thugs during Kristallnacht. Other transports soon followed from major Central European cities such as Berlin, Vienna and Prague, bringing thousands of mostly Jewish children in sealed trains to ports in Belgium and the Netherlands. The children then journeyed by ship across the English Channel. Eventually, some 10,000 children, most of them Jewish, would be brought to the United Kingdom on the Kindertransport undertaking.

Priority was given to children whose parents were in concentration camps, orphans and children from impoverished families. Each child was allowed to take only one suitcase containing clothes, his or her most cherished possessions and at the most ten German marks, all that the Nazi government would allow. According to eyewitness accounts, the separation from parents and other family members at railway stations was heartbreaking.

In February and August of 1939, there were Kindertransports from Poland. Kindertransports from this country stopped with the outbreak of World War II on September 1, 1939. The very last Kindertransport left from the Netherlands on May 14, 1940, four days after Nazi Germany had invaded the country.

Once in England, the children found themselves without their parents in a country where they could not speak the language and did not know who would care for them.

A number of the younger children went from the port to Liverpool Station in London where they met their foster parents. These families were found for them by the Refugee Children's Movement, a non-denominational organization formed to underwrite and find homes for the children. Children who did not have sponsors, about half of them, were housed in summer holiday camps, at boarding schools and farms.

Most of the children were well cared for by their foster families, both non-Jewish and Jewish. Soon, a number of older children went to work. Those who turned 18 joined the Allied armed forces and contributed to the war effort against the Nazis.

After the war, several thousand children whose parents had been murdered remained in Great Britain. Others left for various countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia and Israel. The great majority of the children saved by the Kindertransport undertaking became productive citizens of the countries in which they settled and retained their Jewish identity. Four Kindertransport children eventually became Nobel Prize winners, two from Great Britain and two from the United States.\*

\*Kindertransport Sources: Vera Fast's work, *Children's Exodus: A History of the Kindertransport*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), makes fine use of individual Memoirs and archival material to develop a multi-layered history of the Kindertransport.

Deborah Hodge's work, *Rescuing the Children: The Story of the Kindertransport*, (New York: Random House, 2012) is geared to younger audiences, middle school and high school children. A teacher's guide accompanies the work, which may be found at [www.Deborahhodge.com/teachersguide.pdf](http://www.Deborahhodge.com/teachersguide.pdf).

Lore Segal's book, *In Other People's Houses* (New York: The New Press, 2004), is an acclaimed semi-autobiographical account of the experiences in England of a Kindertransport child.

A unique work dealing with the Kindertransport is, *Postcards to a Little Boy: A Kindertransport Story* by Henry Foner. It contains postcards and letters that Henry received from his father and other relatives, while he was living with a Jewish couple in Wales. It may be ordered from Yad Vashem publications, [publications.marketing@yadvashem.org.il](mailto:publications.marketing@yadvashem.org.il).

Finally, there are two fine documentary films on the Kindertransport: *My Knees Were Jumping: Remembering the Kindertransports* and *Into the Arms of Strangers: Stories of the Kindertransport*. The latter won the Academy Award in 2001 for best documentary feature. It has a companion book by the same name.

## **Marietta Ryba's Story**

Marietta (Pollack) Ryba vividly recalls the last time she ever saw her parents. It was June 1939 and she was 13 years old. Her father, the manager of a chocolate factory in Czechoslovakia, arranged for her to be sent out of war-torn Europe to safety in England on the Kindertransport. Mrs. Ryba recounted:

We drove to Prague...we were to be at the railway station at a certain time. I did not like leaving my parents and my sister, but I could see that it was very important for my father, and he told me, 'We'll come and join you as soon as we can, but you're the first to go because there is an opportunity for you.'

I remember saying good-bye to my parents, but (the Kindertransport organizers) more or less snatched the children and they put us on the train. The entire family was crying. They forbade the parents to come close, but my father managed to get through and climbed to the window so he could kiss me good-bye. I will never forget that.

The train left. She and older children tried to look after the littler ones during the journey. "We hugged them and put them on our laps", she remembered. Finally, the train filled with children arrived in Holland. They were each given a cup of hot chocolate by Dutch volunteers and boarded a ship, which eventually landed in Harwich England.

Until she was separated from her family, Mrs. Ryba had a very happy childhood. Her parents were loving and caring. The family lived in a large home with a lovely garden, which was provided by her father's employer. She remembered talking long walks with her parents and older sister Edith.

Her parents were not observant Jews, and she did not receive a Jewish education. However, the family did celebrate major Jewish holidays. Mrs. Ryba took pride in both her Czech and her Jewish identities, and she did not recall experiencing any significant anti-Semitism.

### **Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia**

Life for the approximately 118,000 Jews of Czechoslovakia changed dramatically for the worse on March 15, 1939, when Nazi Germany invaded the Czech lands. During the Munich Conference at the end of September 1938, Great Britain and France had betrayed Czechoslovakia by giving the Sudetenland portion of the country to Nazi Germany in exchange for a promise by Hitler that this would be his last territorial demand in Europe.

Hitler broke that pledge with the invasion of Czechoslovakia. Bohemia and Moravia, in the west of Czechoslovakia, were declared a German protectorate one day after the invasion. Slovakia, in the East, became a Nazi puppet state headed by a Catholic priest, Father Jozef Tiso.

In the immediate wake of the German invasion, Jews were taunted and attacked. In Brno, the largest city in Moravia, near where Mrs. Ryba's family lived, Jews were rounded up in cafes and beaten in the streets. The Germans expropriated Jewish property, using threats and blackmail to acquire Jewish businesses.

Mrs. Ryba's parents had explored several possibilities for escape but were unsuccessful. Until the fall of 1941, Nazi policy was to get rid of the Jews through large-scale Jewish emigration, and about 20 percent of Czech Jews did manage to flee.

Mrs. Ryba's father heard about the Kindertransport program for Czech Jewish children being organized by Nicholas Winton. Mrs. Ryba recounted:

Parents flocked to his hotel room in downtown Prague where he had set up his office to try to persuade him to include their children in the transport. My father, as the manager of a chocolate factory, had traveled quite a bit, and on one of his business trips to England he met Mr. Cadbury of Cadbury Chocolate who was a Quaker and sympathetic to the plight of the Jews. And I think that had something to do with my being included in the Kindertransport.

Mrs. Ryba was on one of eight Czech Kindertransports organized by Nicholas Winton. Her sister, Edith, was 18 and too old to be included. A ninth transport was prevented from traveling to England due to the outbreak of war on September 1, 1939. None of the children who were to be included in that transport are believed to have survived.

"For over half a century, most of the children, including me, did not know to whom we owed our lives," Mrs. Ryba declared. Winton's story only emerged when his wife found an old leather briefcase in their attic that contained lists of children and letters from their parents. He had not even told his wife about his rescue efforts that saved 669 human lives.

## **Life in England**

Mrs. Ryba and the children on her transport arrived at London's Liverpool Station and from there she and two other children went on to their foster families in Birmingham England, arriving there on July 1, 1939. She was placed with Leslie and Nancy Jones, the parents of three young boys. They welcomed her and made her feel part of their family. A few months after her arrival, she wrote in her diary: "Mr. and Mrs. Jones are doing a lot for me so that I do not know if I shall ever be able to do something for them to show how grateful I am."

Once World War II began, German air raids on Birmingham started, and the Jones family moved to their summer home, a small cottage on the west coast of the country. "My dream is to still be in our dear country (Czechoslovakia) and to help in working for peace," she wrote in her diary. "It is really beautiful here, blue sky and blue grey sea, the lovely soft and warm sand...but mummy and daddy..."

She asked Mr. and Mrs. Jones for help in getting her parents and sister out of Czechoslovakia, but there was nothing they could do. However, for a time, she was able to

write letters to her family with the help of a friend of her father in neutral Sweden, who was also the manager of a chocolate factory.

The Pollack's were deeply grateful to the Jones family for their care of Marietta. "In all the letters we receive from Marietta, I realize how good you are to her," Marietta's mother wrote to Mrs. Jones. "Thank you so much for your great kindness. I am very happy that Marietta is in your house. I shall never forget what you are doing for my dear child. May God save you and your family and the great English nation."

Mrs. Ryba's formal education ended when the Jones family left Birmingham, and she had to leave the secondary school in which she was enrolled. She did try to read on her own and later took a course in shorthand and typing. After staying two years with her foster family, she decided she wanted to contribute to the war effort and so traveled to London to train as a nurse. After completing her student-nursing course, she found work in a Czech military hospital under the auspices of the Czechoslovak Red Cross, which was connected to the country's government in exile in Great Britain.

### **Return to Czechoslovakia**

In the summer of 1945, following Nazi Germany's surrender, Mrs. Ryba returned to her native country along with a group of Czech doctors and nurses. She was sent to the liberated Theresienstadt ghetto, along with other medical personnel, to a hospital that had been established there to care for Holocaust survivors. In the final days of the war, the Nazis had sent several thousand prisoners to Theresienstadt from concentration camps about to be overrun by Allied forces, and the overcrowded conditions caused epidemics such as typhoid fever and typhus.

When Mrs. Ryba came to the Theresienstadt hospital, she and other medical personnel found many survivors on the brink of death. "There were a lot of people with typhus and others with tuberculosis, and we took care of those people hoping that some of them would survive," she recalled. "A lot of them were just skeletons. They were human wrecks, many at death's door. They needed a place to die in clean beds."

She became the night nurse sitting in the wards, listening and watching these dying men and women. Most of them were unable to eat or drink other than sips of water and a few crumbs of bread. Some prayed, and she listened to their chants all night long, knowing that stillness meant death. "The eeriness of those dark nights and the wailing sounds of those soon-to-be cadavers haunted me for the rest of my life," she said. "It was hard for me to understand their faith in a Supreme Being who would permit the atrocities committed upon them."

"I deliberately hide this period in the back of my mind."

While at Theresienstadt, Mrs. Ryba searched for her sister, Edith Pollack. "I didn't expect to find my parents, but I felt sure that somehow Edith had survived."

One day, a nurse with whom Ms. Ryba worked went to Prague. “As she was walking down the street, she met Edith, and she said, ‘Your sister is in Terezin (the Czech name for Theresienstadt).’ Edith soon got on the next train to Theresienstadt. “We were just having a meal,” Mrs. Ryba remembered. “She walked in and said, ‘Which one is Marietta?’ I responded, and she walked up to me and said, ‘I am Edith, remember me?’

I shall never forget the way she looked. All the misery and unhappiness in the world were pictured in her face. She was small and somehow shrunken, and in her face was only bitterness and irony,” Mrs. Ryba said. “Her hair was short and fair. She was like a little doll, but it was my Edith. I had her back again. We went into another room and cried.”

Her sister, who had survived Auschwitz and a forced labor camp, had just found out that her husband had been killed during the Holocaust. “She said that the reason she endured and lived through everything was that she always believed that she would be reunited with him,” Mrs. Ryba remembered. “Now, she at least has me, and I knew that I could restore some hope and faith in her.”

Despite the war, Prague was even more beautiful than she remembered. “The surrounding countryside was so beautiful that it took one’s breath away, but food was scarce, and the shops are empty,” she said. “Still, Edith and I managed, and one could slowly notice how things were getting back to normal. I also felt that Edith was becoming her old self again.”

“I began to feel full of energy looking into the future, and in spite of everything, I did not feel lonely or unhappy.”

### **Life after Czechoslovakia**

Soon after being reunited with her sister, Marietta Pollack married John Ryba, a Czech mechanical engineer. When the communists took over Czechoslovakia in early 1948, she and her husband decided that they did not want to live under Soviet rule. They made their way across the Czech German border illegally and were interned in a Displaced Persons camp. Edith, having experienced the horrors of the camps, did not want to accompany them to yet another barbed wired internment. Mrs. Ryba wrote to her foster family in England, and Mr. Jones was able to secure permits for Mr. and Mrs. Ryba to come to England. After ten weeks in the Displaced Persons’ camp, they managed to leave and begin a new life.

In 1952, the couple immigrated to the United States, settling for a time in Chicago where John Ryba had found a job. The Ryba’s had three children, two sons and a daughter.

Over the years, Mrs. Ryba remained in contact with the Jones family. When Mr. and Mrs. Jones died, she still kept in touch with their three sons both through letters and occasional visits. To this day, she continues to call the Jones boys, “my brothers.”

Eventually, Mrs. Ryba and her husband moved into the Selfhelp Home, where she was reunited again with her sister, who had come to the United States in the mid-1960s. At the time of her interview in 2007, Mrs. Ryba observed: “I’m very happy here and well satisfied.

It's a wonderful place. It really is." In 2013, Mrs. Ryba moved into a retirement home in Kansas so that she could live closer to her daughter.

\*The information for Mrs. Ryba's story came from the interview conducted by Mr. Bensinger with Mrs. Ryba on November 15 2007, from letters she shared with him as well as from pages from a diary she wrote while in England.

## **Sought Learning Objectives.**

Students will:

- \*Value the rescue efforts undertaken by Sir Nicholas Winton during the Holocaust and the way in which even one person can make a difference in the world (i.e. "the power of one").
- \*Empathize with the trauma endured by the Kindertransport children and gain an awareness of some of their experiences in Great Britain.
- \*Reflect on ways in which students can engage in acts of caring and compassion of their own.
- \*Appreciate the rescue efforts of non-Jews who rescued Jews during the Holocaust, called "Righteous Among the Nations," and the full import of the Talmudic saying, "Whoever saves one life saves the whole world."
- \*Recognize that liberation did not bring an end to the suffering of survivors.
- \*Compare and contrast the actions by Great Britain and the United States to save Jewish children and explore the reasons for the differences.
- \*Appreciate the opportunities offered survivors by the United States in the postwar world to rebuild their lives.

## **Key Questions**

1. What factors helped account for Mrs. Ryba's happy childhood in Czechoslovakia?
2. What role did her inclusion in the Kindertransport play in her life?
3. Why did Mrs. Ryba have positive memories of her life in England during the war?
4. Why did she return to Czechoslovakia after the war, and why does the reunification with her sister there stand out so clearly in her memory?
5. How do Mrs. Ryba's experiences caring for survivors in the Theresienstadt hospital after the war illustrate how Nazis tried to dehumanize their victims?
6. Why did Mrs. Ryba decide to leave Czechoslovakia in 1948, where did she go and why, and where did she eventually settle and why?
7. What were the losses experienced by Mrs. Ryba as a result of the Holocaust?

## **Learning Activities**

1. One of the most poignant episodes in Mrs. Ryba's story is the scene at the railroad station where she had to part from her parents and sister, Edith. Before leaving, Mrs. Ryba said goodbye to her parents and to Edith. Then the children were put on the train, and the parents were forbidden to come close. But Mr. Pollack did manage to get through to the train, and he climbed up the railroad carriage to the window to try to kiss his daughter

goodbye. This was the last time Marietta saw her parents. Ask students to draw an illustration of this scene imagining what it might have looked like. Also, ask students to think about this question: what might Marietta's parents have been thinking about their future and their daughter's future when they put her on the train?

2. Request that students compose an imaginary letter that Mrs. Ryba might have written to her parents in Prague just after the outbreak of the war. Great Britain and France had declared war on Nazi Germany on September 3, 1939, following the Nazi invasion of Poland two days earlier. What feelings and concerns might Mrs. Ryba have expressed in her letter? What sentiments might she have conveyed towards her parents and her sister, Edith? What might she have said about her adjustment to a new country, a new culture and a new language?

3. When Marietta Ryba arrived in England, she did not speak English and had to learn the language. In one of the early conversations she had with her foster family, the Joneses, in the summer of 1939, she said, "Chamberlain no good. Chamberlain no good." Why would Mrs. Ryba say this to her foster family, especially since at the time Neville Chamberlain was still Prime Minister of Great Britain? To fully understand Mrs. Ryba's feelings, students should research Neville Chamberlain's role at the Munich Conference on September 29/30, 1938 and its consequences for Czechoslovakia.

4. Mrs. Ryba recounted a dream she had in England in March 1945 just before the end of the war: "My father was shot in March 1945. I had a definite dream about him. I knew he was in a camp, and he was telling me that if it were his fate to get out, he would see me again. And then I had a terrific blast in my head like, I would say, a shot. It woke me up. And I swear that was when my father was shot, and I felt it. It was the one dream I really believe in. We all dream, and we dream all kinds of the things, but of this one I am positive." Ask students what they think about the validity of Mrs. Ryba's dream. Have any of them ever dreamt of an event that then actually occurred? Are they comfortable recounting the dream?

5. Discuss the question, why did Mrs. Ryba's experiences as a night nurse on a ward in the Red Cross hospital in Theresienstadt cause her to abandon the nursing profession? Why did she say when in her 80s: "Though the experiences are buried in the deepest crevices of my mind and are now covered with layers of dust, they still haunt me from time to time." Are students willing to share an experience that they think will continue to haunt them?

6. Divide students into groups. Ask each group to work together to research and respond to the question: why as the war was ending and they knew defeat was certain didn't the Nazis flee and let their concentration camp prisoners be rescued by advancing Allied armies? Students may find information relevant to this question online by searching for such topics as "Nazi death marches at the end of World War II." Groups should explore other ways to search online for answers to this question.

## Enrichment Activities Focusing on Sir Nicholas Winton, Other Holocaust Rescuers, and Rescue Efforts During the Holocaust

1. “*Nicholas Winton: The Power of Good*” is an acclaimed documentary film depicting the rescue efforts of Winton on behalf of the Czechoslovak children. It is available from The National Center For Jewish Film:

<http://www.brandeis.edu/jewishfilm/Catalogue/ordering.htm>

Marietta Ryba is among the 669 children who owe their lives to Sir Winton. Ask students to view the film with the following question in mind.

Research concerning rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust illustrates that rescuers shared some common characteristics. What examples of these characteristics can you find in the story of Nicholas Winton:

- a. The decision to rescue was most often spontaneous and unplanned.
- b. Rescuers were individuals who could live with risk. They had a special kind of courage that enabled them to act on their feelings of compassion and concern.
- c. Rescuers were emotionally secure people who viewed the problems of life as manageable. They were independent, inner-directed people.
- d. Those who rescued Jews did not view them first and foremost as Jews but rather as human beings in need.
- e. Rescuers did not see themselves as heroic. They viewed their acts of rescue as actions that everyone should have done in similar circumstances.
- f. Once rescue began, it grew. Not only did others being menaced hear about the rescuers’ altruistic actions, but also rescuers developed a “rescuer self” that stimulated them to save more and more people.
- g. Rescuers had a history of performing good deeds both before and after their rescue activities during the Holocaust.

2. Nicholas Winton’s rescue exploits went undiscovered for almost fifty years until his wife, Grete, found a scrapbook containing a variety of documents relating to his efforts to save Czechoslovak children, including Mrs. Ryba, in their attic in an old leather briefcase. What clues does the film, “*Nicholas Winton: The Power of Good*,” provide as to why Nicholas Winton never talked about his rescue activities during the war?

3. In the study guide which accompanies the film (distributed by the Gelman Educational Foundation), there is a quotation from one of Winton’s letters: “But there is a difference between passive goodness and active goodness, which is, in my opinion, the giving of one’s time and energy in the alleviation of pain and suffering. It entails going out, finding and helping those in suffering and danger and not merely leading an exemplary life in a purely passive way of doing no wrong.” (p. 3).

How might this quotation help explain Winton’s motivation for his rescue efforts?

There is a line in the Talmud, a record of more than six centuries of Rabbinic teachings, that along with the Bible, is the central Jewish religious work, that reads: “Whoever saves a single life saves the entire universe.” It is inscribed on the medal awarded to Gentile rescuers of

Jews during the Holocaust by Yad Vashem. How might this sentence help explain Winton's motivation? Yad Vashem is Israel's museum and memorial for Holocaust research and commemoration.

4. Of special interest in the film's study guide are the primary sources found on pages 17 to 35. They consist of letters and press releases written by Winton at the time, as well as several responses to his inquiries seeking countries of refuge for children. Divide the students into five groups. Ask each group to analyze Winton's letters and press releases that reveal aspects of his personality and character, which helped make his rescue enterprise a success. These include: his foresight, compassion, intelligence, determination, risk taking, perseverance, resourcefulness, courage and organizational ability. A designated representative from each group will share the group's findings with the class.

Please note: a multi-award winning film, "*Nicky's Family*," that recounts Winton's rescue exploits was released in 2013. Nicholas Winton, who in 2013 was 104 years old, can take pride in the fact that "*Nicky's Family*" has today grown to almost 6,000 people who owe their lives to his rescue efforts. The work by Muriel Emanuel and Vera Gissing, *Nicholas Winton and the Rescued Generation* (London: Valentine Mitchell, 2001) also provides valuable information on Winton's rescue enterprise.

5. There are several excellent works dealing with rescuers of Jews during the Holocaust. They are: Block, Gay and Malka Drucker, *Rescuers: Portraits of Moral Courage in the Holocaust* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1992); Gilbert, Martin, *The Righteous: The Unsung Heroes of the Holocaust* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2003); Gushee, David, *Righteous Gentiles of the Holocaust* (St. Paul: Paragon House, 2003); Oliner, Samuel and Pearl, *The Altruistic Personality* (London: Collier Macmillan, 1988); and Paldiel, Mordecai, *The Righteous Among the Nations* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2007).

Ask students to remain in the same five groups as above. Each group should be assigned one of the works and requested to engage in the following activities:

Group 1 will be assigned the Block and Drucker work, which is organized around rescuers by country of origin. The group leader should assign a country of origin to each member of the group focusing on Western and Central Europe (The Netherlands, Belgium, France, Germany and Italy). Each group member should read the section on one of these countries. There is also a section on Czechoslovakia that all in the group should read. Each member of the group should be asked to report on the rescue efforts and motivations of the individuals in his or her assigned country.

Group 2 should read the Gilbert book, which is also organized by country. The activity here should focus on Eastern Europe (Poland, Lithuania, the Soviet Union and the Balkans). Everyone should also read the section on Czechoslovakia. Each group member should report on the rescue efforts and motivations of the individuals in his or her assigned country.

Group 3 should be asked to read the Gushee book. There are seven chapters in the book. All members of the group should read chapters one and two. The remaining chapters may be

assigned to individuals in the group with the key question being: what does the author say were the factors that motivated the rescuers?

Group 4 should read the Oliner book, which focuses on a research study of rescuers to discover their commonalities and motivations. This is an important work that should be read by all group members. Each should write a short summary of what they see as the most significant findings of the authors regarding the commonalities and motivations of the rescuers, and share these summaries with the group.

Group 5 should read the Paldiel book, which tells the stories of individual rescuers. The stories of the rescuers should be divided among members of the group. Group members should be asked to report about the motivations of the rescuers. Why did they do what they did? It should be noted that Mordecai Paldiel is the head of the “Righteous Among the Nations” project at Yad Vashem.

After individuals in each of the groups have reported their findings to the group, group leaders should provide a summary of his or her group findings to the class as a whole.

6. A class discussion should then be held exploring ways in which students might become “rescuers” on a personal basis. While students will not be faced with a situation as catastrophic and life threatening as the Holocaust, there are ways in which individuals can take action to alleviate pain and suffering in the world today. What are some things students can do to translate sympathy and empathy into action?

7. Nicholas Winton wrote to the United States State Department requesting asylum for Czechoslovak children. The U.S. government informed him it could not accept immigrants beyond the established quotas.

In the wake of Kristallnacht, in February 1939, Robert Wagner, a Democratic Senator, and Edith Rogers, a Republican Congresswoman, introduced a bill to allow the immigration to this country of 20,000 German-Jewish children over and above the existing quota during a two-year period. The children would be subsidized by Jewish organizations. They would not become American citizens but would return to their parents after the war.

The “Wagner-Rogers” bill was supported by a number of organizations, including major academic institutions and many labor unions, but opposed by such “patriotic” organizations as the Sons and Daughters of the American Revolution and the American Legion. It was opposed, as well, by the State Department. President Roosevelt made no effort to advance the bill, which ultimately failed.

Download the Wagner-Rogers bill at: [www.aifl.org-teach-lesso#456B7A](http://www.aifl.org-teach-lesso#456B7A). The lesson plan provides the immediate historical context for the bill and contains instructions for staging a mock debate about the bill that can be used in high school classes. This lesson plan is well worth considering.

Also, consider asking students to research the reasons why President Roosevelt did not work for the bill’s passage despite the urging of his wife, Eleanor, to do so.

It should be noted that several years after the failure of the Wagner-Rogers bill, Congress did pass a measure to allow into this country British children who were endangered by Nazi air raids. None of these children was Jewish. The great majority of those children who would have come to this country had the Wagner-Rogers bill been passed were murdered in the Holocaust.

8. Pose the following question for discussion. Why was Great Britain, an embattled island nation that fought alone against Nazi Germany from the fall of France in June 1940 until June 22, 1941, the German invasion of the Soviet Union, more willing to save Jewish children than the United States, a nation much superior in wealth and resources. The U.S. did not even enter the war until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941.

9. There are three Americans recognized by the Yad Vashem's "Righteous Among the Nations" project. The first is Varian Fry, who rescued hundreds of endangered Jews, including world-famous artists, thinkers and writers, from his headquarters in southern France controlled by the Vichy government (the French regime in power after the defeat of France by Nazi Germany). The second and third are Waitstill Sharp, a young Unitarian minister from Wellesley Massachusetts, and his wife Martha, a social worker. The American Unitarian Association's Department of Social Relations sent them to Prague, Czechoslovakia. Once there, in February 1939, they engaged in assiduous and successful efforts to aid refugees, spearheading the most significant private American effort on behalf of endangered refugees, both Jewish and non-Jewish. After the March 15, 1939, invasion of Czech lands by Nazi Germany, they were hounded by the Gestapo and barely escaped arrest.

Ask students to research the rescue efforts of Varian Fry and the Sharps, paying special attention to their motivations. Varian Fry was only supposed to stay in southern France for three weeks. He remained for thirteen months, and by the end of his stay his life was in danger. The Sharps were also at risk and left behind their two small children to engage in rescue work. Information on both Varian Fry and the Sharps may be readily found online.

10. Discuss with students the following question: Now that you are more acquainted with the commonalities, motives and actions of several rescuers, do you think you or someone you know could have rescued Jews during the Holocaust? This assignment might also be written, with the instructor summarizing the results out loud or in writing for the students. Students can choose to include specific names or not.

11. An issue of *Prism: An Interdisciplinary Journal for Holocaust Education* (Spring 2013, vol. 5) published by Yeshiva University focuses on the Kindertransport. It can be found at: [www.yu.edu/azrieli/research/prism-journal/](http://www.yu.edu/azrieli/research/prism-journal/). The journal contains a wealth of useful information, including survivor narratives, pedagogical suggestions that engage students and promote their understanding of various aspects of the Kindertransport, insights from archives of refugee organizations regarding Kindertransport children, and a discussion of Kindertransport memorials.

The following two poems appear in this issue of *Prism*:

The first poem is, "*Leather Suitcase*," written by Tom Berman and dedicated to Nicholas Winton. It focuses on the suitcase that accompanied Mr. Berman, then a 5-year-old child, on his journey from Prague to Scotland:

"They don't make suitcases like that anymore  
Time was when this case was solid, leather, heavy stitching  
With protective edges at the corners.

Time was when voyage meant train, steamship, distances unbridgeable  
Waiting for a thinning mail, weeks, then months, then nothing.

Children's train across the Reich stops and starts again  
Holland, a lighted gangplank  
Night ferry to grey-misted sea-gulled Harwich  
Again the rails reaching flat across East Anglia to London.

In my bedroom, on the suitcase, a silent witness with two labels  
"Masaryk Station, Praha"  
"Royal Scot, London-Glasgow"

Leather suitcase from a far-off country,  
Czechoslovakia,  
Containing all the love parents could pack  
For a five year old  
Off on a journey for life."

Questions:

1. What emotions is the poet attempting to evoke in the reader?
2. How does the poet manage to evoke these feelings?
3. What for you is the most memorable line in the poem and why?

A Kindertransport child, Lotte Kramer, who journeyed from the German city of Mainz to England, wrote the second poem. Lotte's parents and ten other members of her family were murdered in the Holocaust.

"Exodus"

"For all the mothers in anguish  
Pushing their babies in a small basket  
To let the river cradle them

And kind hands find them.  
Providing safety in a hostile world;  
Our constant gratitude.

As in this last century  
The crowded trains taking us away from home  
Became our baby baskets.  
Rattling to foreign parts  
Our exodus, from death.”

Questions:

1. Why is this poem entitled “Exodus?”
2. What episode from the life of Moses in the Hebrew Bible does it recall? (see Exodus 2:1-10)
3. What is the analogy the author is making between what happened to Moses and what happened to the children on the Kindertransport?

### **Marietta Ryba’s Timeline**

October 18, 1918-The independence of Czechoslovakia was proclaimed. The new state was formed from several provinces of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which was defeated in World War I. Thomas Masaryk and Edvard Benes, the key leaders of new state, were committed democrats who forged a stable parliamentary democracy that recognized the fundamental rights of all its citizens. Czechoslovakia was also the most industrially advanced country in Eastern Europe. It contained not only Czech and Slovaks but also Germans, Hungarians, Ruthenians and Jews. Thus Marietta Ryba grew up in a democratic, pluralistic society.

September 29/30, 1938-Czechoslovakia was betrayed by Great Britain and France at the Munich Conference and was forced to give up the Sudetenland, a key segment of the nation with a large German population, but also with important industries and fortifications. Hitler promised that this would be his last territorial demand in Europe.

March 15, 1939-Hitler broke his promise and German forces occupied Bohemia and Moravia, which became the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, and part of the Third Reich. The Protectorate contained 118,000 Jews. Synagogues in Vsetin and Jihlava were burned on the first days of occupation. Jews were arrested and attacked in many localities. Just one day earlier, a separate Slovak state was established under the rule of a Catholic priest, Father Josef Tiso. It became a satellite of Nazi Germany. Hungary annexed portions of southern Slovakia, and Poland annexed a portion of Czech Silesia.

June 1939-Adolf Eichmann arrived in Prague and established the Office for Jewish Emigration. It was given authority over the Protectorate’s Jewish community and used the Prague Jewish leadership to transmit orders to the Jewish community. Massive expropriation of Jewish property began, and Jews were denied civil rights and excluded from political and cultural life. About 26,000 Czech Jews managed to flee until October 1941 when emigration was banned.

June 1939-Marietta Ryba departed Prague on a Kindertransport organized by the intrepid Englishman, Nicolas Winton. She arrived at her foster family's home in Birmingham England on July 1, 1939. The Jones family made Marietta feel as if she was one of their family.

September 1, 1939-With the outbreak of World War II, Czech Jews became subject to a reign of terror including incarceration in concentration camps, restrictions on freedom of movement and the banning of Jewish children from public schools. The Jewish community attempted to provide Jewish and general education as well as social and welfare services. Mrs. Ryba's parents, Julius and Bertha Pollack, and her sister Edith were now in even more danger.

October 1939-The first expulsion of Czech Jews took place to the Nisko settlement in the Lublin area of Poland.

Late June and early July 1940-The Battle of Britain began. With the fall of France, the German air force, the Luftwaffe, attempted to gain mastery of the skies over Great Britain so that the Germans could launch an invasion of the island nation. On August 8, the intensive phase of the battle began. By the end of September it became evident that the British had won the battle because British fighters aided by radar were shooting down German bombers faster than German factories could produce them. With the failure of the Germans to gain air ascendancy over Great Britain, Hitler ordered the invasion suspended indefinitely.

September 7, 1940-May 1941-This was the time of the Blitz, the German bombing of British cities, especially in nighttime raids, in order to break civilian morale. London was especially heavily bombed, but other cities such as Birmingham were as well. This caused Marietta's foster family to move to their summer home on the west coast of the country where they would be safer. Hitler called off the Blitz in May 1941 as Nazi Germany prepared for its massive invasion of the Soviet Union launched on June 22, 1941. Mrs. Ryba spent the rest of the war years in Great Britain. She journeyed to London to enroll in a nursing course.

1939-1945-At the beginning of the Second World War, Edvard Benes, president of Czechoslovakia came to London where he assumed the presidency of the Czechoslovak government in exile. Mrs. Ryba became a nurse in a Czech military hospital in England under the auspices of the Czechoslovak Red Cross that was linked to the government in exile in Great Britain.

October 10, 1941-A secret meeting chaired by Reich Protector Reinhardt Heydrich decided on the establishment of a ghetto in Theresienstadt about 90 miles north of Prague. The purpose of the ghetto was to serve as a "model camp" where certain "privileged prisoners" would be sent and also as a transit camp from which Jews would be deported to extermination centers.

October 17, 1941-The SS and the police sent the first transport of Czech Jews, from Prague to the Lodz ghetto. During the months of October and November, 6,000 Czech Jews were deported to the Lodz and Minsk ghettos where nearly all of them died.

November 24, 1941-The first Jewish detachment arrived in Theresienstadt. They were among 73,603 Czech Jews deported to Theresienstadt between November 24, 1941 and late 1944. Of these, 60,399 were deported to Auschwitz and other killing centers. Most of the rest died in Theresienstadt. Only 3,227 Czech deportees survived the war.

Before the deportations, Jewish community leaders in Prague managed to hide articles of religious and cultural significance relating to the heritage of the Jews of Bohemia and Moravia. Most of these artifacts were salvaged after the war.

January 20, 1942-Reinhard Heydrich, chief of the Reich Security Main Office and Reich Protector of Bohemia and Moravia announced the existence and purpose of Theresienstadt to the key officials of the Nazi party, the German government and the SS gathered at the Wannsee Conference in a suburb outside of Berlin. This infamous conference was convened to discuss and co-ordinate the Final Solution-the plan to murder European Jewry.

February 1942-The Germans deported Mrs. Ryba's parents and sister to Theresienstadt. Mr. and Mrs. Pollack were murdered in the Holocaust. Edith Pollack survived Theresienstadt, Auschwitz and a Nazi forced labor camp.

May 27, 1942-Heydrich was severely wounded by the Czech underground. He died several days later. In reprisal, 1,000 Jews Czech Jews were deported on June 10, 1942, to Usadz, Poland, where they were forced to dig their own graves and then executed. The Czech village of Lidice was also destroyed as part of Nazi revenge.

First half of 1943-By this time about 90 percent of all Jews of Bohemia and Moravia had been deported to Theresienstadt. Despite being banned, regular classes for children were held there. The effort to educate children in the ghetto was an outstanding example of moral resistance. Of the some 15,000 Jewish children deported to Theresienstadt, only a handful survived the war. Religious services and a variety of cultural activities for adults were also held in the ghetto.

June 23, 1944-Two representatives of the International Red Cross and one representative of the Danish Red Cross visited Theresienstadt. Every aspect of ghetto life was falsified for the visitors so that they saw nothing of the hunger, disease, exhaustion, fear and anxiety of the inhabitants. The subsequent International Red Cross report indicated that the Nazi deception worked.

September 27, 1944-The SS executed Paul Eppstein in Theresienstadt. He was the leader of Theresienstadt's German Jews and the co-chair of the Council of Jewish Elders in Theresienstadt.

September 28,1944-October 28, 1944-The SS deported approximately 18,402 Theresienstadt prisoners to Auschwitz. Of these, only about 1,574 survived the war. Mrs. Ryba's mother and sister were deported to this hell on earth on October 10, 1944. Bertha Pollack was immediately sent to the gas chamber. Edith was admitted to the camp as a forced laborer.

May 3, 1945-The Nazis turned Theresienstadt over to a representative of the International Red Cross. By this time between 13,500-15,000 concentration camp prisoners from the Buchenwald and Gross-Rosen concentration camps had arrived in the ghetto swelling the population and creating a raging typhus epidemic .

May 5, 1945-Czechoslovakia was liberated by the Russians. It is estimated that some 78,000 Czech Jews perished in the Holocaust, including the parents of Marietta Ryba.

May 9, 1945-Soviet troops entered Theresienstadt. Since its inception, approximately 141,184 Jews had been deported to Theresienstadt from Czechoslovakia, Germany, Austria, The Netherlands, Poland, Hungary and Denmark. About 33,456 died in the ghetto and 88,203 were sent to the East where they perished. A total of 16,832 Jewish prisoners were liberated in Theresienstadt when the Russians entered. Marietta Ryba, along with other medical personnel, was sent to a hospital in Theresienstadt to care for the Holocaust survivors.

In the Czech lands as a whole only about 14,000 Jews remained alive from the pre-war population of 118,000. Marietta Ryba and her sister Edith were among these survivors.

Summer 1945-Mrs. Ryba came to Theresienstadt as a nurse with the Czechoslovak Red Cross that had established a hospital in the former ghetto. There she tended to desperately ill survivors and was reunited with her sister Edith.

February 1948-In late February 1948, the communist party of Czechoslovakia seized power with Soviet backing. This so-called “Czech coup” brought about forty years of communist dictatorship in the country. Marietta, who had met and married John Ryba, decided along with her husband to leave the country at this time and after a sojourn in a Displaced Persons camp in Germany came to England with the help of Mrs. Ryba’s foster family. In 1952, the couple immigrated to the United States to begin a new life in this country. Mrs. Ryba continued to keep in contact with the Jones family in England that had sheltered her during the war and provided help to her and her husband following the communist takeover of Czechoslovakia.

### **Maps: Kindertransport**

[Kindertransport, 1938-19#3F240B](#)

Click on article for details on travel routes

Click on “view photographs” for photographs of departure and arrival sites

# TERESIENSTADT

## Introduction

*“Freedom, how do you handle freedom after four years?” – Hannah Messinger.*

The Theresienstadt ghetto/concentration camp was created out of a small, walled 18th-century garrison town, just northwest of Prague, on November 24, 1941. Until its liberation by the Red Army on May 8, 1945, more than 140,000 Jews from Czechoslovakia, Germany, Austria and several other Western European countries were deported to Theresienstadt. The great majority perished.

Cynically portrayed by the Nazis as a “spa town” and as a retirement center where Jews could enjoy their time in peace and comfort, Theresienstadt was in reality a ghetto that had aspects of a concentration camp for Czech and other Jews, as well as those considered “privileged” because they were celebrities, veterans of World War I or elderly. At Theresienstadt, known as Terezin in Czech, inmates lived under a harsh regime established by the SS. Families were torn apart and were assigned to strenuous labor on a starvation diet. Prisoners suffered not only from malnutrition but also from abominable sanitary conditions, lice, bed bugs and disease. In the three and a half years of its existence, more than 33,000 people died in Theresienstadt itself from disease and starvation.

From nearly the beginning, though, the threat of deportation hung over its residents. The vast majority of Jews brought there were sent to ghettos and extermination camps in the East. In all, more than 88,000 Jews were deported from Theresienstadt. Thus, Theresienstadt also may be termed a transit camp.

Some 15,000 children were incarcerated in Theresienstadt, of whom about 90 percent perished in extermination centers.

In January 1942, the first two transports each carrying 1,000 Jews left Theresienstadt for the Riga ghetto in Latvia. Upon arrival, they were murdered. Prisoners were deported to other Eastern European ghettos, as well as to the Treblinka and Sobibor extermination centers and the Majdanek concentration/extermination camp. The relatives of the deportees left behind in Theresienstadt did not know of their fate.

Beginning in October 1942, the destination of all transports from Theresienstadt was Auschwitz-Birkenau. Hannah Messinger and Edith Stern (whose story is also told in this study guide) were among the approximately 18,500 Jews sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau in the last wave of deportations in the fall of 1944.

Though the SS administered Theresienstadt, the internal affairs of the ghetto were run by a Council of Jewish Elders. The SS forced the Council to compile lists of Jews for deportation, but it had some latitude in carrying out other responsibilities. It oversaw food distribution, work assignments, health care, lodging, the organization of a variety of cultural activities and, although officially forbidden, the education of Theresienstadt's children.

The Council's first head, Jacob Edelstein, was executed by the SS in June 1944. Its second head, Paul Eppstein, was murdered in September 1944. Another leader, Rabbi Benjamin Murelstein, survived. Rabbi Leo Baeck, the courageous and brilliant leader of the German-Jewish community under the Nazis, was imprisoned in Theresienstadt in early 1943, and served on the Council of Elders beginning in late 1944. He also survived.

The Council of Elders established a health care system with several hospitals. Edith Stern worked in one of them. It also organized a vibrant ghetto cultural life drawing on the talents of musicians, artists, actors, writers and academics deported there. Both Mrs. Messinger and Mrs. Stern watched several outstanding musical performances in the ghetto. Despite the Nazi prohibition on teaching children, the Council succeeded in organizing secret classes for them in Theresienstadt's children's homes taught by a team of dedicated instructors.

The Nazis sought to use Theresienstadt as propaganda to show the outside world that the Nazis were treating the Jews humanely. Deceptively, they portrayed it as a model Jewish settlement.

On June 23, 1944, representatives of the International Red Cross visited the ghetto. In the weeks leading up to the visit, the SS reduced the severe overcrowding by deporting Jews to their deaths in Auschwitz. Those on board two transports were housed in a "Czech family camp," created in case the Red Cross officials visiting the "model ghetto" in Theresienstadt might seek to inspect the final destination of deportees from that ghetto. Ultimately, the great majority of those in the "family camp" were killed at Auschwitz.

During their visit to Theresienstadt the three Red Cross members saw such fabrications as a café, a bank, a kindergarten, a carousel, shops, newly painted building exteriors as well as presentations of social and cultural events staged for their benefit. Following the visit, which hoodwinked the Red Cross, the Nazis made a propaganda film about their "model Jewish settlement". When it was completed, most of those in it, including the children, were sent to die in Auschwitz.

In the fall of 1944, the German-Jewish actor and film director Kurt Gerron was commissioned to shoot a second propaganda film about Theresienstadt. Titled "Theresienstadt: A Documentary from the Jewish Settlement Area," it portrayed the ghetto as a happy and prosperous Jewish town. After he finished the film, Kurt Gerron was placed on the last transport from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz where he was sent to the gas chamber.

During the first months of 1945, Jews continued to be deported to Theresienstadt. Miraculously, some were saved as the Red Cross was able to transfer 1,200 Jews from

Theresienstadt to Switzerland and more than 400 Danish Jews to Sweden. However, when Soviet forces liberated the ghetto on May 8, 1945, they found approximately 17,000 inmates, most of them sick, and emaciated. A number of them had been brought to Theresienstadt on death marches from other camps.

Following its liberation, a hospital was established in Theresienstadt in which Marietta Ryba, Edith Stern's sister served. It was in Theresienstadt during the summer of 1945 that their reunion took place. Marietta's story is also told in this study guide.

Karl Rahm and Siegfried Seidel, two of the Theresienstadt commandants, were sentenced to death by a Czechoslovak court after the war and hanged. Anton Burger, another commandant, was sentenced to death in absentia.

Czech Jewish artist Helga Weiss began writing a diary just before her and her family's incarceration in Theresienstadt in late 1941, soon after her 12<sup>th</sup> birthday. In September 1944, she and her mother were deported to Auschwitz and then ultimately to the Mauthausen concentration camp, from which they were liberated. *Helga's Diary: A Young Girl's Account of Life in a Concentration Camp* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013) includes a valuable eyewitness account of Theresienstadt.

## **Hannah Messinger's Story**

### **Early years**

Hannah Messinger's face lights up when she speaks about her childhood, her family and the beautiful town in the hills of Czechoslovakia where she grew up. "It was a wonderful childhood," she says.

Hannah Messinger was born on October 16, 1920, in Carlsbad, now known as Karlovy Vary, a lovely and historic spa town in the Sudetenland, an area in the west of Czechoslovakia bordering Germany. Her parents, Irma and Emil Lowy, raised her in an atmosphere of books and music and art. Her sister, Gertie, was three years younger. "I can describe her in one word—Sunshine!" said Mrs. Messinger. "She was pretty and outgoing and also inventive and artistic." Mrs. Messinger's grandfather also lived with the family, "We adored him and he adored us," she remembered, smiling.

Reaching back into her memories of more than 80 years, Mrs. Messinger spoke of her many aunts, uncles and cousins who would all frequently get together during weekends and holidays. Surrounding the town were hills, mountains and forests, where she and her family and friends hiked and roamed, stopping at little restaurants tucked into the woods.

At the time Czechoslovakia, under the leadership of its president Thomas Masaryk, was one of the most democratic and tolerant countries in Europe and the only democratic country in Eastern Europe. However, once Hitler came to power in neighboring Germany on January 30,

1933, a shadow began spreading over the lives of Mrs. Messinger and her family. Anti-Semitism became prevalent, especially in the Sudetenland with its large German population, and her non-Jewish friends began to avoid her, she remembered. Despite the growing Nazi threat, her father felt that the Nazi anti-Semitism would not last. “My father,” Mrs. Messinger said, “never did anything wrong to anyone else. Why, he thought, should anyone want to do anything wrong to him?”

### **Under Nazi rule**

In late September 1938, Great Britain and France allowed Nazi Germany to annex the German-speaking Sudetenland portion of Czechoslovakia where Mrs. Messinger lived in exchange for a promise by Hitler—which was quickly broken—that this would be his last territorial demand in Europe. The Munich Agreement, as this was known, handed to the Nazi dictator a part of an independent nation with strong fortifications, a well developed industrial and communications complex, rich coal mines and gold reserves.

Nazi Germany marched into the Sudetenland and that night, Mrs. Messinger’s family fled to Prague, the Czech capital, abandoning their home and business. Her father let each of them take only a single suitcase, and they left only with whatever money was in the house.

On March 15, 1939, Hitler invaded the Czech lands of Bohemia and Moravia. The Slovakia region became a Nazi puppet state headed by Father Josef Tiso, and Bohemia and Moravia became Nazi protectorates. This act of naked aggression meant that Mrs. Messinger and her family in Prague found themselves under Nazi German rule. Immediately, the Jewish community in Prague was subjected to anti-Semitic attacks and expropriations of property. After World War II began on September 1, 1939, Jewish children were expelled from public schools, and the Nazis imposed travel, employment and other restrictions on the Czech Jewish population.

A few months before her 20<sup>th</sup> birthday, Mrs. Messinger married Carl Cohorn, a young Czech Jew whom she had known for several years and loved deeply.

In late 1941, her husband, who had been forced to do manual labor for the Nazis, received a summons to report for deportation, and was sent to Theresienstadt.

### **Incarceration in Theresienstadt, the “Model Jewish Settlement”**

Two weeks later, Mrs. Messinger herself was sent to Theresienstadt. At first, the couple lived separately, but eventually they were able to craft a small room for themselves out of cardboard in one of the ghetto barracks. The Nazis put Mrs. Messinger to work doing heavy labor, such as shoveling coal, but then, by chance, she managed to get a job as a hairdresser—an occupation much in demand, because the Germans forbade women from having long hair. Her husband, an accountant, was fortunate to find work in the ghetto kitchen, where he was able to procure some extra food.

They also received some help initially from a Czech Christian friend named Josef Hrbek, who several times risked his life to smuggle food and messages to Mrs. Messinger and her

husband in Theresienstadt. He also saved a painting by Mrs. Messinger's father which he kept throughout the war and which now hangs in her apartment at the Selfhelp Home in Chicago.

In May 1942, Mrs. Messinger's parents and sister arrived in Theresienstadt, remaining there for only three days before being deported to the East. When they boarded the train, Mrs. Messinger thought her heart would break. "The last words my sister said to me were, 'Hannah, you were my best friend.' "

Mrs. Messinger and her husband saw thousands of Jews sent "to the East," mainly to Auschwitz. They also saw the deaths of many ghetto residents due to disease and malnutrition. They lived with the very real fear that they too would be deported or die of illness. Mrs. Messinger explained:

"For the young people, capable of working, it was possible somehow to adjust to all the rules and regulations as well as the deprivations. But for the older people, it was very hard. They lived in cramped quarters plagued by sickness and hunger."

The Jewish artists imprisoned in Theresienstadt created a vibrant cultural life, and Mrs. Messinger attended some of the outstanding musical performances by gifted Jewish musicians and singers, most of whom were later deported and murdered. She is one of the last living witnesses of the infamous visit of the Red Cross on July 23, 1944, when the Nazis created an elaborate hoax to show how Jews were faring under the "benevolent" Third Reich. The Red Cross was apparently deceived by the subterfuge, and the Nazis were so pleased with the outcome of the visit that they decided to create a film. "They painted the fronts of all the houses to make them look nice," she said. "Old people were not allowed to go on the street, only young people. And they had to wear the best thing they could find. And they opened a couple of stores...and there was a coffee house where they had young people sit."

In August 1944, Mrs. Messinger's husband was deported to Auschwitz.

### **Incarceration in Auschwitz-Birkenau--the deepest circle of the Nazi hell**

Two weeks later, Mrs. Messinger followed him and was sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau, known as Auschwitz II. Auschwitz-Birkenau was the largest section of the Auschwitz camp complex. Criss-crossed by electrified barbed wire and patrolled by the SS with dogs, it housed the camp's gas chambers and crematoria which were used to murder and incinerate some one million Jewish men, women and children. Auschwitz-Birkenau also had primitive barracks housing the largest number of the Auschwitz camp complex's prisoner population.

When she arrived at Auschwitz, Mrs. Messinger underwent an initial selection by Nazi doctors who decided which prisoners were fit to work and which would be sent immediately to die in the gas chambers. The doctor in charge of her selection was the notorious Josef Mengele. "He was a very good-looking man," Mrs. Messinger said, "and he just looked at people and pointed this way and that way."

Mengele asked Mrs. Messinger her profession. I said, 'hairedresser', and he got a real cynical smirk on his face and said, 'You, we need very much', and pushed me to the right."

As Mrs. Messinger began to run to the right, she threw her watch and wedding ring—her last links to her husband—into the mud thinking it would be too dangerous to keep them. "Then suddenly I heard a woman's pleading voice coming from the right side of the fence. The woman said, 'If you have any bread, throw it to me; they won't let you keep it anyway.' I had a hunk of bread hidden under my coat, and without thinking I threw it to her. She caught the bread and started running. Then a shot rang out. The woman sank to the ground, a pool of blood around her. I heard the dying woman's cries, 'bloodhounds, bloodhounds!'"

Mrs. Messinger had a second encounter with Mengele, when he oversaw a selection of prisoners to determine who was still fit to continue working and who would be killed in the gas chamber: "We had to walk naked in front of Mengele, and he looked at me and he said, 'You are pregnant.' "

She responded no, that she had been pregnant but had an abortion. Shortly before Mrs. Messinger was deported, she had become pregnant in Theresienstadt. Because, giving birth there was a death sentence, to save her life she had voluntarily undergone an abortion. "I said something I regret to this day." I told him, 'I didn't want to bring another Jewish child into the world.' "

Mengele replied sarcastically, "How considerate of you." And he let her live.

Mrs. Messinger remembered the roll calls where she had to stand for hours, the starvation rations and the tiers of wooden bunks the women slept on, five of them crammed into each bunk—all designed to degrade and dehumanize the prisoners. She described the groups of prisoners who were little more than skeletons being marched to the gas chamber:

"They didn't look human any more. They were just eyes... And we knew where they were going. So we wondered when it would be our turn."

It is hard for Mrs. Messinger to speak about her time in Auschwitz, hard to find the words to describe this deepest circle of the Nazi hell.

Mrs. Messinger lost whatever religious faith she had in Auschwitz. What helped to keep her going was her youth and the hope she would find her husband and her sister again, "I was determined not to give up and to live for whomever would remain of my family."

### **Incarceration in the Merzdorf forced labor camp**

Mrs. Messinger was interned in Auschwitz from September 1944 until January 1945, when she was sent to a forced labor camp in eastern Germany. On the way there she and five other women were guarded by two older German soldiers who gave them bread and cheese. Recounting her time at Merzdorf, Mrs. Messinger said. "It was very hard work, and there was hardly any food, but there was no gas chamber." But, harsh and abusive SS women guarded

the prisoners. "Before work we had to stand outside to be counted no matter how (bad) the weather. And they would always make it as long as possible."

At Merzdorf, Mrs. Messinger formed a close-knit circle with five women, who came with her from Auschwitz. These friendships, which lasted for many years after the war, helped them survive physically and emotionally. Mrs. Messinger explained:

We tried to nourish our brains to maintain a semblance of culture and dignity. We recited poems from memory and practiced foreign languages we knew, especially English. We shared our innermost thoughts and fears. I took it upon myself to make up hopeful stories.

Whatever extra bits of food they found, they shared among the six of them.

### **Liberation and Its immediate aftermath**

Liberation by the Russians came suddenly on May 7, 1945, the day the German instrument of surrender was signed. "Every morning we had to go to the factory. They locked us in our room. And one day they didn't open the door and we looked out in the courtyard and we didn't see anybody. We didn't know what was going on. All of a sudden the door opened and one Russian soldier with a bicycle walked in. And he told us in Russian, 'You are free' ...so we went into the courtyard and we didn't know what to do."

"Freedom," she added reflectively. "How do you handle freedom after four years?"

Mrs. Messinger and several other former prisoners decided to walk to the Czech border, which was a few days walk away. The first night, they found a house stocked with food and clothes, which had been abandoned by a German doctor and his family, who had fled in advance of the Russians. After years of captivity, they were unused to everyday comforts, like beds, she said: "We all found ourselves on the floor the next morning." Continuing their journey home, they slept in an abandoned farmhouse, where they feasted on boiled chicken and potatoes the fleeing residents had left behind.

Mrs. Messinger finally reached Prague and immediately went to her parents' apartment. A woman she had not known opened the door. She knew nothing about Mrs. Messinger's family, but nevertheless kindly and graciously invited her to stay. After several weeks, Mrs. Messinger realized that no one was coming back from the Nazi camps, not her parents who were killed in the Chelmno death camp, nor her sister whom she found out later had been shot in a Polish forced labor camp when she became too weak to work, nor her husband. "I found out later that my husband was killed only a few weeks before the end of the war. He was on a death march, and he couldn't walk any further," she said. Her husband fell to the ground and was shot, and left to die in the mud.

Mrs. Messinger sent an aunt in Chicago a telegram. It read, "All the family was killed. I am alone." She was extremely ill from her horrendous experiences, but she did have contact

with other survivors. “We tried to help one another as much as we could by sharing our enormous pain and trying to make some sense out of the life that was left to us,” she said.

Her aunt in Chicago sent letters urging her to apply for a visa to come to the United States. “But how would I be able to start life in a new country and for whom?” she wondered.

Mrs. Messinger wrote to her aunt in Budapest, her last surviving relative in Europe, pouring out her heart to her as she related her Holocaust experiences and the losses and suffering she and her loved ones had endured. When her aunt read the letters out loud, a friend of the family, Imre Messinger, was listening. Imre wrote to Hannah and they began to write to each other. “And this sounds very corny, but I fell in love with him, and he fell in love with me.”

Hannah and Imre did not actually meet in person until October 1946 in Paris. At their first meeting, “We fell into each other’s arms hugging and kissing. It seemed so very natural. We were together at last.”

### **A new life in Chicago**

By this time, Mrs. Messinger had obtained an American visa with the help of her aunt in Chicago, who sent her an affidavit of support so that she could apply for immigration. Mrs. Messinger arrived in the United States on December 21, 1946. When her plane landed in Chicago, a man approached her, saying, “I have to talk to you.” She was quite apprehensive until he introduced himself as a reporter from the *Chicago Sun* who wished to write a story about her. The article about her miraculous survival and the losses she had endured appeared shortly thereafter in the paper along with a picture of her and her aunt. However, Mrs. Messinger felt terribly alone, especially since her relatives did not want to hear what happened to her. They urged her to put the past behind her and build a new life in this country.

Eventually Imre Messinger was able to join her in the U.S., and the couple was married in New York on April 2, 1947.

The Messinger’s made a happy and bountiful life for themselves in Chicago. They bought a house in Lincolnwood, a Chicago suburb, where they raised their two children and lived for forty years. In 1997, two months after their fiftieth wedding anniversary, Imre Messinger died. Three years later, Mrs. Messinger moved into the Selfhelp Home, where she found a warm and loving community of other survivors and refugees. She had drawn since her earliest childhood, but at Selfhelp she took classes in sculpture and painting and today her work is in the collection of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and has been shown at other museums and libraries. “I am very content here”, Mrs. Messinger said.

Postscript: The six women who supported each other in the Merzdorf forced labor camp celebrated a thirtieth reunion. “We laughed and cried. I reminded the others of how we had persisted in our efforts at maintaining sanity; how we quoted poetry, told stories; how these efforts bound us together and transformed us into sisters. As long as we lived, this bond would not be broken.”

\*The quotations in Mrs. Messinger's story are taken from two sources: an unpublished autobiography of Imre and Hannah Messinger entitled, *"Beyond Barriers,"* completed in 1996 and an interview conducted with Mrs. Messinger by Ethan Bensinger in the Selfhelp Home on May 22, 2007.

## Sought Learning Objectives

Students will:

- \*Understand the importance of examining individual Holocaust stories and that the catastrophe of the Holocaust can only be understood by understanding these narratives "one by one by one."
- \*Recognize the losses endured by the Jews during the Holocaust—the loss of family, friends, home, possessions, culture, innocence, and for a number of survivors including Mrs. Messinger, the loss of traditional religious faith.
- \*Gain an awareness of people's inhumanity to other people, as witnessed by the suffering experienced by Mrs. Messinger and those around her during the Holocaust.
- \*Identify those aspects of Mrs. Messinger's story that illustrate the caring and concern of people for one another under the most adverse circumstances.
- \*Explore examples of moral and spiritual resistance to oppression as seen in Mrs. Messinger's experiences.
- \*Make inferences and draw conclusions about the role both chance and choices played in Mrs. Messinger's survival during the Holocaust.
- \*Appreciate the importance of human resilience and its role in helping Mrs. Messinger rebuild her life.
- \*Realize the importance of freedom and opportunity provided by America to Holocaust survivors, such as Mrs. Messinger, and explore and value those freedoms and opportunities in their own lives.

## Key Questions

1. Describe some reasons that made Mrs. Messinger's childhood in pre-war Czechoslovakia so happy.
2. What were the changes in Mrs. Messinger's life brought about by the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia?
3. How does Mrs. Messinger's experience illustrate that Theresienstadt was not the benign "model Jewish settlement" portrayed by Nazi propaganda?
4. What are some examples of resistance illustrated by Mrs. Messinger's experiences in Theresienstadt?
5. How do Mrs. Messinger's Auschwitz experiences demonstrate that it was "a hell on earth"?
6. What were the factors that aided Mrs. Messinger's survival in the Merzdorf forced labor camp?
7. How did Mrs. Messinger feel after she was liberated and why?
8. What were some of the factors that helped her to overcome the trauma she suffered in the Holocaust and the loss of her family, and begin a new life in this country?

## Learning Activities

1. How did the Nazis try to dehumanize Mrs. Messinger and the other victims in Auschwitz? Why do you think they took such pains to engage in systematic dehumanization of the prisoners?
2. Why did Dr. Mengele have a smirk on his face when, after Mrs. Messinger told him she was a hairdresser, he said, "You, we need very much"?
3. To this day, Mrs. Messinger still feels guilty about telling Dr. Mengele that she did not want to bring another Jewish child into this world. Why do you believe this sense of guilt remained with her throughout her life?
4. How did Mrs. Messinger maintain her will to live in Auschwitz?

Here is what one survivor, Viktor Frankl, an Auschwitz survivor and psychotherapist, wrote about the will to live:

Any attempt to restore a man's inner strength in the camp had first to succeed in showing him some future goal ... Whenever there was an opportunity for it, one had to give (our fellow prisoners) a 'why'—an aim—for their lives, in order to strengthen them to bear the terrible how of the existence... Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answers to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual. (Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Pocket Books, 1985, pp. 97-98).

Do you have a goal that helps give meaning and purpose to your life? How will you go about fulfilling that goal? Do you think, there will be new expectations life has of you? What personal attributes will you need to fulfill those expectations?

5. Mrs. Messinger described those prisoners in Auschwitz known as Muselmanner: "They didn't look human any more. They were just eyes...and we knew where they were going, so we wondered when it would be our turn." Why do you believe these Muselmanner lost the will to live and what was Mrs. Messinger's reaction to them?

Primo Levi, a chemist and Auschwitz survivor also wrote about the Muselmanner:

On their entry into the camp, though basic incapacity, or by misfortune, or through some banal incident, they are overcome before they can adapt themselves; they are beaten by time, they do not begin to learn German, to disentangle the infernal knot of laws and prohibitions until their body is already in decay, and nothing can save them from selection or from death by exhaustion. Their life is short, but their number is endless; they, the Muselmanner, the drowned, form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labor in silence, the divine spark dead within them, already too empty to really suffer. (Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* (New York: Collier Books, 1966), p.82).

6. For some in Auschwitz, their religious faith was what sustained them and helped them survive. There were those who conducted secret prayer services, who studied Torah and Talmud from memory and who went to the gas chambers with the Shema (the Jewish affirmation of belief in God) on their lips. Yet there were others whose religious faith was severely shaken by their experience in Auschwitz. Mrs. Messinger was one of these, although she still continued to feel close to the Jewish people and to Jewish culture. Why do you believe her faith in God and religion was destroyed?

Elie Wiesel, a noted writer and survivor, also questioned his childhood religious faith. How does the following passage from his memoir *Night* show why Wiesel's belief in God was shaken? Might his reasons also have caused Mrs. Messinger's loss of faith:

Why, but why should I bless Him? In every fiber I rebelled. Because He had had thousands of children burned in His pits? Because He kept six crematories working night and day, on Sunday's and feast days? Because in His great might He had created Auschwitz-Birkenau, Buna, and so many factories of death? How could I say to Him: 'Blessed are You, Eternal, Master of the Universe, Who chose us...to be tortured day and night, to see our fathers, our mothers, our brothers, end in the crematory? Praised by Your Holy Name, Thou Who has chosen us to be butchered on Thine altar? (Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Bantam Books: 1986), p. 64).

7. Mrs. Messinger found it very difficult to speak about her time in Auschwitz. Why? Were there times when you had experiences that could not be described in words? What were these experiences?

Primo Levi attempted to describe this lack of words: "Just as our hunger is not that feeling of missing a meal, so our way of being cold has need of a new word. We say 'hunger,' we say 'tiredness,' 'fear,' 'pain,' we say 'winter' and they are different things. They are free words, created and used by free men who lived in comfort and suffered in their homes. If the camps had lasted longer a new harsh language would have been born; and only this language could express what it means to toil the whole day in the wind with the temperature below freezing, wearing only a shirt, underpants, cloth jacket and trousers, and in one's body, nothing but weakness, hunger and knowledge of the end drawing nearer." (Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, pp. 112-13).

8. Mrs. Messinger was able to bond with other women in the Merzdorf forced labor camp. How did these friendships help her stay alive during the last months of the war?

Holocaust scholar Terrence des Pres says that we, as human beings, not only have a need for help but that we also have the need to help others. Can you think of examples from your own life when you felt the need to help?

In his classic work, *The Survivor*, Terrence des Pres wrote:

Prisoners in the concentration camps helped each other. That in itself is a significant fact. Sometimes it was help given individually...sometimes it took the form of one group helping another...And sometimes help came collectively, unplanned and uncalled for, where and when it was needed...The survivor's experience is evidence that the need to help is as basic as the need for help, a fact which points to the radically social nature of life in extremity. (Des Pres, *The Survivor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 135-36).

9. At the time of her liberation, Mrs. Messinger said, "Freedom—how do you handle freedom after four years?" Why, for Mrs. Messinger and for so many other survivors, was freedom such a bittersweet experience?

Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl wrote: " 'Freedom,' we repeated to ourselves, and yet we could not grasp it. We had said this word so often during all the years we dreamed about it, that it had lost its meaning. Its reality did not yet penetrate our consciousness...we did not yet belong to this world...We had literally lost the ability to feel pleased and had to return to it slowly...The dream of freedom had come true. But could we truly believe it?" (Frankl, *op.cit.* p. 109).

10. Although Hannah and her husband had a successful and rewarding life in this country, both were plagued with recurring nightmares. One of Mrs. Messinger's dreams began during the last few weeks in Merzdorf:

I found myself on top of a mountain of coal with a shovel in my hand (one of Mrs. Messinger's first jobs in Theresienstadt was shoveling coal). Time and again, I dug the shovel into the coal, lifted it up, and flung it into the air. I could not see where the coal landed. The more coal I removed from the top, the more the mountain kept growing higher and higher, instead of sinking lower. As I was looking down the mountain, I saw my parents and sister Gerti with arms outstretched towards me. They implored me to save them. I wanted to climb down the pile and bring them up to the top, but I was paralyzed, I could not move at all.

What do you think Mrs. Messinger's dream means and why do you think it began soon before liberation?

11. Mrs. Messinger used art—drawing and painting—to work through her Holocaust experiences. How might her artwork have helped her accomplish this?

The *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* states: "The experience of the Holocaust teaches that human beings can undergo extreme traumatic experiences... In the process of (postwar) adaptation, the survivors discovered powers within them which came to expression during the different phases of their lives after the war...including shaping their lives in their new homes." (*Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, ed. Israel Gutman, Vol. 4 (New York: Macmillan, 1990) p. 1428.

12. Once in Chicago, Mrs. Messinger's relatives and others did not want to hear about her Holocaust experiences. Her relatives urged her to get on with rebuilding her life in a land of

freedom and opportunity, to look to the future and forget the past. Many other survivors also heard the same advice and kept their stories to themselves for many years. What do you think accounts for the reaction of American Jews to Holocaust survivors in the early postwar years?

13. Why do you think Mrs. Messinger's father felt that since he had never done anything wrong to anyone else, he did not expect that anyone would want to do anything wrong to him? What might be learned from her father's mistaken attitude that would be relevant to our own lives?

14. In Merzdorf, Hannah and her friends reminisced about the food they remembered eating and exchanged recipes. Secure a copy of, *Recipes Remembered: A Celebration of Survival* (Rudderfinn Press, 2011), which contains the remarkable stories and recipes of Holocaust survivors. Just as recipes served as an antidote to what Mrs. Messinger and others had to endure in the forced labor camp, so these recipes are an antidote to the horrific period of persecution and anguish endured by the survivors. Examine the recipes and make any three of them.

15. In the abandoned house that Mrs. Messinger and her companions entered on their way to Prague after liberation, they found food, clothing and a piano. She recalled: "Then we gathered around the piano and Anka began to play. She who had not touched a piano in several years played Robert Schumann's "Traumerie" with a feeling of triumph. We were all very moved and I found myself crying. I had survived as a cultured human being despite being brutalized by the Nazis." Listen to Schumann's "Traumerie" on YouTube. Why do you think Anka chose to play it? What is your reaction to the piece?

16. After arriving in this country, Mrs. Messinger went to work for a time with HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, a Jewish immigration organization that to this day helps resettle immigrants in the U.S. Research the efforts undertaken by HIAS after World War II to help Jewish refugees. What obstacles did HIAS have to overcome in rendering aid? How did it go about surmounting them? What were its accomplishments in this regard? In its efforts, HIAS illustrated the values of welcoming strangers and the fact that we as human beings are responsible one for the other. How can you demonstrate these values in your own life?

17. Finally, if you could meet Mrs. Messinger, what would you want to express to her after learning about her story?

### **Enrichment Activities Focusing on the Holocaust in Czechoslovakia**

1. On a map, trace Mrs. Messinger's journey from Carlsbad to Prague, from Prague to Theresienstadt, from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz, from Auschwitz to Merzdorf and from Merzdorf back to Carlsbad.

2. Locate the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia on the map found in the study guide. Why was the Sudetenland of such strategic importance to both Germany and Czechoslovakia?

3. During the period between World War I and World War II, Czechoslovakia was the most democratic country in Eastern Europe. How do you think the government treated its minorities, including Jews? How might it have had an impact on the happiness of Mrs. Messinger's childhood?

4. Even though Great Britain and France had been on the winning side in World War I, victory came at the cost of several million young lives and more wounded and maimed, and a great deal of national wealth. It planted the seeds for a new and more terrible conflict due to a vengeful Germany. Great Britain and France also suffered from the effects of the Great Depression, which began in 1929, the threat of the communist Soviet Union and the insecurity brought about by American isolationism. How did these developments influence their decision to pursue a policy of appeasement towards Nazi Germany?

5. After taking over Austria in March 1938, Hitler promised that the German takeover of the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia would be his last European territorial demand. A year later, in March 1939, he broke that pledge and occupied the rest of the Czech lands of Bohemia and Moravia. As a result, Great Britain and France began to prepare seriously for war. Yet when Great Britain and France declared war on Germany after it invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, Hitler was surprised that they had declared war. Why do you think he was surprised?

6. Theresienstadt was termed a "model Jewish settlement" by the Nazis, never a ghetto or a concentration camp. The Nazis never called the more than 1,100 actual ghettos they set up ghettos, but rather "Jewish quarters." Define "euphemism" and discuss why the Nazis continually used euphemistic language when speaking about the "Jewish question."

7. There were many talented Jewish thinkers and artists interned in Theresienstadt. Mrs. Messinger recalled: "Well known musicians and artists and actors of all kinds helped with their performances to make us forget from time to time where we really were." In Theresienstadt, she saw performances of operas, such as "Figaro," "Rigoletto," "Carmen," "The Bartered Bride," "The Kiss," and "The Barber of Seville." Frequently, these performances were attended by Nazi officers of the camp. Can you think of any explanation why so many high-ranking Nazis could appreciate and enjoy operas, plays, symphonies and poetry and still murder children?

8. Theresienstadt was a ghetto whose inhabitants were incarcerated under conditions of extreme deprivation. It was a concentration camp where everyone except those too young or too old or too sick had to work. It also was a transit camp and a gateway to extermination centers, especially to Auschwitz. How are these aspects of the Theresienstadt ghetto seen in Mrs. Messinger's story?

9. Throughout the Holocaust, the Nazis were masters of deceit and deception. Towards the end of 1943, the Nazis decided to allow an International Red Cross Investigating Committee to visit Theresienstadt in an attempt to dispel rumors about the extermination of the Jews. The visit took place on June 23, 1944. What means used by the Nazis to disguise the true nature of the ghetto does Mrs. Messinger describe? Research the Red Cross visit to

Theresienstadt on the Internet to learn of other ways the Nazis tried to fool the Red Cross visitors.

After the Red Cross visit on July 23, 1944, the Nazis made a propaganda film about Theresienstadt showing how good Jewish life was under “the benevolent Third Reich.” When the film was completed almost everyone in it, including children, were sent to the gas chambers at Auschwitz. Why do you think the Nazis were so eager to exterminate the cast and the crew?

10. Create a small-scale model of the Theresienstadt ghetto. Although the model will provide you with some idea of key areas of the camp, it can never transmit the pain, suffering, fear, hunger, anguish and humiliation of those who were incarcerated there.

11. During 1943 and 1944, a group of Jewish prisoners in Theresienstadt formed a choir, and performed Giuseppe Verdi’s “Requiem” sixteen different times to their Nazi captors, who considered it a cruel joke. Yet the Jewish choir considered their performances of this musical composition in honor of the dead, a form of defiance. Learn more about Verdi’s “Messa da Requiem” through Internet research and discuss why Jewish choral members viewed presenting it as a form of resistance.

12. Distribute copies of the book, *I Never Saw Another Butterfly*, which includes children’s drawings and poems created in Theresienstadt. Divide the class into groups. Ask each group to appoint a facilitator and a recorder. The facilitator will pose the following questions to the group, which they should answer at home: Which poem moved you the most and why? Which picture moved you the most and why? Compose a short poem of your own honoring the 15,000 children who passed through Theresienstadt to concentration camps in the East, most of whom perished. When group members reassemble, each group recorder will note responses and then share them with the class as a whole.

13. On May 27, 1942, members of the Czech underground attempted to assassinate Reinhardt Heydrich, the chief Nazi official in Bohemia and Moravia in Czechoslovakia. He died a few days later of his wounds. The Germans retaliated in brutal fashion with collective punishment. Their worst retaliatory attack was on the Czech village of Lidice on June 1, 1942. All of the men, 192 in all, as well as 71 women were executed. The remaining women and children were deported.

Carl Cohorn, Hannah’s husband at the time, was sent from Theresienstadt, along with others, to clear away the debris of the demolished village. The Czech victims of Lidice were among the millions of non-Jews murdered by the Nazis. Today, Lidice, rebuilt after the war, has become a symbol of Czech resistance and Nazi terror. View the video, “The Children from Lidice,” on YouTube and report on the fate of some of the deported Lidice children.

## Hannah Messinger's Timeline

October 18, 1918-The independence of Czechoslovakia was proclaimed. The new state was formed from several parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which was defeated in World War I. Thomas Masaryk and Edvard Benes, the key leaders of the new state, were committed democrats who forged a stable parliamentary democracy that recognized the fundamental rights of all of its citizens. Czechoslovakia was also the most industrially advanced country in Eastern Europe. It contained not only Czechs and Slovaks but also Germans, Hungarians, Ruthenians and Jews. Thus, Hannah Messinger grew up in a democratic, pluralistic society.

September 10, 1919-The Treaty of Saint-Germain was signed with Austria. It recognized the independence of Czechoslovakia and confirmed that the Sudetenland, the northern and western border region of Czechoslovakia with its large ethnic German population would be part of the new Czechoslovak state. Among a number of ethnic Germans, the desire to become a part of Germany became more popular especially in the wake of the Great Depression and the Nazi takeover of power in Germany on January 30, 1933. This was accompanied by an increase in anti-Semitism, which impacted Mrs. Messinger.

September 28/29, 1938-Czechoslovakia was betrayed by Great Britain and France at the Munich Conference and was forced to give up the Sudetenland, a key segment of the nation with a large German population, but also with important industries and fortifications. Hitler promised that this is his last territorial demand in Europe. Mrs. Messinger and her family fled to Prague in an attempt to escape falling under Nazi rule.

March 15, 1939-Hitler broke his promise, and German forces occupied Bohemia and Moravia, which became the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, part of the Third Reich. The Protectorate contained 118,000 Jews including Mrs. Messinger's family. Synagogues in Vsetin and Jihlava were burned on the first days of occupation. Jews were arrested and attacked in many localities. Just one day earlier, a separate Slovakian state was established under the rule of a Catholic priest, Father Josef Tiso. It became a satellite of Nazi Germany. Hungary annexed portions of southern Slovakia, and Poland annexed a portion of Czech Silesia.

June 1939-Adolf Eichmann arrived in Prague and established the Office for Jewish Emigration. It was given authority over the Protectorate's Jewish community and used the Prague Jewish leadership to transmit orders. Massive expropriation of Jewish property began, and Jews were denied civil rights and excluded from political and cultural life. About 26,000 Czech Jews managed to flee until October 1941, when emigration was banned.

September 1939-With the outbreak of World War II, Czech Jews became subject to a reign of terror including incarceration in concentration camps, restrictions on freedom of movement and the banning of Jewish children from public schools. The Jewish community attempted to provide Jewish and general education as well as social and welfare services.

October 1939-First expulsion of Czech Jews took place. This one was to the Nisko settlement in the Lublin area of Poland.

April 27, 1940-Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS, decided to establish a concentration camp in Auschwitz located in the historical borderland between Germany and Poland. It became Nazi Germany's largest concentration and extermination camp and a metaphor for the Holocaust. Approximately one million Jewish men, women and children were murdered there as well as some 100,000 non-Jews, the majority of whom were Poles. Auschwitz came to symbolize the dark side of modern industrial civilization. It was a death factory.

September 1, 1941-All Jews were forced to wear a yellow badge, further isolating them from the general population.

October 1941-Construction of Auschwitz II or Auschwitz-Birkenau began. It served both as a labor camp and as the central location for the extermination of the Jews of Europe. They were murdered by means of Zyklon B pellets that turned into a lethal gas once in the air. It had previously been tested in Auschwitz on Russian prisoners of war. Mass murder began in two "provisional" gas chambers. Between March and June 1943 four large sophisticated crematorium buildings were constructed in Auschwitz-Birkenau each consisting of a disrobing area, a gas chamber and crematorium ovens. New arrivals at Auschwitz-Birkenau underwent selections during which SS doctors decided who would be admitted to the camp as a forced laborer and who would die immediately in the gas chambers. The large majority of new arrivals were sent immediately to their deaths.

October 10, 1941-A secret meeting chaired by Reich Protector Reinhardt Heydrich decided on the establishment of a ghetto in Theresienstadt about 90 miles north of Prague. The purpose of the ghetto was to serve as a "model camp" where certain "privileged prisoners" would be sent and also a transit camp from which Jews would be deported to extermination centers.

October 17, 1941-The SS and the police sent the first transport of Czech Jews from Prague to the Lodz ghetto. During the months of October and November, 6,000 Czech Jews were deported to the Lodz and Minsk ghettos where nearly all of them died.

November 24, 1941-The first Jewish detachment arrived in Theresienstadt. Mrs. Messinger's first husband, Carl Cohorn, was ordered to Theresienstadt not long thereafter to be followed two weeks later by Hannah. They were among the 73,603 Czech Jews deported to Theresienstadt between November 24, 1941 and late 1944. Of these, 60,399 were deported to Auschwitz and other killing centers, including more than twenty members of Mrs. Messinger's family, among them her parents, sister and husband. Most of the rest died in Theresienstadt. Only 3,227 Czech deportees survived the war.

Before the deportations, Jewish community leaders in Prague managed to hide articles of religious and cultural significance relating to the heritage of the Jews of Bohemia and Moravia. Most of these artifacts were salvaged after the war.

January 20, 1942-Reinhard Heydrich, chief of the Reich Security Main Office and Reich Protector of Bohemia and Moravia announced the existence and purpose of Theresienstadt to the key officials of the Nazi party, the German government and the SS gathered at the

Wannsee Conference in a suburb outside of Berlin. This infamous conference was convened to discuss and co-ordinate the Final Solution-the plan to murder European Jewry.

May 27, 1942-Heydrich was severely wounded by the Czech underground. He died shortly thereafter. In reprisal, 1,000 Jews Czech Jews were deported on June 10, 1942 to Usadz, Poland where they were forced to dig their own graves and were then executed. The Czech village of Lidice was also destroyed as part of Nazi revenge.

First half of 1943-By this time, some 90 percent of all Jews of Bohemia and Moravia had been deported to Theresienstadt. Despite being banned, regular classes for children were held. The educational effort in the ghetto was an outstanding example of moral resistance. Of the some 15,000 Jewish children deported to Theresienstadt, only a handful survived the war. Religious services and a variety of cultural activities for adults were also held in the ghetto.

July 23, 1944-Two representatives of the International Red Cross and one representative of the Danish Red Cross visited Theresienstadt. Mrs. Messinger was there at the time. Every aspect of ghetto life was falsified for the visitors so that they saw nothing of the hunger, disease, exhaustion, fear and anxiety of the inhabitants. The subsequent International Red Cross report indicated that the Nazi deception worked.

September 27, 1944-The SS executed Paul Eppstein in Theresienstadt. He was the leader of Theresienstadt's German Jews and the co-chairperson of the Council of Jewish Elders in Theresienstadt.

September 28, 1944-October 28, 1944-The SS deported approximately 18,402 Theresienstadt prisoners to Auschwitz-Birkenau, among them Mrs. Messinger and her first husband. Of these, only about 1,574 survived the war. Carl Cohorn was not among them, but Hannah miraculously was. In Auschwitz-Birkenau, Mrs. Messinger, like others incarcerated there, worked twelve hours a day, lived on a starvation diet in inhumane overcrowded conditions with no warm clothes and little sleep in a camp where gas chambers and crematoria functioned daily and the smell of death was pervasive and overwhelming. Mrs. Messinger also recalled the endless roll calls and the sight of human beings who were so dehumanized that they seemed like the living dead.

January 1945-Mrs. Messinger was sent from Auschwitz to a forced labor camp in Merzdorf, Germany where she and others worked in a clothing factory. Her friendship with other women there aided their survival. Merzdorf was liberated by Soviet forces on May 7, 1945, one day before the end of the war in Europe.

May 3, 1945-The Nazis turned Theresienstadt over to a representative of the International Red Cross. By this time between 13,500-15,000 concentration camp prisoners from Buchenwald and Gross-Rosen concentration camps had arrived in the ghetto swelling the population and creating a raging typhus epidemic.

May 5, 1945-Czechoslovakia was liberated by the Russians. It is estimated that some 78,000 Czech Jews perished in the Holocaust.

May 9, 1945-Soviet troops entered Theresienstadt. Since its inception, approximately 141,184 Jews had been deported to Theresienstadt including Jews from Czechoslovakia, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary and Denmark. About 33,456 died in the ghetto and 88,203 were sent to the East where they perished. A total of 16,832 Jewish prisoners were liberated in Theresienstadt when the Russians entered.

In the Czech lands as a whole only about 14,000 Jews remained alive from the pre-war population of 118,000. Hannah Messinger was one of these survivors. With the help of her aunt, Mrs. Messinger arrived in Chicago on December 21, 1946 to begin a new life in this country.

### **Maps: The Holocaust in Bohemia and Moravia**

[http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/gallery\\_nm.php?ModuleId=10007323](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/gallery_nm.php?ModuleId=10007323)

<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005424>

# AUSCHWITZ

## Introduction

*"We are the last generation. Soon, there will be no living people who can tell the story of the Holocaust."* –Edith Stern

Over the entrance to the main Auschwitz concentration and extermination camp, the symbolic center of the Holocaust, stretches a black iron sign. It reads: "Arbeit Macht Frei." In English: "Work Sets You Free."

The Auschwitz complex, consisting of a network of three main concentration and extermination camps and 39 subcamps, was the largest in the Nazi constellation of death. Located 37 miles west of Cracow, Poland, it is estimated that 1.3 million people were deported there, including 1.1 million Jews.

The original camp, Auschwitz I, was built in 1940. Its purpose was to incarcerate and execute the enemies of Nazi Germany and the German occupation authorities in Poland and to maintain a ready supply of forced laborers. Its first prisoners were predominantly Polish. Some 74,000 Poles were killed in Auschwitz. The Nazis first experimented with gassing prisoners in Auschwitz on September 3, 1941, using Zyklon B, a pesticide developed to kill lice and other insects. Six hundred Soviet prisoners of war and 250 sick inmates were the first victims. Auschwitz I also contained facilities where university-trained physicians, in collaboration with German research institutions, used living prisoners for medical experiments. These were conducted in Block (barracks) 10. Auschwitz's infamous prison, where prisoners were beaten and tortured to death was in Block 11.

Auschwitz II, known as Auschwitz-Birkenau, opened in early 1942. Located about two miles from Auschwitz I, near what had been the Polish village of Brzezinka, Auschwitz-Birkenau had the capacity to hold about 150,000 prisoners at any one time. It was comprised of more than two dozen units separated by electrically charged barbed wire, with separate sections for women and men. In 1943 it had a family camp for Roma (Gypsies) and a family camp for Jewish families deported from the Theresienstadt ghetto.

Between March and June 1943, four large and sophisticated gas chambers were constructed in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Each one had an area for undressing, a large gas chamber where people were killed with Zyklon B gas, and ovens to incinerate the bodies of the victims. The crematory ovens had the capacity to burn about 4,400 people daily.

Historians estimate that 1.3 million people were transported to Auschwitz from many countries under German occupation. On arrival in Auschwitz-Birkenau, usually after several days journey in a sealed train with little food and water and no sanitary facilities, SS doctors, including the notorious Josef Mengele, made instant decisions about who would live or die.

Most of those who arrived were immediately sent to the gas chambers. Close to one million Jews were killed in Auschwitz.

Prisoners selected for forced labor were deloused, shaved and tattooed with numbers on their left forearms. It is believed that 400,000 Auschwitz prisoners were registered this way. They were given inadequate clothing and sent to work in inhumane conditions where many of them died from malnutrition, exhaustion, overwork and disease.

The majority of arrivals though, those deemed too old or too sick for work, as well as all mothers with young children and pregnant women, were sent immediately to the gas chambers. To deceive the victims and prevent riots, these were disguised as shower installations. It took just 15 minutes for the Zyklon B gas to kill the victims. When all the prisoners were dead, prisoners of the Sonderkommando ("special unit") aired out the chambers, removed the bodies, searched them for valuables, cut the women's hair and sent the bodies to be burned in the crematoria.

The belongings of the victims were seized and sorted for shipment to Germany. The yield was enormous. When the Soviets liberated Auschwitz, they found 35 storehouses filled with sacks of hair, eyeglasses, more than 500,000 pieces of clothing, housewares and children's toys.

The third camp of Auschwitz, also known as Buna or Monowitz opened near the Polish town of Monowice in October 1942. It was built to house slave laborers working in the Buna synthetic rubber and fuel plant run by the I.G. Farben chemical conglomerate that patented Zyklon B gas. German corporations, like I.G. Farben, profited from the Holocaust, making use of an ever-renewable supply of forced labor.

Auschwitz III had subcamps with prisoners employed in industrial, armament and agricultural production. They worked in coalmines, quarries, experimental farms and munitions factories. Prisoners employed in forced labor underwent periodic selections, and those too weak or too sick to continue working were sent to be gassed in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

In November 1944, gassing operations in Auschwitz ended by order of Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS, as the Eastern front drew closer.

As Soviet forces approached Auschwitz in mid-January 1945, the SS began evacuating all areas of the camp and subcamps. They forced some 58,000 prisoners on death marches to the West, shooting those who fell behind or collapsed from exhaustion. About 15,000 prisoners died during the death marches just days away from liberation. When Soviet forces liberated Auschwitz on January 27, 1945, they found just 7,500 sick and dying prisoners abandoned by the SS.

Although about one million Jews were murdered at Auschwitz, Auschwitz also had the largest number of Jewish survivors, because of the chance of survival as a forced laborer at the camp complex. The thousands of Auschwitz prisoners who lived to liberation bear witness to human beings' capacity for inhumanity.

## Edith Stern's Story

### Early years

Edith Stern's mother always said, "Don't forget you don't have a better friend than your sister. And we were thinking, 'oh yeah, what does she know?' But then the life taught us that she was right," said Mrs. Stern.

Edith Stern is a tiny spitfire of a woman. In her 90s, she still has tremendous energy and vivacity. When she speaks about her childhood and her life during the Holocaust, she speaks passionately and with heart-breaking sadness.

Edith Stern was born Edith Johanna Pollack on May 18, 1921, in Vienna, Austria. Mrs. Stern's father fought in the army of the Austro-Hungarian Empire during World War I as a lieutenant. His parents migrated to Vienna from Bessarabia, located in southeastern Europe and then a part of the Russian empire. In Vienna, they opened a stationery store. Her mother's parents, the Meiblums, emigrated from Poland during World War I and had owned one of the first movie theaters in the Polish city of Lvov.

Mrs. Stern's parents were progressive, open-minded people who taught their daughters that all people should be treated with understanding and tolerance and to act decently to all human beings.

In 1925, Mrs. Stern's father lost his job at a bank in Vienna due to an economic downturn, but obtained a position as director of a chocolate factory located in the small village of Rhotada, in the part of Czechoslovakia known as Moravia.

It was in this new location that Mrs. Stern and her younger sister, Marietta grew up. Marietta's story precedes that of Mrs. Stern in this study guide. Mrs. Stern remembered her childhood as a very happy time in her life. Her parents were happily married and, due to her father's position, the family was well off. In fact, they lived in a villa with a large garden.

She belonged to a Zionist youth group, HaMaccabi HaTzair, which advocated for a Jewish state in British-ruled Palestine. With her youth group, she went on frequent trips to the countryside.

Mrs. Stern wryly remembers the family walks. Her parents loved to take walks, and she and her younger sister, Marietta, had to walk in front, standing straight, holding hands and breathing deeply.

"And I don't know about Marietta, but I was always bored to death with the walk," Mrs. Stern laughed, remembering the family constitutionals. "She was four years younger, and at that time, when I was 14, I was already a teenager. My childhood was the happiest time in my life," she said. "Czechoslovakia was my home, my country."

Mrs. Stern was a bright student who wanted to study medicine. In March 1939, three months before she graduated from gymnasium, the European college preparatory high school, the Nazis marched into Czechoslovakia.

### **Under Nazi rule**

Mrs. Stern was one of the last Jewish students to graduate from her gymnasium, since immediately after their takeover, the Nazis barred Jewish students from attending school. She graduated with honors, and still remembered the relief of one of her Czech teachers that the graduation went smoothly in spite of the German occupation.

Following the Nazi takeover, Mrs. Stern's father was stripped of his position, and the family was forced to move from the village where the factory was located to nearby Hodonin. By this time, her father had burned any books that could be considered subversive.

### **Separation from Mrs. Stern's sister, Marietta**

When Mrs. Stern was 18, her 13-year-old sister was sent to England on the Kindertransport, a rescue effort to get Jewish children out of continental Europe. Mrs. Stern recalled going to the railway station in Prague to put her sister on the train that would take her to safety. As the whole family cried, her father tried to hoist himself up to the railroad car to give a parting kiss to Marietta. "It just breaks my heart when I think about it," said Mrs. Stern. Her parents would never see their beloved younger daughter again.

Mrs. Stern lived in Prague where she studied within the Jewish community to become a kindergarten teacher. Since Jewish children could not attend school, they were secretly taught in small groups in peoples' homes. Mrs. Stern remained in Prague until 1942, when she returned to Hodonin. Deportations of Czech Jews had begun, and she wanted to be with her parents. In Hodonin, their Czech neighbors gave them food and provided other basic needs. Her parents also placed some of their most precious possessions with their non-Jewish neighbors for safekeeping, and after the war, these neighbors returned everything.

"They really behaved wonderfully to my parents and to me," Mrs. Stern recalled.

Mr. and Mrs. Pollack had registered for entrance visas to the United States, but were turned down because they were unable to obtain the necessary documents. Worried about their older daughter's safety, they wrote to Marietta's foster family in England, asking them for help to get Edith out of Czechoslovakia. Unfortunately, they could be of no further assistance, and in February 1942, Edith and her parents were deported to Theresienstadt. The cherished letters that they had received from Marietta in England now ceased.

## **Incarceration in Theresienstadt**

In Theresienstadt, Mrs. Stern met her future husband, Otto Rebenwurz. His brother was head of surgery in the makeshift ghetto hospital and because of him Mrs. Stern was able to train as a nurse, becoming one of the youngest nurses in the hospital.

As a nurse, Mrs. Stern cared for many of those who fell sick because of the horrific conditions they had to endure in the ghetto; terrible overcrowding, lack of food, and disease. She herself developed meningitis. "I was deadly sick, and my fiancé was called into a transport, and he was supposed to go east. And my father knew that if he leaves I will die," she said. Her father arranged for the two of them to get married immediately. With her head swathed in bandages and her face paralyzed on one side, Mrs. Stern was married in Theresienstadt in a Jewish ceremony. "I must have been a beautiful bride," she joked. The nurses and doctors crowded around them, weeping. She, however, laughed with happiness.

Soon, she was selected for forced labor in the extensive agricultural plot just outside the ghetto. She and other Jewish agricultural workers risked severe punishment to smuggle vegetables into the ghetto.

Mrs. Stern was in Theresienstadt during the Red Cross visit to the ghetto on June 23, 1944, and during the propaganda film the Nazis made in an attempt to deceive the outside world about the living conditions in Theresienstadt.

On October 10, 1944, Mrs. Stern and her mother were deported to Auschwitz. Her husband and her father had been sent to a forced labor camp several weeks earlier. The women were told merely that they were going to join their husbands and fathers in a labor camp in Germany. They had no idea that Auschwitz was their destination.

"We really thought we were going to Germany and that we were going to be reunited. We were singing, we were so happy. Then all of a sudden we noticed we really weren't going to Germany, we were going east."

## **Incarceration in Auschwitz**

Mrs. Stern and her mother arrived in Auschwitz-Birkenau on October 10, 1944. Her mother had suffered a nervous breakdown on the train. And as they disembarked the horrendous conditions of the sealed train, Mrs. Stern recounted "And those kapos, they started screaming at us, 'Leave everything! Leave everything! Nothing, nothing!'"

Older people and women with small children were told to go to the right. Mrs. Stern tried to stay with her mother, but the notorious Dr. Josef Mengele separated them and sent her mother to the right to be placed on a truck with others destined for the gas chambers. She was 55 when she perished.

Mrs. Stern was selected for forced labor and underwent the camp registration process. She had to completely disrobe and every personal item she brought with her was immediately

confiscated. Her hair was completely shaved and after a cold shower she was given one piece of clothing to wear to face the autumn cold, along with a pair of wooden clogs.

Aided by her youth—she was 23 years old—her fierce determination to live and the hope of being reunited with her husband, Mrs. Stern survived several selections in Auschwitz. She recounted that:

“We all hoped our husbands would survive and that we would be together again. I think we knew more or less that we wouldn’t see our parents anymore. We saw the chimneys, and we knew what was going on.”

In fact, of the eleven members of her and her husband’s immediate families, Mrs. Stern and her sister, Marietta, were the only survivors.

Mrs. Stern’s survival was aided as well by the deep and lasting friendship she developed with a fellow Czech Jewish prisoner, also named Edith. “She became known as the beautiful Edith, and I became known as the short Edith because we were always together,” said Mrs. Stern.

Mrs. Stern worked in a munitions factory that was part of the Auschwitz complex. Like other prisoners, she had to work long hours and stand at attention for endless roll calls both before and after work, often in bitter cold. She slept in a barracks on an overcrowded bunk and subsisted on watery soup, moldy bread and ersatz coffee. Once a forced labor prisoner threw Mrs. Stern a piece of bread. She picked it up, but was immediately smacked in the mouth by an SS female guard, knocking out one of her teeth.

Mrs. Stern knew her mother had been killed, and after the war she learned of the murder of her husband and also of her father, who had been deported to a forced labor camp in Bavaria. Just weeks before the end of the war, the inmates were ordered on a death march. Her father was unable to walk and was shot with all the others who remained in the camp.

Mrs. Stern lost whatever religious faith she had. Although she knew of survivors who became more religious after the war, believing that God had spared them, she attributed her own survival to fate:

“I survived, but what about my parents? What about my husband? What about those six million who didn’t survive? Why was I so important to God?”

### **Incarceration in a forced labor camp**

In December 1944, Mrs. Stern was sent to a forced labor camp. “Managers from factories in Germany came to Auschwitz looking for laborers, and I again got lucky and got selected,” Mrs. Stern said. She was part of a transport of 500 women who were sent to a factory run by the Siemens Company. Ironically, the camp was located in Kudova-Sachish, Germany, a pre-war spa town where Mrs. Stern and her family had vacationed.

Siemens was a large German industrial firm and operated a number of factories aiding the German war effort. In the Siemens forced labor camp, guarded by SS women, Mrs. Stern worked long hours standing in a bomb assembly plant. Her rations were meager and she slept on a wooden shelf in a barracks with several other women, all of them sharing one thin blanket. They were all infested with lice. Mrs. Stern's friend, Edith, went with her to the forced labor camp.

While she was in Theresienstadt, Mrs. Stern had become pregnant, and by early 1945, her pregnancy had begun to show. At this time, Dr. Mengele was scouring the camps looking for pregnant Jewish women in order to send them to the Gross-Rosen concentration camp to be murdered. Due to the Russian winter offensive they never reached the camp.

They ended up in another labor camp named Grossschoenau in eastern Germany, where they joined other pregnant Jewish women who had also been destined for execution at Gross-Rosen. "Some of the pregnant women gave birth there, and some of the SS women were touched, babies are babies you know," she recalled. The SS women brought the babies food and gave the mothers rags to wear. Mrs. Stern was liberated from Grossschoenau by the soldiers of the Soviet Red Army.

### **Liberation and its immediate aftermath**

After liberation, Mrs. Stern returned to Prague with the assistance of some other survivors. She was nine months pregnant and still dressed in the striped blue uniform of the camp. When she went into labor, the Czech hospital staff suspected that a German Nazi was the father and at first refused to help her. Three days after giving birth, the baby died. She named him Peter.

Mrs. Stern returned to Hodonin. "When our neighbors found out that I had returned, they came to me. This one said, 'Your mother left her china with me. Please take it.' Another said, 'Here is your carpet' and another 'Here is your clothing.'"

Her mother had wanted to tell her where their possessions were while they were in Theresienstadt, but Mrs. Stern didn't want to hear about it. "I told my mother that we would come back one day and everything would be fine," said Mrs. Stern. "The neighbors were kind and honest and did the right thing by returning them."

In Czechoslovakia, she found her sister, Marietta, who had come as a nurse to Theresienstadt after liberation. In Prague, she also met her second husband, and soon after their marriage, their daughter Magda was born. Not long thereafter, Mrs. Stern and her husband separated.

### **Life in communist Czechoslovakia**

Mrs. Stern and Marietta remained in Prague after the war. When the communists took over Czechoslovakia in February, 1948, Marietta and husband decided to leave, but they were unable to persuade Mrs. Stern to come with them. Fearing that they would end up in a Displaced Persons camp for refugees, Mrs. Stern told them: "I just came back from one

concentration camp. I'm not going to a second one." Mrs. Stern also was still attached to Czechoslovakia and considered it her home.

Mrs. Stern remained in Czechoslovakia, living under communist rule. Partly due to her linguistic abilities, she was able to find a reasonably good job in a state department for cultural affairs and was able to support her daughter.

In 1963, she received a letter from Marietta, by now in the United States, inviting her to come and visit. The communist authorities gave her a passport, but stipulated that she had to leave her daughter, then age 14, behind as surety to secure her return to Czechoslovakia. In the U.S. she remembered how amazed she was at the material abundance she saw here, compared to communist Czechoslovakia and by the fact that every home she visited had hot and cold running water. Her divorced husband took care of Magda while she visited with her sister in America. Once she returned to Czechoslovakia, she fought for permission from the authorities to leave with Magda and rejoin her sister in the U.S.

### **Life in the United States**

Permission was finally granted and on August 11, 1964, Mrs. Stern and her daughter came to the United States. A year later, she heard of an opening for a position as administrator of the Selfhelp Home on the South Side of Chicago. She applied and was hired. It was her fluent German—the first language of so many of the elderly refugees and survivors in the home at the time—that won her the job as administrator, she said.

At Selfhelp, Mrs. Stern was not only the administrator, but also the interpreter, because the staff spoke English and the residents spoke German. She had only one day off, Saturday, and even then she had to let them know where she was. "But it was one of the happiest times of my life," she said.

Mrs. Stern spoke of the tremendous meaning she found in caring for elderly survivors and émigrés, as she wished she could have cared for her own parents who perished in Auschwitz. Mrs. Stern likes to recount that:

"You always get back what you give."

Through part time college study she managed to become certified as a licensed nursing home administrator and remained with Selfhelp for some eight years. She resigned after Selfhelp moved to the North Side of Chicago in 1974. Soon thereafter she secured employment in the medical records department at a hospital on Chicago's North Side, where she remained employed for the next twenty-three years. She took the surname Stern as a result of her marriage to Jay Stern, who passed away shortly after they were wed.

In 1999, Mrs. Stern entered Selfhelp as a resident to be with her sister, Marietta, who lived there. She has kept busy managing the gift shop, assisting with cultural presentations, welcoming new residents and visiting those who were hospitalized. And now that she herself is old, one of her great comforts is to live with others who share a similar past.

"As I got older," said Edith Stern, "Selfhelp is my reason to be alive."

\*The quotations in this account are taken from an interview with Edith Stern conducted by Ethan Bensinger on May 21, 2007 and from an interview conducted with Marietta Ryba by Ethan Bensinger on November 15, 2007.

## **Sought Learning Objectives**

Students will:

- \* Recognize the losses suffered by Mrs. Stern and her sister, Marietta, during the Holocaust.
- \* Become aware of the impact of Nazi anti-Semitic policies, deception and dehumanization of their victims.
- \* Understand the suffering Mrs. Stern experienced as a prisoner in Theresienstadt, Auschwitz and in a forced labor camp during the Holocaust.
- \* Be inspired by the fortitude and courage of Mrs. Stern during the Holocaust.
- \* Make inferences and draw conclusions about the role played by choice and chance regarding Mrs. Stern's experiences during the Holocaust.
- \* Explore various forms of Jewish resistance during the Holocaust.
- \* Examine the moral and ethical dilemmas faced by Jews during the Holocaust and develop a personal viewpoint about them.
- \* Appreciate the opportunities the United States offered to survivors in the postwar world to rebuild their lives.
- \* Analyze the experiences of Edith Stern and Hannah Messinger during the Holocaust and compare and contrast them.

## **Key Questions**

1. What factors helped to account for Mrs. Stern's happy childhood and adolescence?
2. Why does the departure of Mrs. Stern's sister, Marietta, stand out so clearly in her memory?
3. What were Mrs. Stern's key memories of her experiences in Theresienstadt?
4. What were Mrs. Stern's key memories of her experiences in Auschwitz and in the forced labor camp?
5. What factors helped account for Mrs. Stern's survival during the Holocaust?
6. Why did the wartime experiences of Edith Stern and her sister differ so greatly?
7. What were the losses experienced by the sisters during the Holocaust?
8. What does Mrs. Stern's story reveal about her personality and character?
9. What role has the Selfhelp Home played in Mrs. Stern's life?
10. How can the Holocaust experiences of Edith Stern and Hannah Messinger be compared and contrasted? In which respects were they similar and in which respects were they different? In your analysis, remember to pay attention to the fact that both came from loving families, that both became pregnant during the Holocaust, that both experienced significant losses, and that both demonstrated the resilience and determination to begin life anew after enduring one of the most devastating and catastrophic events of the twentieth century.

## Learning Activities

1. On page 63 of the work by Ruth Thomson, *Terezin: Voices from the Holocaust* (Sommerville Mass: Candlewick Press, 2011), there is a detailed timeline relating to the ghetto. Identify the historical events on the timeline witnessed by Edith Stern and her family.
2. The following is a quotation from the article on Auschwitz in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Second Edition, Volume 2 (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing, 2007), p. 672:

Auschwitz had become the most lethal death camp of all by the end of the war... Of the 1.1 million Jews deported to Auschwitz, some 100,000 Jews left the camp alive, either in 1944 as transit Jews, or in the death march of 1945. Many of these survivors died or were shot on the long way to the West, or during their imprisonment in spring 1945 in concentration camps like Buchenwald and Bergen-Belsen. Yet tens of thousands saw liberation and testified to their ordeal after the war.

One of those dwindling number of Auschwitz survivors is Edith Stern. She survived Theresienstadt, Auschwitz, and a forced labor camp and went on to bear witness and to rebuild her life. Yet, like all survivors she lives with loss. What are the losses she has had to endure throughout her long life?

3. After she recovered from a near fatal meningitis attack in Theresienstadt, Edith Stern did not return to work in the ghetto hospital, but was assigned to agricultural work outside the ghetto walls where there were extensive vegetable gardens. When returning from work, she and others were able to smuggle extra food into the ghetto to alleviate the starvation of the prisoners. This was a very risky undertaking because anyone caught would face severe punishment.

There were also various kinds of moral and spiritual resistance in Theresienstadt, for instance, the musical and cultural events, which helped to boost the morale of the prisoners. Another type of resistance came in the form of art.

In Theresienstadt, there was a group of professional Jewish artists who made architectural drawings, illustrated official reports and engaged in various artistic endeavors demanded by their captors. However, in their free time, these artists made secret drawings, which depicted the true nature of the ghetto and the suffering and misery of its inmates.

In the summer of 1944, the Germans arrested four artists, Bedrich Fritta, Ferdinand Bloch, Otto Ungar and Leo Haas, who had made clandestine drawings of Theresienstadt. All of the artists along with their families were sent to the ghetto prison in the small fortress of Theresienstadt. Bedrich Fritta was deported to Auschwitz where he died of dysentery. Ferdinand Bloch was beaten to death immediately. SS guards crushed Otto Ungar's right hand with their boots and clubs. Two of his fingers had to be amputated. He died in

Buchenwald from typhus shortly after its liberation. Only Leo Haas and his wife survived. After the war, they adopted Fritta's son Tommy and raised him as their own.

A number of works by the artists of Theresienstadt are found in the book by Gerald Green, *The Artists of Theresienstadt* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1972). They are also scattered throughout a book by Ruth Thomson, *Terezin: Voices from the Holocaust*.

Make copies of the works by the artists of Theresienstadt and distribute them to students in the class. Ask them:

- A. What do they see in the each work?
- B. What does the work convey about life in Theresienstadt?
- C. What emotions does the work evoke?
- D. What techniques are used by the artist in order to evoke these emotions in the onlooker?
- E. Which work or works by the artists of Theresienstadt do they find most moving and why?

Friedl Dicker-Brandeis was an Austrian-born artist, textile designer and teacher, who was deported to Theresienstadt in December 1942, along with her husband. In Theresienstadt she taught more than 600 children to sew, make puppets, draw and paint. Especially through drawing and painting, Mrs. Dicker-Brandeis taught the children to express their feelings, a form of art therapy for them. She died in Auschwitz on October 9, 1944. But before being deported from Theresienstadt, she hid two suitcases containing about 4,500 examples of the children's work. They were recovered after the war, and the creative art works of the children she taught is now in Prague's Jewish Museum.

The story of Mrs. Dicker-Brandeis is told in a book for younger children (grades 4 to 8) *Fireflies in the Dark: The Story of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis and the Children of Terezin* (New York: Holiday Books, 2000).

4. Mrs. Stern recalled seeing several performances of the children's opera, "Brundibar," created by a Jewish composer, in Theresienstadt. There were 55 performances of this opera there, including one organized for the Red Cross visit and one for the Nazi propaganda film made to deceive the outside world about Theresienstadt. In the opera, a sister and brother have to buy milk for their sick mother. By singing, the children and their animal friends earn a bit of money for the milk, but Brundibar, an organ grinder, (who represented Hitler) steals what they have earned. The children chase Brundibar to recover the money and retrieve it. After their final song of victory, there would be great applause from the audience because good had triumphed over evil.

Pose the following questions to students:

- A. Why was this children's opera so popular in the ghetto?
- B. Why, given its story, message and the approval with which it was received, did the Nazis allow it to be performed so many times in Theresienstadt?

5. In his classic work, *Survival in Auschwitz* (New York: Collier Books, 1958), Primo Levi, a notable Auschwitz survivor, wrote:

Just as our hunger is not the feeling of missing a meal, so our way of being cold has need of a new word. We say 'hunger,' we say 'tiredness,' 'fear,' 'pain,' we say 'winter' and they are different things. They are free words, created and used by free people who lived in comfort and suffering in their homes. If the camps had lasted longer, a new, harsh language would have been born; and only this language could express what it means to toil the whole day in the wind, with temperature below freezing, wearing only a shirt, underpants, cloth jacket and trousers, and in one's body nothing but weakness, hunger and knowledge of the end drawing near. (Pgs. 112-13).

Pose the question to students: How would this passage from Levi relate to Mrs. Stern's experiences in Auschwitz?

6. Following her deportation from Auschwitz, Mrs. Stern worked in a forced labor camp factory associated with the Siemens firm, a large German electronics and electrical engineering corporation. Siemens supplied all of the electrical power to Auschwitz and operated factories in a number of forced labor camps where slave laborers worked in harsh conditions suffering from malnutrition, abuse and disease. Death was common.

Siemens was just one of a number of German big businesses whose behavior during the Holocaust was governed by greed and opportunism and a total disregard for human decency.

Accounts of the behavior of large German corporations can be found in the Anti-Defamation League's journal "Dimensions":

[http://archive.adl.org/braun/dimensions\\_toc.asp](http://archive.adl.org/braun/dimensions_toc.asp)

Click on "Business and the Holocaust."

There are four creative classroom exercises found in this issue that can be used by students in dealing with questions raised in the articles. They are well worth exploring for classroom use.

### **Enrichment Activities Focusing on Theresienstadt**

1. One of the most renowned prisoners in Theresienstadt was Rabbi Leo Baeck, a leading Berlin rabbi, a brilliant thinker and one of the foremost Jewish theologians of his time. After the Nazis came to power, he became head of the Reichsvertretung, the organization representing the Jewish community to Nazi governmental authorities.

In this capacity, Rabbi Baeck played a leading role in arranging for the emigration of German Jews, promoting efforts to educate German Jewry and providing for German-Jewish social welfare.

Rabbi Baeck could have left Germany along with his immediate family who sought refuge in England, but he chose to remain with his people. On January 27, 1943, at the age of 69, he was deported to Theresienstadt. Three of his sisters had already died in the camp and a fourth died soon after his arrival. At first, he was given the task of hauling garbage carts, but

in the evenings, he organized educational programs for the Jewish prisoners and gave a series of lectures, which helped raise spirits and boost morale.

Eventually, in the fall of 1944, he became one of the ghetto's Council of Elders, which had internal authority over the Jews in the camp. He then became Chief Elder. During the last months of the ghetto, Rabbi Baeck worked tirelessly to preserve the physical and moral well being of Theresienstadt's Jewish community.

Rabbi Baeck knew that deportation to "the East" from Theresienstadt meant generally deportation to Auschwitz, where most Jews were murdered in the gas chambers. Yet, he chose not to tell the deportees of their destination. Mrs. Stern, for instance, did not suspect that those deported "to the East," including the members of her own family, were in fact going to their deaths. After the war, Rabbi Baeck wrote: "Living in the expectation of death by gassing would only be the harder, and death was not certain for all. There was selection for slave labor; perhaps not all transports went to Auschwitz. So came my grave decision to tell no one." He continued: "There were rumors, but at least no one knew for certain." Quotation found in, Leonard Baker, *Days of Sorrow and Pain: Leo Baeck and the Berlin Jews* (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1972), p. 311.

After the war, Paul Tillich, a German-born Protestant theologian, was critical of Rabbi Baeck for his refusal to confirm the rumors: "I would criticize Baeck for not giving the last iota of information he possessed. If he did know that Auschwitz meant certain death, he should have spoken out. The full existential truth should always be made available just as an incurable patient should always be told the whole truth." (Baker, p. 311).

Organize a class debate focusing on the question of whether or not Rabbi Baeck should have told the deportees what he strongly suspected Auschwitz meant for most of them. Was it right for Rabbi Baeck to try and keep hope and morale alive by not informing the deportees of almost certain death in Auschwitz or was he wrong for withholding the truth?

2. A class debate might also be organized around the following issue. In the closing days of Theresienstadt in May 1945, when most of the Germans had fled and the Russians had not yet arrived, one prominent German remained. This was Karl Rahm, commandant of the ghetto from February 1944 to May 1945. Rahm had presided over a number of transports to Auschwitz and other extermination centers. He was one of the chief persecutors of those imprisoned in Theresienstadt. Even after the SS guards had left Theresienstadt, Rahm rode from gate to gate on his bicycle without a weapon, locking each one.

Leo Baeck and a friend, Willi Groag, also watched as Rahm pedaled by. Groag remembered that Baeck praised the restraint of the Jewish prisoners in not attacking Rahm and said that they were acting in a civilized manner by not seeking vengeance which should rightfully come from God." (Baker, p. 318).

Do agree or disagree with Rabbi Baeck's attitude that Rahm should not have been attacked because vengeance should come from God or should the Jews of Theresienstadt have acted differently towards him?

3. The following creative works reflect the spirit and thinking that helped Mrs. Stern survive the Holocaust. The first is from the magazine, *Vedem*, (In the Lead), secretly published by a group of 13 to 15 year-old boys in the ghetto. It can be found in a book by Marie Rut Krizkova, Kurt Jiri Kotouc and Zdenek Ornest, *We are Children Just the Same: Vedem, The Secret Magazine by the Boys of Terezin*, Third Edition, trans. R. Elizabeth Novak (Prague: Aventinum Nakladatelstvi, 1999), p. 84.

Following are the last two stanzas of a poem in *Vedem* by Hanus Hachenburg who perished in the Holocaust:

“...Today, death holds his filthy hand  
Over the world and over my soul  
But the cup, fashioned of skulls,

With brains shriveled and dried  
Will overflow, and all  
The bones and muscles call:  
“Life!, life!, life!”

Time presses forward,  
The spiral turns,

People are born and die,  
History happens and seems to happen,  
At the end of the chain of time  
Freed from fetters, and money,  
At the end of its wild spiral  
Love twists into eternity.”

The second creative work is a poem written by 12-year-old Eva Pickova during a typhoid epidemic in Theresienstadt in 1943. Eva was murdered in Auschwitz on December 18 of that year.

The poem is found in the book by Jana Renee Friesova, *Fortress of My Youth: Memoir of a Terezin Survivor*, translated by Elinor Morrisby and Ladislav Rosendorf (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), p. 121.

“Today, the ghetto knows a different fear.  
Close in its grip, Death wields an icy scythe.  
An evil sickness spreads terror in its wake,  
The victims of its shadows weep and writhe.

Today a father’s heartbeat tells his fright  
And mothers bow their heads into their hands.  
Now children choke and die with typhoid here  
A bitter toll is taken from their ranks.

My heart still beats inside my breast  
While friends depart for other worlds.  
Perhaps it's better-who can say?-  
Than watching this to die today

No, no, my God, we want to live,  
Not watch our numbers melt away!  
We want to have a better world,  
We want to work-we must not die!"

Jana Renee Friesova, survived the Holocaust. In her memoir, *Fortress Of My Youth*, (Hobart: Teledor Publishing, 1996) p.87, she revealed that the middle stanzas of Rudyard Kipling's poem, "If" were fastened to a beam in her barracks.

"If you can dream-and not make dreams your master;  
If you can think-and not make thoughts your aim:  
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster  
And treat those two impostors just the same;  
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken  
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,  
Or watch the things you gave your life to broken,

And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools.

.....

If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew  
To serve your turn long after they are gone,  
And so hold on when there is nothing in you  
Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'"

Share these poems with your students and ask:

1. What are the common themes you see in them?
2. Do you share a belief in the sentiments they express?
3. How did these sentiments help Mrs. Stern survive?
4. How can these sentiments help you to overcome life's difficulties and challenges?

### **Enrichment Activities Focusing on Auschwitz**

1. Primo Levi wrote about the muselman, a derogatory term for Auschwitz prisoners who were unable to adapt to the camp. Mrs. Stern encountered them on a number of occasions during her incarceration in Auschwitz. Levi described them in *Survival in Auschwitz* in this way:

On their entry into the camp, through basic incapacity, or by misfortune, or through some banal incident, they are overcome before they can adapt themselves; they are beaten by time, they do not begin to learn German, to disentangle the infernal knot of laws and prohibitions until their body is already in decay, and nothing can save them

from the selections or death by exhaustion. Their life is short, but their numbers are endless; they, the muselman, the drowned...If I could enclose all the evil of our time in one image, I would choose this image which is familiar to me: an emaciated man, with head drooped and shoulders curved, on whose face in whose eyes not a trace of thought is to be seen. (p. 82).

Discuss: What do you believe were the reasons that prevented Mrs. Stern from becoming a "Muselmann" in Auschwitz?

2. The most significant act of physical resistance in Auschwitz occurred on October 7, 1944, just three days before the arrival of Mrs. Stern and her mother. This was the revolt of the Sonderkommando, inmates forced by the SS to work in the horrible death installations of the camp—the crematoria and the gas chambers. The goal of their revolt was to destroy the crematoria and gas chambers and to avenge the innocents who had been murdered in them. The immediate reason for the revolt was that the Sonderkommando had heard that the Nazis would soon kill them.

Several members of the Auschwitz Sonderkommando wrote eyewitness accounts of what they saw. They buried these manuscripts in the ground surrounding the crematoria. These accounts were discovered after the war and later published by Ber Mark in *The Scrolls of Auschwitz* (Tel Aviv: Oved Publishers, 1985).

The prisoners from the Sonderkommando rose in revolt, attacking the SS with makeshift weapons and using gunpowder smuggled by Jewish women who worked in the Union Metallwerke factory in Auschwitz to blow up crematorium IV. They killed three SS men and wounded twelve others. A number managed to escape from the camp but all the escapees were captured. A total of 451 Sonderkommando prisoners were killed either during the battle or, in retaliation, shortly afterwards. The others, continued to function until November, 1944.

Pose the following question to students: Was the revolt of the Auschwitz Sonderkommando worth the price? Did what it achieved outweigh what it had cost or visa versa?

Students should bear in mind that the Sonderkommando revolt was crushed and all those who took part in it were murdered, that not one single Sonderkommando prisoner successfully escaped, and that the gas chambers, apart from the one that was blown up, continued to function for several weeks after the rebellion.

3. During the time that Mrs. Stern was in Auschwitz, the Allies had the capability to bomb the gas chambers but chose not to do so. The controversy over whether or not the Allies should have bombed Auschwitz and the railroad tracks leading to it is ongoing. It is also part of the larger question of why the Allies did not do more to help the Jews during the Holocaust. Do an Internet search using the keywords: "Auschwitz, bombing controversy" and download the following: 1. An article from the Jewish Virtual Library based on information from the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Second Edition. 2. An article from Yad Vashem, "The Auschwitz Bombing Controversy in Context." This has a YouTube component. 3. Why Wasn't Auschwitz Bombed?" from *Britannica*. 4. "USA rejects bombing of Auschwitz" from WWII history.com.

Based on the information contained in these articles, stage a class debate around this question.

Remind students that in addition to the practical considerations involved in the bombing, there are also moral considerations and moral consequences that should be taken into account.

4. Hannah Arendt, the noted political philosopher, wrote in a letter to her colleague Karl Jaspers in 1946 about the Nazis: "For these crimes, there is no adequate punishment... This kind of guilt in contrast to all criminal guilt, goes beyond and destroys every system of law and justice... And as non-human this guilt is, so is the innocence of the victims. As innocent as the victims were in front of the gas chambers, no human being can ever be... This kind of guilt... is beyond all crime." (cited in *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, Vol. I ed. Yisrael Gutman (New York: Macmillan, 1990), p. 118.

Discuss with students the meaning of Arendt's words about the guilt of the Nazis and the innocence of the victims and whether or not they agree with her.

5. Primo Levi began the original Italian version of his work, *Survival in Auschwitz*, with the following poem based on a Jewish prayer found in the biblical book of Deuteronomy 6:4-9.

"You who live safe  
In your warm houses,  
You who find, returning in the evening,  
Hot food and friendly faces:  
Consider if this is a man  
Who works in the mud  
Who does not know peace  
Who fights for a scrap of bread  
Who dies because of a yes or no.  
Consider if this is a woman,  
Without hair and without name  
With no more strength to remember,  
Her eyes empty and her womb cold  
Like a frog in winter.  
Meditate that this came about:

I commend these words to you.  
Carve them in your hearts  
At home and in the street,  
Going to bed, rising;  
Repeat them to your children,  
Or may your house fall apart,  
May illness impede you,  
May your children turn their faces from you."

Questions:

1. What is Primo Levi asking us to do in this poem?
2. Why is it that he asks this of us?
3. Do you think it is possible to do what Levi is asking?
4. If we were to do what Levi is asking, how would we act towards others?

6. Just recently, researchers from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., discovered that the number of ghettos and camps in Nazi-occupied Europe is four times greater than originally thought. The researchers discovered 42,500 camps, ghettos and places of confinement, a staggering number of sites where slavery, torture and death took place. The researchers found some 30,000 forced labor camps, 1,150 Jewish ghettos, 980 concentration camps, 1,000 Prisoner of War camps, 500 brothels, as well as transit camps, extermination centers and euthanasia program facilities, where up to 250,000 disabled people were murdered.

Questions:

- A. What do these revelations tell us about the number of Germans and their collaborators who took part in the horrific acts committed under Nazi rule?
- B. What do these revelations tell us about the number of German civilians who knew about the atrocities being perpetrated by the Nazi regime?
- C. Why is it important to think of the millions who were victimized in these places—"one by one by one"—as individual human beings and not as statistics, each with his or her own personality and own story?
- D. What does the number of these Nazi camps and ghettos tell us about the human capacity to inflict pain and suffering on other human beings?

7. Laurence Rees concluded his work, *Auschwitz: A New History* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005), as follows:

We must judge behavior by the context of the times and judged by the context of mid-20th century sophisticated European culture, Auschwitz and the Nazis' 'Final Solution' represent the lowest act in all history. Through their crime, the Nazis brought into the world an awareness of what educated, technologically advanced human beings can do—as long as they possess a cold heart. Once allowed into the world, knowledge of what they did must not be unlearned. It lies there—ugly, inert, waiting to be discovered by each new generation. A warning for us and for those who come after. (299).

Discuss: do students agree with Rees that Auschwitz and the Holocaust mark the lowest point in human history? What are the lessons that we should learn from them?

## Edith Stern's Timeline

October 18, 1918-The independence of Czechoslovakia was proclaimed. The new state was formed from several parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which was defeated in World War I. Thomas Masaryk and Edvard Benes, the key leaders of the new state, were committed democrats who forged a stable parliamentary democracy that recognized the rights of all of its citizens. Czechoslovakia was also the most industrially advanced country in Eastern Europe. It contained Czechs and Slovaks but also Germans, Hungarians, Ruthenians and Jews. Thus, Edith Stern grew up in a democratic, pluralistic society. She and her family lived for a number of years in Hodonin, the birthplace of Thomas Masaryk.

September 28/29, 1938-Czechoslovakia was betrayed by Great Britain and France at the Munich Conference and was forced to give Hitler the Sudetenland, a key segment of the nation with a large German population but also with important industries and fortifications. Hitler promised that this is his last territorial demand in Europe.

March 15, 1939-Hitler broke his promise as German forces occupied the Czech lands of Bohemia and Moravia, which became the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, part of the Third Reich. The Protectorate contained 118,000 Jews including Mrs. Stern's family. Synagogues in Vsetin and Jihlava were burned on the first days of occupation. Jews were arrested and attacked in many localities. One day earlier, a separate Slovak state had been established under the rule of a Catholic priest, Father Josef Tiso. It became a satellite state of Nazi Germany. Hungary annexed portions of southern Slovakia. Poland annexed a portion of Czech Silesia.

June 1939-Adolf Eichmann arrived in Prague and established the Office for Jewish Emigration. It was given authority over the Protectorate's Jewish community and used the Prague Jewish leadership to transmit orders. Massive expropriation of Jewish property began, and Jews were denied civil rights and excluded from political and cultural life. Until October 1941, when emigration was banned, about 26,000 Czech Jews managed to leave.

June 1939-Marietta Pollack, Mrs. Stern's sister, departed from Prague, Czechoslovakia on a Kindertransport to England. They would not meet again for six years.

September 1939-With the outbreak of World War II, Czech Jews became subject to a reign of terror including incarceration in concentration camps, restrictions on freedom of movement and removal of Jewish children from schools. The Jewish community attempted to provide Jewish and general education as well as social and welfare services. Mrs. Stern's education ended with her graduation from gymnasium.

October 1939-First expulsion of Czech Jews took place. This one was to the Nisko settlement in the Lublin area of Poland.

April 27, 1940-Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS, decided to establish a concentration camp in Auschwitz located in the historical borderland between Germany and Poland. It became Nazi Germany's largest concentration and extermination camp and a metaphor for the Holocaust. Approximately one million Jewish men women and children were murdered there

as well as some 100,000 non Jews-the majority of whom were Poles. Auschwitz came to symbolize the dark side of modern industrial civilization. It was a death factory.

September 1, 1941-All Czech Jews were forced to wear a yellow badge, further isolating them from the general population.

October 1941-Construction of Auschwitz II or Auschwitz-Birkenau began. It served both as a labor camp and as the central location for the extermination of the Jews of Europe. They were murdered by means of Zyklon B pellets that turned into a lethal gas once in the air. Zyklon B had previously been tested on Russian prisoners of war in Auschwitz. Mass murder began in two "provisional" gas chambers. Between March and June 1943, four large sophisticated crematorium buildings were constructed in Auschwitz-Birkenau, each consisting of an undressing area, a gas chamber and crematorium ovens. New arrivals at Auschwitz-Birkenau underwent selections during which SS doctors decided who would be admitted to the camp as a forced laborer and who would die immediately in the gas chambers. The large majority of new arrivals were sent directly to their deaths.

October 10, 1941-A secret meeting chaired by Reich Protector Reinhardt Heydrich decided on the establishment of a ghetto in Theresienstadt about 90 miles north of Prague. The ghetto was to serve as a "model camp" where certain "privileged prisoners" would be sent and a transit camp from which Jews would be deported to extermination centers.

October 17, 1941-The SS and the police sent the first transport of Czech Jews from Prague to the Lodz ghetto. During October and November 1941, 6,000 Czech Jews were deported to the Lodz and Minsk ghettos where nearly all died.

January 20, 1942-Reinhard Heydrich, chief of the Reich Security Main Office and Reich Protector of Bohemia and Moravia, announced the existence and purpose of Theresienstadt to the key officials of the Nazi party, the German government and the SS, gathered at the Wannsee Conference in a suburb outside of Berlin. This infamous conference was convened to discuss and co-ordinate the Final Solution-the plan to murder European Jewry.

February 1942-Edith Stern and her parents were deported to Theresienstadt. There, she like other able-bodied deportees, was forced to work long hours. Theresienstadt inmates had to endure deplorable living conditions and scant rations and witness deaths of their fellow prisoners due to malnutrition, exhaustion and despair. In Theresienstadt, Mrs. Stern fell in love with and married Otto Rebenwurz. They and their families were among the 73,603 Czech Jews deported to the ghetto between November 24, 1941 and late 1944. Of these, 60,399 were deported to Auschwitz and other killing centers. Most of the rest died in Theresienstadt. Only 3,227 Czech deportees survived the war.

Before the deportations, Jewish community leaders in Prague managed to hide articles of religious and cultural significance relating to the heritage of the Jews of Bohemia and Moravia. Most of these articles were salvaged after the war.

May 27, 1942-Heydrich was severely wounded by the Czech underground. He died shortly thereafter. In reprisal, 1,000 Jews Czech Jews were deported on June 10, 1942 to Uszd,

Poland where they were forced to dig their own graves and were then executed. The Czech village of Lidice was also destroyed as part of Nazi revenge.

First half of 1943-By this time some 90 percent of all Jews of Bohemia and Moravia had been deported to Theresienstadt. Despite being banned, regular classes for children were held. The educational effort in the ghetto was an outstanding example of moral resistance. Of the some 15,000 Jewish children deported to Theresienstadt only a handful survived the war. Religious services and a variety of cultural activities for adults were also held in the ghetto.

July 23, 1944-Two representatives of the International Red Cross and one representative of the Danish Red Cross visited Theresienstadt. Mrs. Stern was there at the time. She was employed in agricultural work and at great risk, was able to smuggle food into the ghetto. Every aspect of ghetto life was falsified for the Red Cross visitors so that they saw nothing of the hunger, disease, exhaustion, fear and anxiety of the inhabitants. The subsequent International Red Cross report indicated that the Nazi deception worked.

September 27, 1944-The SS executed Paul Eppstein in Theresienstadt. He was the leader of Theresienstadt's German Jews and the co-chairperson of the Council of Jewish Elders in Theresienstadt.

October 10, 1944-Mrs. Stern and her mother were deported from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Her husband and her father and a number of other males had been sent to a forced labor camp several weeks earlier. The female deportees were told they were going to join their husbands, a typical Nazi deception. Upon arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Mr. Stern's mother was selected to be gassed, but Mrs. Stern was admitted to the camp. Like others incarcerated there, she worked twelve hours a day, lived on a starvation diet in inhumane overcrowded conditions with primitive and degrading sanitary facilities, no warm clothing and little sleep. The gas chambers and crematoria ovens functioned daily, and the smell of death was pervasive and overwhelming.

December 1944-Mrs. Stern was sent from Auschwitz to a forced labor camp in Kudova-Sachish Germany. There she worked in a munitions factory under harsh and demeaning conditions.

Early 1945-Mrs. Stern had become pregnant before leaving Theresienstadt and along with other pregnant women in forced labor camps was sent to the Gross-Rosen concentration camp to be murdered along with her unborn child. The Red army's winter offensive prevented transportation to Gross-Rosen concentration camps, and the pregnant women were incarcerated in the Grosschoenau forced labor camp in eastern Germany.

Spring 1945-Mrs. Stern was liberated by Soviet forces and returned to Prague to have her baby. Tragically, her son Peter died several days after his birth.

May 3, 1945-The Nazis turned Theresienstadt over to a representative of the International Red Cross. By this time between 13,500-15,000 concentration camp prisoners from

Buchenwald and Gross-Rosen had arrived in the ghetto swelling the population and creating a raging typhus epidemic.

May 5, 1945-Czechoslovakia was liberated by the Russians. It is estimated that some 78,000 Czech Jews perished in the Holocaust including a number of members of Mrs. Stern's and her husband's families.

May 9, 1945-Soviet troops entered Theresienstadt. Since its inception, approximately 141,184 Jews had been deported to Theresienstadt including Jews from Czechoslovakia, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary and Denmark. Some 33,456 died in the ghetto and 88,203 were sent to the East where they perished. A total of 16,832 Jewish prisoners were liberated in Theresienstadt when the Russians entered.

In the Czech lands as a whole, only about 14,000 Jews remained alive from the pre-war population of 118,000. Edith Stern was one of these survivors.

Summer 1945-Mrs. Stern was reunited with her sister Marietta in Theresienstadt, part of which had been turned into a hospital. Marietta returned to Czechoslovakia as a nurse with the Red Cross of Czechoslovakia after the war and was working in this hospital.

February 1948-In late February 1948, the communist party of Czechoslovakia seized power with the backing of the Soviet Union. This so-called "Czech coup" brought about forty years of communist dictatorship in the country. Mrs. Stern's sister Marietta and her husband, John Ryba, decided to leave Czechoslovakia rather than live under the communists, but Mrs. Stern decided to stay. She married, had a child named Magda, and divorced. She and her daughter remained in Czechoslovakia until August 11, 1964 when they came to this country to begin a new life.

### **Maps: Auschwitz**

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Click on Auschwitz

## JEWISH CHILDREN DURING THE HOLOCAUST

### Introduction

*“No one can invent a revenge for the murder of a child. It is the greatest of crimes.”*—Chaim Nachman Bialik (Israel’s national poet)

The Nazis killed tens of thousands of Roma and Sinti (Gypsy) children, hundreds of thousands of Polish and Russian children, as well as disabled German and Austrian children they considered to be unworthy of life.

But the most lethal and systematic Nazi genocidal efforts against children were directed against Jewish children. Between 1939 and 1945, more than 1.1 million Jewish children were killed by the Nazis and their collaborators.

The Nazis viewed the war against the Jews as a war for world domination, in which every single one of their Jewish adversaries would have to be utterly destroyed, including Jewish children. By killing children, the future of the Jewish people, the Nazis thought they would biologically cripple their hated adversaries. SS chief Heinrich Himmler rationalized the extermination of Jewish children as a defensive measure so that they would not become “the dangerous avengers of their parents.”

The Nazi assault on Jewish children began soon after Hitler's rise to power on January 30, 1933. German-Jewish children increasingly became targets of anti-Semitic taunts and humiliation by their schoolmates and at times their teachers. They were systematically excluded from German schools, from sports and social activities, and from public places. As Nazi restrictions grew stricter, many parents were unable to give their children a sense of safety and protection. Some children had to quit school and go to work to help out financially. For many German and Austrian children, the Kristallnacht attacks on November 9/10, 1938, put an end to all childhood innocence.

In Poland, once the war began and the country was swiftly conquered, the Nazis began to lock up Polish Jews in ghettos. Incarceration in the ghettos tore apart children’s lives. Subject to Nazi terror, violence and cruelty, children died of malnutrition, disease and exposure. Parents witnessed the death of their children, and the children of their parents. Older orphaned children had to care of their younger siblings. Some younger children were left on their own.

In the ghettos, the Germans made it a crime for Jews to have babies. Although there were some clandestine births, few Jewish babies survived the war. Many who did so were hidden by Righteous Gentiles.

In June of 1941, with the German invasion of the Soviet Union, mobile death squads, called the Einsatzgruppen began to murder Jews. Thousands of Jewish children were shot to death along with their entire families and buried into mass graves. When the Final Solution, the industrialized mass murder of European Jewry, went into full effect in the spring of 1942, Jewish children were sent to their deaths in extermination centers. Of the nearly 250,000

Jewish children deported to Auschwitz, only 6,000 to 7,000 teenagers capable of forced labor survived. Children, especially twins, were also used for medical experiments. Any mother who gave birth to a baby in Auschwitz was sent immediately with her newborn to the gas chambers.

Parents did try to hide their children from the murderers. In fact, most children who survived the Holocaust did so in hiding. However, the Nazis obsessively sought to ferret them out, aided by informers, collaborators and blackmailers. To hide a Jewish child in Poland could mean the death of an entire Polish family and at times an entire Polish village. Although many brave souls hid Jewish children, this collective punishment was an effective deterrent.

Nevertheless, despite the formidable forces arrayed against them, Jewish children struggled to survive. In Germany during the 1930s, they joined Jewish youth organizations and, when banned from German schools, were sent by their parents to Jewish schools. They learned to be wary, avoiding confrontations with their non-Jewish peers. If children were fortunate enough to flee to safety with their parents or to be included in Kindertransports, they learned how to adapt to new surroundings and take greater responsibility for themselves.

In the ghettos, despite the Nazi ban on education, thousands of school-aged children attended underground classes where they received academic as well as vocational training. Older children and teens participated in cultural and social events in ghettos and joined youth groups. Hundreds of courageous Jewish children smuggled food through the Warsaw ghetto wall at the risk of their lives in order to help feed the starving ghetto residents. Some Jewish teens were able to successfully escape from ghettos and join Jewish partisan groups in the forests of Eastern Europe. A few children were saved in Jewish family camps, such as that of the Bielski brothers, in the forests of Byelorussia.

Those Jewish children who survived in hiding found refuge in private homes, religious institutions such as Catholic convents, boarding schools and in hiding places devised by rescue networks including Zegota in Poland, the OSE in France and elements of the Dutch and Belgian undergrounds. Jewish parents often had to make the terribly painful decision of whether to keep their children with them or send them alone into hiding, a move that might provide them with better chances for survival or might mean death.

Sometimes, children hid with their parents, but more often they were separated from their families, as was the case with the orphaned Sonia Samson in Paula Tritsch's account. Sonia, like other Jewish children hidden in various institutions, had to assume a new identity, pretending to be Christian, and be ever vigilant lest she betray who she really was. Like all Jewish hidden children, she ran the daily risk of being betrayed. There were children who were hidden at such a young age that they forgot their real names and did not know they were Jewish.

In private homes, some children "hid in plain sight" and were able to go outside the home with false identity papers. Other hidden children were able to move about freely in their places of refuge. Others had to stay in small, cramped and often dark spaces for long periods of time. They coped with boredom, loneliness and fears about the fate of family

members from whom they were separated. Some had toys to play with or created active interior lives in order to transcend their surroundings.

Most children hidden by private individuals, usually strangers, were well treated, but there were cases of abuse. Hidden children without their parents often had to be moved several times by their rescuers for fear of discovery. Children hiding with their parents, as was the case with Mrs. Tritsch and her family, also often had to change hiding places, living on the run and in constant fear.

Hidden children owed their survival to their resilience, determination, their dreams of one day being reunited with their parents, the efforts of their rescuers and, in many cases, pure luck. Mrs. Tritsch and her family, for example, survived due to the help of strangers, but also fortunately survived many close calls.

There were children during the Holocaust living in hiding, in concentration camps and in ghettos who wrote diaries. These diaries bear witness to the physical, psychological and emotional hardships they had to endure, the coping mechanisms they developed to deal with the daily trials and the dangers they encountered. They also describe perceptions the children had of the people around them and the societies in which they found themselves. The most famous of these diaries is that of Anne Frank, a Dutch child who died in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, but there are other moving and insightful diaries as well. See: Laura Holiday, *Children in the Holocaust and World War II: Their Secret Diaries* (New York: Pocket Books, 1995).

Some children in Eastern Europe survived on their own going from village to village. They attempted to trade their labor for food and a temporary hiding place. These children lived in constant fear of discovery and had to be both cunning and lucky in order to survive. Their lives were in constant danger, as well as the lives of their hosts.

Though very few children in camps survived, about 900 children were liberated by American troops at Buchenwald. They survived due to the efforts of the strong and well-organized camp underground, which established a children's block where children were shielded from harsh labor and given enough food to sustain them.

A few children who had been subjects of medical experiments in Auschwitz were liberated by Soviet troops. Western Allied armies found about 4,000 Jewish children alive in other concentration camps and forced labor camps.

Liberation did not end the challenges that Jewish child survivors had to overcome. Many had lost parents, siblings and other family members. The traumas they endured were deeply scarring. It was sometimes painful to regain their true identities and renew bonds with relatives who had survived. After the war, Jewish organizations came to look for hidden children. Those who had been hidden as infants or toddlers were often reluctant to leave the only family they had ever truly known. Some foster families were in turn reluctant to part with children they had come to love, which resulted in legal custody battles with the real parents. On a few occasions, foster parents hid Jewish children a second time due to their refusal to give them up.

Liberated Jewish teenagers and children who returned to their home communities, especially in Eastern Europe, were often treated with hostility. Throughout Europe in the immediate postwar years, European governments did not concern themselves with these children. However, Jewish organizations sought to care for them. The British who controlled Palestine at the time refused to let substantial numbers of Jews into the country and did not make exceptions for children. Jews in Palestine, however, brought many in illegally, through operation Aliya Bet. The children were interned a second time, if they were caught by the British.

The message the liberated children heard wherever they went was to put the past behind them, to forget about their former lives, to not tell others their “atrocities stories” and to rebuild their lives. It was only many decades after liberation that child survivors, like their adult survivors, began to speak about their experiences.

Those children who died in the Holocaust were often buried in unmarked graves or were turned to ashes in crematoria. In many cases, none of their family members remained alive to perpetuate their memories.

The Holocaust robbed the children who did survive of their loved ones, of their homes, of their possessions, of their education, of their innocence and of their childhoods. But at least, unlike more than one million other Jewish children, they escaped, like Ariel and Sonia, in Mrs. Tritsch’s account with their lives.

## **Paula Tritsch’s Story**

### **Early years**

“I had a wonderful youth; sheltered and wonderful,” Paula Tritsch, who in 2013 was 102, began her story.

Mrs. Tritsch, was born in Memel, Germany, which is now part of Lithuania, on August 27, 1911. She fondly remembers her grandfather, Joseph Telschitz. He only had an elementary school education but, according to Mrs. Tritsch, he wrote three books of Hebrew poetry. Mrs. Tritsch still has a beautifully carved picture frame made by him.

Her father’s father “was such a pious man; everyone loved him, Jew and Christians.” Grandfather Gidansky made his living as a shochet, a ritual slaughterer. When Mrs. Tritsch and her brother visited him as children, they would snuggle in bed with him, and Mrs. Tritsch would sometimes braid her grandfather’s long beard.

Mrs. Tritsch especially remembered the Passover holidays, which she celebrated with her extended family. “We went to my (paternal) grandfather’s house, and it was wonderful. We were with my uncles, aunts and cousins.”

Her own home was a favorite gathering spot for the Jewish community in Memel. However, due to anti-Semitism, she did not have non-Jewish friends: “We felt a lot of anti-Semitism. People would say, ‘The Jews are here again taking our places.’ ”

Mrs. Tritsch did not like school and did not do well, she said. From an early age, she loved art and was especially interested in design. Her aunt and uncle in Brussels, Belgium, owned a clothing factory and invited her to come and learn clothing design there.

However, soon thereafter, Mrs. Tritsch returned to Memel to care for her mother who was ill, and went into business as an independent dressmaker. In 1934, she enrolled in a design school in Paris. There, she met Leon Slucki, a Jewish man from Vilna, then under Polish control, who was working as a chemist for the Paris gas company. They married in Paris in 1936 and two years later their only child, a son, was born. They named him Ariel.

Although Mrs. Tritsch liked Paris, she experienced anti-Semitism there. The French economy was severely impacted by the Great Depression and this, along with xenophobia and the growth of rightwing anti-Semitic factions made Jews, especially Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, unwelcome. Mrs. Tritsch recalled being referred to as “that foreigner.”

### **Annihilation of Mrs. Tritsch’s family**

In March 1939, Lithuania bowed to an ultimatum from Nazi Germany to return Memel and its surroundings to the Third Reich. Lithuania had gained its independence after World War I and had acquired Memel. Mrs. Tritsch’s family fled to the city of Kovno, the capital of Lithuania. Mrs. Tritsch later learned that her family was among the thousands of Jews in the city of Kovno who were murdered by the Nazis in the fall of 1941. “I still feel guilty that I was not able to go back and be with them. It still hurts me to this day,” she said.

### **In German occupied France, 1940/41**

World War II began with the German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939. In May 1940, the Germans struck west and rapidly advanced. Soon, Paris was threatened. Fearing Paris would be bombed in the fight over the capital, Mrs. Tritsch and her family fled south, together with thousands of others. She brought along her most treasured possession, her grandmother’s candlesticks, which she kept in a hatbox. Often traveling by bicycle, the family found lodging wherever they could, one time, in a horse stable, and for several terrifying weeks in a rat infested attic on a farm.

After only six weeks of fighting, France surrendered to the Nazis. An armistice was signed on June 22, 1940. Under its terms, the Germans occupied three-fifths of the country, including Paris, while the rest was designated as the Unoccupied Zone administered by a French collaborationist government based in Vichy. Mussolini’s fascist Italy, an ally of Nazi Germany, occupied a small area in the southeast of the country adjacent to Italy.

After the armistice was signed, Mrs. Tritsch and her family returned to Paris. But the family continually feared for their safety. "My son was blond and had blue eyes as a baby. He was very cute. Some German soldiers saw us with him, and one said, 'Oh, this is going to be a good German soldier, blue eyes and blond hair.' If they only knew he was Jewish," Mrs. Tritsch thought.

### **Flight and hiding in Vichy France, 1941-1944**

Mrs. Tritsch and her husband had secured Russian papers, but when Germany's war with the Soviet Union began on June 22, 1941, they were considered to be enemy aliens and began to be hunted by the Gestapo, the Nazi state police. The family found a smuggler who took them to the unoccupied zone of the country controlled by the Vichy government. However, they were forced to move continually fearing arrest by the French police. Fortunately, they always had access to some money, which they transported in a little crate full of linen.

We put the money in the crate in between the linens, and we shipped the crate to each new destination. We never had the crate with us as we traveled because it would have been risky to be caught traveling with money...and without money, we would have been lost. We were lucky.

One of the first places Mrs. Tritsch and her family stayed in Vichy France was in a rented room in a home for retired Catholic priests. One day while they were both out, the French police came for her husband. "When I came back, the Father Superior told me that the police had been there looking for him. But then he said: 'Don't be frightened, my child. You can stay here as long as you want and feel safe. And I don't want to know where your husband is.' " The fact was that Mrs. Tritsch's husband was in the nearby town of Montpellier.

After the police visit, Mrs. Tritsch no longer felt safe in the home for elderly priests, and she and her son joined her husband in Montpellier. At the time, the French organization Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants (Children's Aid Society) known by its initials, O.S.E., was caring for about 100 Jewish children near the city. Mrs. Tritsch went to visit one of the children, Sonia Samson, whose parents, acquaintances of Mrs. Tritsch, had been deported. "She was so happy to see me. And she was so hungry," Mrs. Tritsch said. "None of us had much to eat during the war. There was very little food."

Mrs. Tritsch took Sonia with her to Chambéry, a town of about 29,000 people in southeastern France. There, Mrs. Tritsch found Sonia a place in a boarding school, where the principal sheltered her until the end of the war. "The principal of the school was very good to us," Mrs. Tritsch said. "You see we ran into people who were good and who helped us."

Mrs. Tritsch and her family proceeded to rent a small second floor apartment in Chambéry above a café. Mrs. Tritsch and her husband wanted to keep as low a profile as possible and had taken a risk by not registering as Jews with the Vichy authorities. Thus, they found it

difficult to go outside lest they would be seen and reported to the Vichy police. Mrs. Tritsch went back to the boarding school principal for help. The principal sent them to a doctor who was sympathetic to the plight of Jews and who found them a place to stay in a castle. "You'll be the cook and your husband will be the gardener," Mrs. Tritsch remembered him saying.

So Mrs. Tritsch and her family found shelter in a castle on an estate owned by a French baron. There they lived with their son Ariel, as a cook and gardener for the baron, his wife and their seven children.

However, they lived under constant danger and threat. The Germans attacked nearby villages, killing the residents and burning the buildings. "And we saw the burning all over. We didn't feel safe anymore," she said. Soon they returned to Chambéry.

By then, Chambéry was in the Italian-occupied zone, and thousands of Jews fled there for safety. The Italians refused German demands to round up and deport the Jews in their zone, providing them with a refuge. However, in September 1943, Italian dictator Benito Mussolini was overthrown in a coup, and Italy switched sides to back the Allies. Following this development, the Germans took over the Italian zone on September 8, 1943 and began their hunt for Jews.

Mrs. Tritsch and her family were once again in grave danger. Aided by a kindly French woman who shielded the family, they were able to hide in Chambéry until the town was liberated by the American army in August 1944.

"It was the nicest day I can ever remember, The American soldiers came in big trucks to the town square, and they gave us chewing gum, and for my son, chocolate."

After liberation, Mrs. Tritsch, her husband and son returned to Paris. They were not able to get their apartment back but were able to retrieve their possessions including the carved picture frame made by her beloved grandfather.

## **New life in Chicago**

With the help of relatives on her mother's side, who lived in the United States, Mrs. Tritsch was able to obtain a visa for herself and her son to come to Chicago. She and her husband divorced, and he remained in France. She brought to America the carved picture frame and her grandmother's candlesticks that she managed to keep safe while in hiding throughout the war. Today, the candlesticks have found a place of honor in her son's home.

In Chicago, she obtained a job as a dressmaker, and in time got her own apartment on the North Side of the city. In 1956, she married Oscar Tritsch. It was a happy marriage that lasted twenty years until his death. Mrs. Tritsch has five grandchildren.

In 1997, she moved into the Selfhelp Home. In 2003, at the age of 92, Mrs. Tritsch began to paint. "I love to do things with my hands. I used to sculpt; that was my love," she said. "My hand is not steady any more at all. But I will do it as long as my eyes allow it." Today, Mrs.

Tritsch's art is in the collections of The Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center, The Simon Wiesenthal Center and the Desert Holocaust Museum in Palm Springs, Arizona.

The Holocaust continues to cast its shadow over her life. One of her sculptures depicts Jews being herded into a boxcar goaded by a soldier with a whip.

“I am still having dreams and sometimes nightmares. The past is still with me. I have a dream I’m running with my son after a train, and I can’t make it. We were running and running all the time.”

\*The quotations in Mrs. Tritsch’s story come from two interviews conducted with her by Ethan Bensinger in the Selfhelp Home on June 27, 2007 and on July 9, 2007.

## **Sought Learning Outcomes**

Students will:

- \* Become aware of the anti-Semitism manifested by both the German occupation regime and the Vichy collaborationist regime in France during World War II and the impact that this anti-Semitism had on Mrs. Tritsch and her family.
- \* Recognize that flight and hiding were forms of resistance during the Holocaust.
- \* Examine the behavior of the French population toward Jews during the Holocaust in order to understand that popular opinion can undergo rapid changes and that negative stereotypes are problematic.
- \* Draw inspiration from the altruism and courage of those French men and women who helped Mrs. Tritsch and her family.
- \* Become aware of the experiences of Jewish children in France during the Holocaust.
- \* Appreciate the resilience and fortitude displayed by Mrs. Tritsch during the Holocaust, as a single parent and Holocaust survivor while rebuilding her life in this country.

## **Key Questions**

1. Why did Mrs. Tritsch feel that she had a happy and sheltered childhood?
2. What were some of the most significant obstacles and challenges faced by Mrs. Tritsch and her family to survival during the Holocaust?
3. Why, despite these obstacles and challenges, were they able to survive?
4. What does Mrs. Tritsch’s story reveal about her personality and character?
5. What does Mrs. Tritsch’s story reveal about the fate of Jewish children in France during the Holocaust?
6. What role did Mrs. Tritsch’s artistic abilities play in her life?

## Learning Activities

1. Write a letter that Mrs. Tritsch might have written to her parents in Kovno, Lithuania about her life in France during the first years of the German occupation. Note that the collaborationist Vichy regime had issued its infamous anti-Semitic “Statut des Juifs” (October 3, 1940) and other anti-Semitic measures, which were enforced throughout the country, including Paris where Mrs. Tritsch and her family were living at the time. Her family in Kovno was living under the rule of the Soviet Union, which had occupied Lithuania in the summer of 1940 and held it until shortly after the invasion of the U.S.S.R. by Nazi Germany on June 22, 1941.

2. Compose an imaginary conversation between Mrs. Tritsch and the principal of the boarding school in Chambéry, whom Mrs. Tritsch approached for help in hiding the orphaned Sonia. Keep in mind that the conversation is taking place in Vichy France some time before the German and Italian occupation of the Unoccupied Zone on November 8, 1942. The greatest fear at that time would have been discovery and arrest by the Vichy police on the alert for so-called “foreign Jews,” who were not French citizens. Mrs. Tritsch would address the principal as “Madame.” Her title would have been “Directrice” of the boarding school.

3. Ask students to imagine and draw a picture of two of the following episodes in Mrs. Tritsch’s life, then create a class collage of these pictures.

A. Mrs. Tritsch and her family in flight along with a flood of refugees as the German army closed in on Paris in June 1940.

B. Mrs. Tritsch and her family hiding in a rented room in a home for retired Catholic priests.

C. Mrs. Tritsch bringing apples to Sonia Samson in an OSE children’s home.

D. Sonia Samson hiding “in plain sight” in a classroom at the boarding school in Chambéry.

E. Mrs. Tritsch working as a cook, her husband as a gardener and her child playing in the cherry orchard on the estate of a French baron, his wife and seven children.

F. Mrs. Tritsch and her family hiding in the house of a kind woman in Chambéry during the closing months of the war.

4. At the conclusion of Susan Zuccotti’s work, *The Holocaust, the French and the Jews*, (New York: Basic Books, 1993), (p. 288), Zuccotti notes, “Those (Frenchmen and women) willing to help Jews had an ability to perceive the human dimension that lay beyond bureaucratic jargon. They were skeptical of (Vichy and German) political rhetoric and able to think independently. They demonstrated in the last analysis a respect for human life, a tolerance of diversity and a willingness to ignore regulations that threatened the survival of others.”

Ask students to identify some examples of these helpful French citizens found in Mrs. Tritsch’s story.

5. Susan Zuccotti observes: “And then there were those who helped by simply doing nothing. Shopkeepers, teachers, priests, pastors, mailmen, bus drivers, municipal employees—hundreds of thousands of French men and women, scattered throughout the

country—could not help but notice that there was a new face in town. They helped by asking no questions, by minding their own business. They created an environment conducive, with a strong dose of good luck, to survival.” Susan Zuccotti, *The Holocaust, the French and the Jews*.

Indeed, it should be remembered that some three-quarters of the French Jewish population did survive, although between 40 and 45 percent of those killed were foreign born, such as Mrs. Tritsch and her family. What were some of the elements of good luck seen in Mrs. Tritsch’s story, which contributed to her survival and that of her family?

6. Even at an advanced age, Mrs. Tritsch, still was haunted by her experiences during the Holocaust. Draw an illustration of her recurring dream: “I’m running with my son after a train, and I can’t make it. We are running and running all the time.” How would you interpret this dream? What is its meaning?

### **Enrichment Activities Focusing on Jews in the Kovno Ghetto and in Nazi Occupied France.**

1. Locate Memel (now called Klaipeda in Lithuania), Mrs. Tritsch’s birthplace, on a map. Research the Memel (Klaipeda) dispute following World War I through an Internet search on the subject. Why did the newly formed state of Lithuania claim this city and its surrounding area? What was its strategic and economic importance? What became of the Jews of Memel after the Nazi takeover on March 22, 1939? What happened to the city after Nazi Germany was defeated and Lithuania was incorporated into the Soviet Union following World War II? What happened to the city after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991?

2. At the time that Mrs. Tritsch’s family lived in Kovno under Nazi rule, there was a young, deeply Orthodox rabbi named Ephraim Oshry, who was one of a handful of Jews to survive the Kovno ghetto. During the war, the Nazis made Rabbi Oshry the custodian of a collection of “artifacts of the extinct Jewish race.” Rabbi Oshry used the books on Jewish law in the collection to issue interpretations or religious law when Jews in the Kovno ghetto came to him with questions regarding their faith. He recorded the questions and responses and buried them in tin cans, which he unearthed after the war and which were ultimately published as, *Responsa from the Holocaust* (New York: Judaica Press, 1983). Rabbi Oshry thus made a poignant contribution to the centuries-old body of Jewish responsa literature, in which experts in Jewish law respond to questions of how Jewish law applies to everyday life in various times and places. But Rabbi Oshry not only recorded responsa. He held secret evening worship services in the Kovno ghetto and helped maintain Jewish religious practices.

On October 28, 1941, all of the members of Mrs. Tritsch’s family in Kovno, except her brother, were killed in a massacre of about 9,000 Jews at the ninth fort outside of Kovno. It is called the “Black Day” of the Kovno ghetto.

Two days before the horrifying “Black Day” of the Kovno ghetto, one of the respected members of the community came to Rabbi Oshry with tears in his eyes and posed a

question of life and death. He asked whether he might kill himself, so he would not have to witness the deaths of his wife, children and grandchildren, whom the Nazis would murder before killing him, and also so he could be buried in the Jewish cemetery of the ghetto.

This was Rabbi Oshry's response: "Although the man would be subjected to unbearable suffering by the abominable murderers, and so hoped to be buried among Jews, he still was not allowed to commit suicide. Permitting suicide in such a case meant surrendering to the abominable enemy. For the Germans often remarked to the Jews, 'Why don't you commit suicide as the Jews of Berlin did.' Suicide is viewed as a great desecration of God, for it shows that a person had no trust in God's capability to save him from the accursed hands of His defilers. The (German) murderers' goal was to bring confusion into the lives of the Jews and to cause them the greatest despondency in order to make annihilating them all the easier.

I cite proudly that in the Kovno ghetto there were only three cases of suicide by people who grew greatly despondent. The rest of the ghetto dwellers trusted and hoped that God would not forsake His people." *Responsa from the Holocaust*, pp. 34-5.

Divide the class into pairs and ask each pair to discuss the following questions:

- A. How does Rabbi Oshry's response demonstrate moral resistance?
- B. How does Rabbi Oshry's response demonstrate spiritual resistance?
- C. Do you agree or disagree with his response and why?
- D. If you disagree with his response write your own response.
- E. We do not know whether during and after the Holocaust Rabbi Oshry asked the question of why God allowed millions of innocents to suffer and be killed. How might you have answered the question of why God is silent while evil flourishes in the world?

For more information, an online exhibition on the Kovno ghetto can be found on the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's website:

<http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/kovno/intro/intro.htm>

3. If Mrs. Tritsch and her family had remained in Paris instead of fleeing to the Unoccupied Zone of France in the summer of 1941, they might have been among the 13,152 Jews in Paris rounded up during the infamous Vel d'Hiver action on July 16-17, 1942.

During the action, families with children under sixteen were sent to the Velodrome d'Hiver, where 8,000 Jews were crowded into the poorly ventilated, stiflingly hot indoor sports stadium. The water in the sinks had been turned off. They had nothing to drink, couldn't wash up, and had only the food they had brought with them. The toilets jammed and were unusable. Some people suffered nervous breakdowns; others attempted suicide. A very few lucky ones managed to escape. After six days, those in the stadium were sent to the transit camps of Beaune-la-Roland and Pithiviers where they experienced the same hunger, filth and degradation as in the Velodrome d'Hiver.

On July 31, 1942 a new nightmare began. Berlin had not yet given permission to deport young children to concentration camps in the East, so in order to keep the deportation trains

full, the French authorities decided to send all the parents, as well as the older children. Children younger than 14 were left behind. There were indescribable scenes as mothers were forcibly separated from their young children and loaded onto trains bound for Auschwitz. Of those deported, only a handful were alive at the end of the war.

Remaining behind were the weakest and most helpless of the victims, 4,000 children between the ages of 15 months and 13 years old. Their heads were shaved, because their hair was full of lice. In early August, Berlin issued orders to deport the children. They were sent first to Drancy where they were forced to sleep on a thick layer of filthy straw. Many were racked with diarrhea and dysentery. Just a few overworked Red Cross volunteers tried to care for them.

Between August 17 and August 31, 1942, seven trains left Drancy on the three-day journey to Auschwitz. Up to one-half of the passengers on each train were the children from the Velodrome d'Hiver. There was no food or water in the boxcars and only a bucket for a toilet. Siblings often had been separated, and children as young as 2 or 3 years old found themselves totally alone. The lack of light was enough to cause panic among the toddlers.

None of the 4000 children deported from the Velodrome D'Hiver returned to the France that had betrayed them.

Susan Zuccotti's chilling, powerful and well-researched chapter in *The Holocaust, the French and the Jews* entitled, "The July Roundup, Paris, 1942" (pp.103-112), provides a horrific account of the roundup along with specific statistics concerning this tragic event.

After reading Zuccotti's chapter, ask students to compose a short poem of their own in memory of the murdered children of the July 16-17 Paris roundup. The poem may be addressed to the children themselves or to a general audience. It may reflect mourning and sadness at the suffering or anger at the cruelty, or both. It may be focused on an indictment of the murderers or on the need to remember the victims. Students are welcome to compose a short musical piece in memory of the children. The creative works of the students should be shared with the class.

The ordeal of the children is depicted in the best-selling novel, *Sarah's Key* (New York: St Martin's Griffin, 2007) by Tatiana de Rosnay and in the film, which is based on the book. This film vividly depicts the suffering of the victims and the cruelty and barbarous conduct of the French police and collaborationist administration, as well as examples of French kindness and compassion. Another depiction of the horrors of the Velodrome d'Hiver is the 2010 acclaimed French film, *La Rafle (The Roundup)*.

4. How does an analysis of the above account of the Velodrome d'Hiver roundup reflect the accuracy of the following observation by the historian Michael Marrus: "The Final Solution in France was a Nazi project from beginning to end. Few Frenchmen advocated massacre, and only a small number of extreme collaborationists in Paris ever carried anti-Semitism to the murderous conclusions of Hitler and his associates. However, it seems highly unlikely that the Germans would have been capable of deporting large numbers of Jews from France without the help of the French authorities. Two years of persecution by the French

government and administration helped snap the bonds that bound Jews to French society, leaving many helpless once the machinery of destruction turned to France.” Michael Marrus, “France: *The Jews and the Holocaust*”, in *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, Volume I, ed. Israel Gutman (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1990), p. 512.

5. Use the actions of the French during World War II to address the idea of stereotyping. A stereotype may be defined as a simplistic opinion, a prejudiced attitude or an uncritical judgment held about a group when categorizing the group and the behavior of individuals in the group. Stereotypes can be positive or negative, but they ignore the uniqueness of the individuals who are part of the group.

One negative stereotype about the French during the Holocaust is that they were all anti-Semitic and were cowardly complicit in the atrocities of the Vichy regime. Mrs. Tritsch’s experiences illustrate that while there was certainly anti-Semitism, there were other attitudes as well. This is most dramatically illustrated by the efforts of the inhabitants of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon and surrounding French villages who saved several thousand Jewish lives during the Holocaust. Ask students to read about their life-saving activities in *The Courage to Care: Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust*, eds. Carol Rittner and Sondra Myers (New York: New York University Press, 1986). See also in this regard, *Hidden on the Mountain: Stories of Children Sheltered from the Nazis in Le Chambon* by Deborah Durland DeSaix and Karen Gray Ruelle (Holiday House, 2006).

6. One of the Jewish teenagers sheltered in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon was Elizabeth Kaufmann, who spent her childhood in Berlin and Vienna. Following the German annexation of Austria in March 1938, she and her family sought refuge in France. During the summer and fall of 1941, Elizabeth was an au pair for the family of Pastor Andre Trocme, the moral compass of the village, and who, along with his wife Magda and assistant, Pastor Edouard Theis, motivated the village’s rescue efforts. Fortuitously, Elizabeth’s family was able to secure visas and come to the United States in early 1942.

Elizabeth kept a diary, excerpts of which are found in the work by Alexandra Zapruder, *Salvaged Pages: Young Writers’ Diaries of the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 37-62. Ask students to read these diary excerpts and respond to the following questions: What did you learn from Elizabeth’s diary about how it felt to be a refugee “on the road to nowhere” fleeing Paris in June 1940 as the Germans advanced on the French capital? How do the emotions in Elizabeth’s account shed light on what Mrs. Tritsch and her family must have felt as they fled at the same time?

Zapruder’s study guide for the book can be found at:  
[www.alexandrazapruder.com/pdf/zapruder-teacher-cheat-sheet.pdf](http://www.alexandrazapruder.com/pdf/zapruder-teacher-cheat-sheet.pdf).

An MTV film, “*I’m Still Here: Real Diaries of Young People Who Lived During the Holocaust*” is based on Zapruder’s work. The organization, Facing History and Ourselves, has an extensive online study guide for this film suitable for high school students at:  
[www.alexandrazapruder.com/pdf/zapruder-fhao-teachers-guide](http://www.alexandrazapruder.com/pdf/zapruder-fhao-teachers-guide).

7. Peter Feigl was another Jewish teenager who was sheltered in Le Chambon. Peter and his family were originally from Germany, but fled to Belgium and then to France. His parents were interned in France and sent to Auschwitz where they were murdered. Catholic charitable organizations helped shield Peter who had the good fortune in January 1943 to be sent to Le Chambon. There, 14-year-old Peter remained for 10 months. Carrying false papers, he was then sent to a boarding school. In May 1944, Peter and some of his schoolmates escaped to neutral Switzerland.

The USC Shoah Foundation has a fascinating interview with the articulate and forthcoming Peter Feigl posted online. Ask students to listen to this interview (search USC Shoah Foundation and scroll down to Jewish survivor, Peter Feigl testimony), and respond to the following question: Compare and contrast the experiences of Peter Feigl and his family in France with those of Mrs. Tritsch and her family. In what ways were they similar and in what respects were they different?

8. Not all children in Nazi occupied France were as fortunate to survive as did Mrs. Tritsch's son, Sophie Samson, Elizabeth Kaufmann and Peter Feigl. Forty-four children, aged between 4 and 17, who lived in an orphanage in the French village of Izieu located near Chambéry, were among the more than 1.1 million Jewish children murdered.

One of the children from Izieu who perished was 11-year-old Lilliane Gerenstein. Just days before she and her brother were captured, Lilliane wrote the following poem to God:

“God? How good You are, how kind and if one had to count the number of goodnesses and kindnesses You have done, one would never finish.

God? It is You who command. It is You who are justice, it is You who reward the good and punish the evil.

God? It is thanks to You that I had a beautiful life before, that I was spoiled, that I had lovely things that others do not have.

God? After that, I ask You for one thing only: Make my parents come back, my poor parents protect them (even more than You protect me) so that I can see them again as soon as possible.

Make them come back again. Ah! I had such a good mother and such a good father! I have such faith in You and thank you in advance.”  
(found online: [www.annefrank.dk/lzieu.htm](http://www.annefrank.dk/lzieu.htm)).

Discuss with students: Why did God, whom Lilliane conceived of as good, kind and just, allow the innocent children of Izieu and more than a million others to suffer and die during the Holocaust? How could a beneficent God permit such a moral and ethical catastrophe to occur?

9. One of the reasons that Mrs. Tritsch and her family were in Chambéry, a city located in the far south of France between Nîmes and Beziers, is that it was the Vichy Zone's headquarters

of the Oeuvre de Secours aux Enfants (Children's Aid Society; OSE), a worldwide Jewish organization to promote children's health care and welfare.

As the Final Solution ramped up, the OSE came under increasing German pressure and had to go underground in both the German-occupied northern and unoccupied (until November 1942) southern zones of the country.

Divide the class into four groups to research the life-saving activities of the OSE during the war and in the immediate aftermath of the war. The first group should be asked to focus on the OSE's activities in the German Occupied Zone of France during the war. The second group should be asked to focus on the activities of the OSE in Vichy France. The third group should be asked to focus on the arrest and deportation by the Gestapo of the staff and children of the OSE at Izieux on April 6, 1944, under the direction of the notorious Klaus Barbie. The fourth group should be asked to focus on the OSE after the war ended. A representative of each group should report the results of the research to the class.

10. The OSE was one of several clandestine Jewish organizational networks that worked to save children in Nazi occupied France. Like others, it worked with non-Jewish groups. The OSE also had the support of the Catholic and Protestant religious authorities in the nation. Through their combined efforts, several thousand Jewish children were hidden in France and 1,000 children were brought to safety in Switzerland. A number of those who took part in these rescue efforts were altruists.

Request students to define the term "altruist." Note that altruism means not only the care and concern for others, but also the courage to put that care and concern into practice by engaging in benevolent and selfless behavior. Students should be asked the following:

- A. Are there times when you acted altruistically?
- B. What motivated you to do so?
- C. What acts of altruism have you seen performed by family members or friends?
- D. What do you think motivated them to do so?
- E. What do you think are some ways that altruism may be encouraged in others?

11. One story of the rescue of Jewish children in occupied France is capably and compellingly told by Fred Coleman in *The Marcel Network: How One French Couple Save 527 Children From the Holocaust* (Dulles VA: Potomac Books, 2012). An intrepid Jewish couple, Odette Rosenstock and Moussa Abadi, ran a clandestine network in Nice, France, that saved these children from deportation to extermination camps. For extra credit, assign this work and ask students to respond to the following questions regarding it:

- A. What were the motivations of this Jewish couple to risk their lives time and again to save the children?
- B. What were the ways in which the couple demonstrated resourcefulness in their life-saving efforts?
- C. How did both Catholics and Protestants aid in rescuing the children?
- D. Which two children's stories did you find most moving and engaging and why?
- E. Why for decades did Odette and Moussa not talk about the "Marcel Network," so that only now has their story come to light?

12. For a generation following the Liberation, there was a marked reluctance in France to confront its wartime experiences. The Vichy regime was dismissed as a small group of collaborators and fascists unrepresentative of the French people. General DeGaulle and the French resistance were extolled as bearers of the honor of the nation. Then, beginning in the early 1970s, the French became willing to confront the extent of support for the Vichy regime and its roots in French history. Along with this was an examination of the role of France in the Nazi genocide against the approximately 330,000 Jews of France, 8 percent of the French population in 1939.

Finally, in 1995, fifty years after the end of the war, the first formal apology for France's treatment of Jews during the German occupation was issued by then-President Jacques Chirac. In a widely televised speech, he declared:

France, home of the Enlightenment and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, France the land of welcome and asylum, committed the irreparable breaking of its word by seconding the criminal folly of the German occupiers.

With the help of the French police, it delivered those it was supposed to protect to their executioners.

Why do you think it took so long for this apology to be made? Do you think it served any useful purpose? Explain.

### **Paula Tritsch's Timeline**

August 27, 1911-Paula Tritsch was born in the Baltic port of Memel, then a part of the German empire, the Second Reich. Following Germany's defeat in World War I, the League of Nations awarded Memel and the surrounding area to the newly created state of Lithuania. Lithuania was formerly a part of the Russian empire. Memel afforded Lithuania its best outlet to the Baltic Sea. Though Memel experienced a good deal of political instability in the interwar era, Mrs. Tritsch remembered her youth fondly.

1934-Mrs. Tritsch went to Paris to further her dressmaking career. There, she married Leon Slucki, a Jew from the city of Vilna, then under Polish control, and in 1938 their son Ariel was born. The French economy had been badly damaged by the Great Depression, and this, along with traditional French anti-Semitism among certain segments of the population, provoked hostility towards eastern European Jewish newcomers such as Mrs. Tritsch and her family. They were regarded as "foreign Jews," different from Jews who had deeper roots in the country.

April 1939-Gurs in southeastern France became the first detention camp to be established in the country. It was originally erected to intern Spanish Republican refugees fleeing across the Pyrenees from the Spanish Civil War (1936-39). Gurs came to house many Jews, as did other detention camps in France. Some 3,000 Jews perished in these detention camps and another 1,000 were executed on French soil during the course of the war.

September 3, 1939-France declared war on Germany following the German invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939. Mrs. Tritsch and her family now found themselves in a nation at war.

May 10, 1940-Nazi Germany attacked France. Prior to the German invasion, France was home to some 330,000 Jews, Mrs. Tritsch and her family among them.

June 14, 1940-Paris was occupied by Nazi German troops. Prior to the occupation, Mrs. Tritsch and her family joined a flood of tens of thousands of refugees fleeing south in an attempt to escape the fighting.

June 18, 1940- General Charles DeGaulle spoke from London announcing the formation of a Free French government. DeGaulle promised that, "The flame of French resistance must not and will not be extinguished." Indeed, this government in exile, along with groups of various political persuasions in the country, helped organize French resistance to the Germans and their collaborators. Jews played an increasingly important role in resistance activities.

June 22, 1940-France signed an armistice with Germany. It divided France into a German occupied zone comprising the northern and western portions of the country including the entire Atlantic coast and unoccupied zone comprising about two fifths of the country with its capital at Vichy. The Vichy government was headed by 84-year-old World War I hero, Marshall Philippe Petain and was a collaborationist regime. Some 1.6 million French prisoners of war were transferred to Germany where many would remain throughout the war doing forced labor. Several departments along the Italian border were assigned to Germany's fascist ally Italy, which had declared war on France on June 10, 1940. Following the signing of the armistice, Mrs. Tritsch and her family returned to Paris.

September 27, 1940-Germans issued the first anti-Jewish measure in the occupied zone. Many more would follow.

October 3, 1940-The Vichy regime issued its Statut des Juifs (Statute concerning Jews) on its own initiative. This statute and other laws and ordinances of the regime were valid throughout the country as long they did not conflict with German laws. The Statut des Juifs defined who was considered to be a Jew, banned Jews from governmental posts and from a number of professions.

October 4, 1940-Key French officials were authorized to intern, assign to a supervised residence or enroll in forced labor any foreign Jews such as Mrs. Tritsch and her family in their jurisdictions at their discretion.

October 7, 1940-Some 115,000 Jews living in Algeria were summarily deprived of their French citizenship, which they had enjoyed since 1870.

March 29, 1941-The Vichy regime established the General Office for Jewish Affairs tasked with coordinating anti-Jewish legislation and activity. With the implementation of the Final

Solution in France the CGQJ, under the anti-Semitic collaborator, Louis Darquier de Pellpoix, extended its full support to the Nazis in their murderous undertakings.

June 2, 1941-The second stage of the Statut des Juifs was passed. It made the definition of who was considered to be a Jew even narrower and removed Jews from French industry, business and all liberal professions. Under the Statut des Juifs, the entire Tritzsch family was considered to be "full Jews."

June 22, 1941-Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union. Mrs. Tritzsch and her family had been living on Russian papers since the Soviet Union until this time, was neutral in World War II. Now, the Tritzsch's became enemy aliens to be hunted by Gestapo and the Vichy police. They fled south to the Vichy controlled zone of France.

July 1941- The Vichy regime embarked on a program of "aryanization" which meant the confiscation of Jewish property by the state.

August 1941-The Drancy detention and transit camp was established in a northeastern suburb of Paris. Some 64,759 Jews were deported from Drancy to extermination centers, mostly Auschwitz, beginning on June 22, 1942. The last transport from Drancy to Auschwitz left on July 31, 1944.

November 1941-The Vichy regime established the General Union of Jews of France. The UGIF, under Jewish leadership, was to control Jewish activities and Jewish communal affairs. It has received some criticism for complying too readily with German directives, but it had to answer to those in power at the time.

January 20, 1942-The Wannsee Conference was convened to discuss and implement the Final Solution-the murder of all the Jews of Europe by poison gas. Following this conference, the Nazis began to prepare for the deportation of European Jews to concentration camps and extermination centers including Jews from France and other Western European countries.

March 27, 1942-The first transport of Jews from France left for Auschwitz marking the start of the Final Solution in that country.

May 29, 1942- All Jews in the German occupied zone of France were ordered to wear a yellow badge.

June 1942-The Nazi German government decided that 100,000 Jews should be taken from both zones in France for deportation.

July 16/17, 1942-The most infamous roundup of Jews in France, known as "la Grande Raffle of the Vel d'Hiver," took place in Paris. Some 13,152 mostly foreign Jews were arrested by the French police and deported including 4,000 young children. Fortunately, Mrs. Tritzsch and her family had left Paris by this time.

August 26-28, 1942-Some 7,000 foreign Jews were arrested by the Vichy regime in the unoccupied zone. Mrs. Tritsch and her family were in the unoccupied zone at the time but fortunately escaped arrest. The arrests and deportations played an important role in turning French public opinion against German and Vichy anti-Semitic policies.

Late 1942-By this time the French Roman Catholic church had turned against the Vichy regime. Many priests, nuns and monks risked their lives to save Jews, especially Jewish children. French Protestant clergy also took part in Jewish rescue efforts. Despite these efforts 42,500 Jews had been sent "to the East" by this time, about one-third from the Vichy controlled zone.

November 8, 1942-Following the Allied landings in North Africa on this date, the Germans and their Italian allies occupied all of France. Many Jews found temporary refuge in the Italian zone in southeastern France as Italy refused to cooperate in the Final Solution.

1943-During this year, the danger of arrest by the Germans came more and more to include Jews with French citizenship as well as foreign-born Jews. For example, German arrests in Marseille from January 22-27, 1943 included both native and foreign Jews. German efforts to arrest and deport Jews in the south were aided by the French fascist militia. Mrs. Tritsch and her family lived under the constant threat of detention and deportation. Mrs. Tritsch and her husband were especially anxious about the threat to their young child.

September 8, 1943-Germany occupied the Italian zone of France following Italy's changing sides during the war. This ended the sanctuary that Jews had enjoyed there.

1944-The Representative Council of French Jewry (CRIF) was formed to coordinate activities among Jewish resistance groups of various ideological persuasions. The CRIF made important contributions to the overall resistance movement. Hundreds of Jews in the resistance were killed during military encounters with the Germans.

June 6, 1944-D-Day. With the Allied landings in Normandy, the successful battle for the liberation of France began.

Early August 1944-American and Free French forces invaded southern France. The Allied forces made swift gains and caused a rapid German retreat. Mrs. Tritsch and her family were liberated in Chambéry, located in southeastern France, by American troops.

August 25, 1944-Paris was liberated. Only a few weeks before, the last convoy of Jews was sent from Drancy to Auschwitz.

1940-1944-Following is a summary of French popular attitudes and behavior during the war from the *Encyclopedia Judaica*: "During the course of the war, the attitude and behavior of French citizens toward Jews gradually shifted from open hostility or apathy to sympathy and support. At first, most Frenchmen approved of discriminatory laws, especially against foreign Jews, as part of their general approval of Marshall Petain's program of national renewal. In time, however, the increasing brutality of Vichy and Nazi policies, beginning in 1942

including the deportation of some native born Jews and women and children and the fact that the roundups were no longer limited to German-occupied areas, led to growing opposition to and resentment against the regime's anti-Jewish policies. Many individual Frenchmen hid children and adults, often at the risk of their own lives..." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Second Edition, Vol. 7 (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing, 2007), p. 162. Mrs. Tritsch and her family obviously benefited from this shift in attitude.

May 8, 1945-V-E (Victory in Europe) Day. Some 77,500 Jews in France were victims of the Nazi German and Vichy French anti-Semitism. Fortunately Mrs. Tritsch and her family were among the approximately three quarters of Jews in France who survived.

Following the war, Mrs. Tritsch divorced Leon Slucki, and she and her son immigrated to the United States, with the assistance of relatives on her father's side, to begin a new life in this country.

## Maps

Escape from German-Occupied Europe  
[Escape from German-Occup#3F2F55](#)

France  
<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005429>

## AMERICAN LIBERATORS OF NAZI CONCENTRATION CAMPS

### Introduction

*“Jews, You are free!”* –American Army Chaplain Rabbi Herschel Schachter.

On April 11, 1945, American Army chaplain Rabbi Herschel Schachter sped through the gates of the Buchenwald Concentration Camp, the first German concentration camp that was liberated by U.S. Armed Forces. Corpses lay everywhere and it looked, he said later, as if no one was left alive. After a while, he walked into a barracks, where weak, emaciated men lay on tiers of rough, wooden planks. As they looked down at him with haunted eyes, he told them, “Jews, you are free!”

By the beginning of 1945, the Nazi regime was collapsing. In the East, in the midst of a bitter winter, the Soviet army had launched a great offensive, advancing rapidly along a broad front until its advance units were within 100 miles of Berlin. On the Western front, Adolph Hitler’s last great gamble, the Battle of the Bulge, had failed. American, British, British Commonwealth and Free French forces readied themselves for the final assault on Nazi Germany.

The liberation of concentration camps was not a primary objective of any of the Allied armies. They simply came upon the camps, like Buchenwald, in the final chaotic weeks of the war. American GIs had read or heard rumors about them, but the rumors were often dismissed or minimized as war propaganda. It was only when these young men in their late teens and their early twenties saw the camps with their own eyes that they believed the truth of their horrific existence. In every camp they liberated, they found evidence of heartrending cruelty: prisoners who were starved, beaten and gassed; prisoners who were subjected to life-threatening medical and scientific experiments; prisoners who were brutally coerced to work as forced laborers in rock quarries and in factories for German manufacturers; and prisoners who were ill and traumatized.

On April 4, 1945, U.S. troops of the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division reached the village of Ohrdruf, a sub-camp of nearby Buchenwald, where the Nazis had murdered some 4,000 inmates on the eve of liberation. A week later, American GIs from the 6<sup>th</sup> Armored Division entered the main Buchenwald concentration camp.

The scenes that greeted the liberators were profoundly disturbing to battle hardened veterans. Emaciated bodies were stacked like cordwood, their suffering etched on their faces. Cramped bunks were jammed with people too sick and weak to walk. Immediately, the GIs and American medical units found themselves tasked with feeding, housing and caring for 20,000 physically and emotionally devastated Buchenwald prisoners. They were faced with epidemics created by the filthy and overcrowded conditions and the task of

restoring the camp's water supply and sewage system which had been destroyed by the SS. About 150 prisoners died each day because either they were too sick to respond to medical care or because their bodies, accustomed to little more than bread and ersatz soup and coffee, could not handle GI rations.

On April 12, 1945, Generals Dwight Eisenhower, Omar Bradley and George Patton toured the Ohrdruf sub-camp. Eisenhower ordered that all GIs in the area be brought to the site to see what the Nazis had done to incarcerated people. The generals were appalled at the horrors they saw with their own eyes in Ohrdruf.

Just at the time Buchenwald was being liberated, American troops, including Hal Strauss from the 3rd Armored Division, reached the Dora-Nordhausen (also known as Dora-Mittelbau) Camp complex in the Harz Mountains. As with other camps, the SS tried to cover their tracks by evacuating prisoners in the Dora complex ahead of the American advance. Thousands of them died on these senseless death marches just as liberation was at hand.

Marching eastward, the Americans liberated the Flossenberg concentration camp located in a Bavarian forest near the Czech border on April 23, 1945. Dachau, in southern Germany was liberated on April 29. There, the GIs found 30 open railway cars piled high with several thousand bodies, evacuees from Buchenwald who had been shipped out of the camp as the Americans were approaching.

The shock of the GI liberators at what they found in Dachau gave way to anger and outrage. Some vented their fury on the former SS guards and killed up to 50 of them. Liberated prisoners also killed some guards and informers.

The last major concentration camp to be liberated by American GIs was Mauthausen, the brutal center of a vast network of satellite camps located near Linz, Austria, Hitler's birthplace. Later, when GIs asked the Austrian civilian population about Mauthausen and its satellite camps, many claimed ignorance. Knowledge of the camp meant responsibility, and responsibility brought with it the possibility of retribution by the Allies.

However, the Mauthausen camp system was spread throughout the country. The local population had certainly witnessed emaciated prisoners being transported to forced labor sites. Farmers in the area used forced laborers for their farms. The smell emanating from the camps spread for miles around. The crimes of the Nazis were made possible only with the criminal indifference and collaboration, both passive and active, of millions of people. Their silence and collaboration helped condemn millions of their fellow human beings to unspeakable suffering and to death.

What the GIs saw, heard and smelled in the camps remained with them for a lifetime. For many of them, such as Hal Strauss, the camps revealed the bottomless depth of Nazi anti-Semitism and how tremendously vulnerable the Jews were in the face of this hatred. Their experiences in liberating the camps helped deepen ties of the Jewish GIs to the Jewish community, promoted concern for Jewish refugees, and strengthened their resolve to fight against intolerance, bigotry and discrimination.

## Hal Strauss' Story

### Early years

In 1936, three years after Hitler came to power and the Jewish community in Germany was already being treated as social outcasts, the principal of Helmut "Hal" Strauss's school in Kirchheim-Bolanden, Germany, called the students together. He told them that although Mr. Strauss was the only Jewish child in the school, they must treat him the same as anyone else.

"I was the only Jew in my class, but I had a protector," said Mr. Strauss, who was born March 19, 1923, in the small German town. "The acting director of the school took me under his wing, and let it be known 'Yes, Strauss is a Jew, but he is student like everyone else and is not to be harmed.' "

This tolerance did not last long. When a new principal took over, Mr. Strauss was immediately singled out. "His very first morning during the salute to the Nazi flag, he made a bee-line for me and told me that my salute was not in accord with the best practices of the school."

Mr. Strauss was ordered to leave the ceremony. Within weeks, his parents enrolled him in a Jewish school in nearby Frankfurt.

Mr. Strauss' mother, Jenny Strauss, had urged her husband, Jacob, to leave Germany, but like many German Jews, he felt that the Nazi regime could not last. Hal's father was one of about 100,000 German Jews, out of a total German-Jewish population of 600,000 who had fought for Germany in World War I and considered himself a patriotic German.

"However, my mother, bless her soul, was not going to raise her kids in that atmosphere of anti-Semitism, and she kept after him relentlessly," Mr. Strauss said. His father eventually agreed when anti-Semitism made it impossible for him to earn a living. Local farmers, from whom he bought produce, refused to sell to a Jew.

First the family looked into immigrating to South America. Then, as Mr. Strauss remembered: "One lucky day, a businessman from Monroe Louisiana, visited my German relatives who lived in a small town not far from ours. The businessman left word, 'tell Jakob Strauss that his brother lives in my home town.'" Mr. Strauss' father had an older brother who had left home at the age of sixteen and eventually wound up in Louisiana, but the two brothers had lost touch.

## **New life in the United States**

In the mid-1930s, Germany was trying to pressure the Jewish community into leaving the country. However, the United States was experiencing a wave of anti-foreign and anti-Semitic sentiment, which was making it difficult for Jews to enter the country. Mr. Strauss' father learned that if he could obtain a business-oriented invitation from his brother, he would be allowed to leave Germany temporarily and come back. He received his exit permit, went to Louisiana and made arrangements for the family to emigrate the following year.

The Strauss family left Germany in 1937 and were followed a year later by Mr. Strauss' grandmother and his aunt. Jakob Strauss went to work in his brother's wholesale produce, liquor and wine business in Monroe and eventually became the produce buyer for the firm. Hal Strauss was enrolled in 1937 in the local school and graduated as class valedictorian.

## **Military service as a "Ritchie Boy" in World War II**

After the United States entered the war against Nazi Germany on December 11 1941, Mr. Strauss, a German citizen, was considered an "enemy alien" and was not allowed to volunteer for military service. However, two years later, he was drafted into the United States Army. Due to his German language skills, he was sent to Camp Ritchie Maryland, the birthplace of modern American psychological warfare.

There, Mr. Strauss became one of the "Ritchie Boys," a special army intelligence unit composed of mainly German-Jewish immigrants who had been drafted into the army because of their knowledge of the German language and German culture. They were trained in the most up-to-date interrogation techniques and taught how to collect tactical and strategic information from captured German soldiers, defectors and German civilians. This included gathering especially vital pieces of information as to troop size and movements, enemy morale, and the workings of the Nazi military command structure and the Nazi bureaucracy.

Much like the other "Ritchie Boys," Mr. Strauss was bright, highly motivated and determined to serve his new country by joining the struggle against Nazi Germany, which had persecuted and betrayed his family. Like other German-Jewish immigrants who served in the American military, Mr. Strauss was at special risk because if captured and his Jewish identity were discovered, he would be sent to a prison camp where his life would be in danger.

Mr. Strauss landed in France in the midst of fierce fighting shortly after D-Day on June 6, 1944. His mission was to secure vital intelligence on enemy troop placement, movements and morale from captured German soldiers. Using ingenuity, cunning, persistence and imagination, he elicited intelligence from the Germans, which helped to save American lives.

Mr. Strauss, like the other German-Jewish interrogators, said he had to force himself to suppress his anger and outrage when interrogating enemy soldiers and secure information in a disciplined, focused, effective manner. They also wrote and distributed leaflets calling on Germans to lay down their arms and made radio broadcasts on trucks equipped with

loud speakers to frontline German soldiers encouraging them to surrender. The truth about the realities of the German military situation was often the best propaganda.

### **Liberation of the Dora-Nordhausen concentration camp**

On April 11, 1945, Mr. Strauss was with the 104<sup>th</sup> U.S. infantry division, which liberated the Dora-Nordhausen (also known as Dora Mittelbau) concentration camp located in the southern portion of the Harz Mountains of central Germany.

The camp mercilessly used forced laborers to manufacture the V-2 rockets that Germany rained down on Great Britain in the closing months of the war. The United States Army was anxious to reach Dora-Nordhausen because under projected Allied occupation plans of Germany, the rocket factory would fall within the Soviet zone of occupation. Thus, there was a keen American interest in discovering as much information as possible about Nazi advances in rocket science before the Soviet takeover.

Many of the forced laborers at Dora-Nordhausen had been evacuated at the beginning of April on death marches as Allied forces closed in. But, American forces liberating the camp soon discovered several thousand dead and dying prisoners. They were considered too weak to work or to take part in the camp evacuation marches and had been left to die housed in barrack-like buildings in the town of Nordhausen.

"We saw bodies stacked up by the hundreds and maybe thousands, like cords of wood," Mr. Strauss remembered. He and the other soldiers, who were devastated by what they saw, tried to feed the survivors their own army rations. Unable to digest the rich food, many become more sick and some died.

In the days following liberation, the Americans tried to provide medical attention and care, but many inmates were already too weak and ill, and died of malnutrition and disease.

### **Immediate postwar experiences in Germany**

Victory in Europe came on May 8, 1945.

"After the war, one of the early objectives was to find and incarcerate Nazi big shots," Mr. Strauss said. By then a lieutenant, he and his group were ordered to capture the Nazi leader of the local province, Weimar, and his cabinet. Mr. Strauss recounted that:

The leader had fled, but I found one of his henchmen and had him draw up a table of the office holders and their addresses and had them all picked up. He must have expected a big reward for his helpfulness, but he was sent off (to prison) with the rest.

From Weimar, Mr. Strauss and his contingent were sent to southern Germany, to Bavaria near Munich. There, they ran a prison camp for high-ranking Nazis and interrogated them. "My chief recollection of this period is simply that there seemed to be no Nazis left," Mr. Strauss said, with a heavy dose of irony. "Everyone claimed that they were all "little people,"

that they had only done what they were told to do, that they had never harmed anyone. Never.”

Many Nazi war criminals maintained that they were “only following orders,” only carrying out the directives of their superiors which they were forced to follow and powerless to change.

Shortly before the end of the war, Mr. Strauss returned to the town of his birth. “Our ancestral home was now occupied by the wife of the former Ortsgruppenleiter, or local Nazi chief. Although my town was in the French zone, I let her know that this home was American property, and all her tears and pleas about ‘please don’t throw us out on the street’ were to no avail.” Mr. Strauss recounted that:

“It really gets a lot out of your system to come back in the uniform of an officer of a conquering army. As a result, I could come back years later, with my own family, to show the kids where daddy was born and went to school with mitigated trauma.”

Mr. Strauss remembered another story from his visit to his hometown: “My grammar school teacher and his wife had managed to keep up a thread of social connection with my parents (after the Nazi takeover) when all their other friends shunned them. They even came to our house in the middle of the night to say good-bye to us in 1937. When I returned in 1945, I knocked on their door and announced I had greetings from a family in America. What family? Strauss. And your name? Also Strauss. ‘Helmut!,’ they shouted in recognition.”

“Why do I bring it up?” he asked: “To show the Germans were not all Nazis and weren’t all bad.”

### **Return to civilian life**

After his discharge Mr. Strauss returned to his family in Monroe, Louisiana. “Me and Winston, we won the war!” he liked to joke. He completed his university studies at Louisiana State University and then was admitted to Northwestern University’s MBA program despite a quota for Jewish students, which limited the number of Jewish students the university accepted. He earned a Master’s degree in Business Administration from Northwestern in Evanston, Illinois, and went on to earn a law degree from Loyola University of Chicago.

In 1950, due to the Korean War, he was summoned once again for military service. However, the commanding general noted that during World War II, Mr. Strauss had spent his tour of duty interrogating Germans, that in Korea there weren’t any Germans, and so discharged him from service.

While in law school, Mr. Strauss met and married Irma Buchman who had been born and raised in the United States. The couple had two sons and two grandchildren.

In 2006, after his wife died, Mr. Strauss moved into the Selfhelp Home, “I love the place,” he said. “I love it here. Very much so.”

## Sought Learning Objectives

Students will:

- \* Understand why and how Mr. Strauss and his family left Germany.
- \* Describe the contributions Mr. Strauss and other “Ritchie Boys” made to the American war effort during World War II.
- \* Explain the reasons for the trauma experienced by Mr. Strauss and other American GIs when they liberated the Dora-Nordhausen concentration camp.
- \* Discuss why this trauma was shared by GI liberators of other Nazi concentration camps.
- \* Analyze the validity of the postwar defense of high-ranking Nazis that they were only obeying orders.
- \* Recognize why it would be falsely stereotyping to say that all Germans during World War II were anti-Semitic.
- \* Appreciate the opportunities and the freedoms offered by this country to new immigrants.

## Key Questions

1. How were Mr. Strauss and his family able to leave Nazi Germany for a new life in the United States?
2. What contributions did Mr. Strauss’ army service as a German language translator and interrogator make to the American war effort during the Second World War?
3. Why were his experiences as a liberator of the Dora-Nordhausen concentration camp so emotionally devastating?
4. In what way did other GI liberators of Nazi concentration camps share Mr. Strauss’ anguish?
5. What was the common post-war spurious defense offered by high-ranking Nazi prisoners who were interrogated by Mr. Strauss for their wartime actions?
6. What experiences did Mr. Strauss have when he visited his hometown immediately after the war, and why did he believe it was important to recount those experiences?
7. In what respects was Mr. Strauss’ postwar life in this country successful?

## Learning Activities

1. The fate of the Jewish community of Mr. Strauss’ hometown, Kirschheim-Bolanden, is a tragic one. It is described in *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Life Before and During the Holocaust*, (ed. Shmuel Spector, Vol. II (New York: New York University Press, 2001), p. 628):

In June 1933, about four months after the Nazi rise to power, there were 65 Jews in Kirschheim-Bolanden. Local residents strictly adhered to the general boycott of Jewish businesses that the Nazis initiated in 1933. In October 1938, 28 Jews remained in the town and by late 1939 just 11. Of those who emigrated between 1935-39, only 37-39 individuals (among them Mr. Strauss and his family) reached the United States. On Kristallnacht,

(November 9/10, 1938) the synagogue was burned, Jewish homes and stores were vandalized and Jewish men were sent to the Dachau concentration camp. Ten Jews from Kirschheim-Bolanden were deported to the Gurs concentration camp (located in southeastern France) on October 22, 1940.

The Jews deported to Gurs from Kirschheim-Bolanden were among the hundreds of Jews who died of hunger and disease in the camp or were among those deported from the camp to extermination centers in 1942/43. Thus a centuries-old Jewish community was destroyed by hate.

Ask students: Is it possible that other long-established communities could be wiped out by hatred in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a century benefiting from significant scientific and technological advances, from the information revolution, from the spread of education and from concern for human rights? Provide reasons to support your response.

2. The Jewish presence in the American South is often overlooked. Ask students to research the history of the Jewish community of Monroe, Louisiana, to which Mr. Strauss and his family belonged, by using the Internet. Monroe witnessed a wave of German-Jewish immigration from the mid-to-end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a wave of Eastern European Jewish immigration from the 1880s to the 1920s and the arrival of Central European Jews fleeing Nazi persecution in the 1930s. The religious, socio-economic and social-psychological orientation of each group of Jewish arrivals in Monroe presents a microcosm of the history of a number of other Jewish communities in the South.

3. Show the documentary, “The Ritchie Boys” on DVD. Mr. Strauss was one of the “Ritchie Boys.” Distribute the following questions to students before they watch the film and ask them to jot down brief answers while they are watching the film. Then ask them to discuss.

Questions:

- a. Why are the “Ritchie Boys” among the most unusual of the “Greatest Generation” combatants during World War II?
- b. Why are some of their stories so tragic?
- c. What were some of the unorthodox interrogation techniques employed by the “Ritchie Boys”? Did these techniques cross moral boundaries into torture in any way? Were they effective in eliciting information?
- d. Why did the “Ritchie Boys” have to make a great effort to remain disciplined and professional when interrogating German POW’s?
- e. Why might it be said that the “Ritchie Boys” were able to exact “the perfect revenge” on their German enemies?
- f. Should Marlene Dietrich’s disloyalty to the government of her native country during World War II be condemned?
- g. When Si Lewen returned from the war, he destroyed everything he had from Europe including nearly every one of his sketchpads. Why? Do you judge him negatively in any way for doing so, especially since the destruction of his sketchpads meant the disappearance of a valuable record of an artist’s impression of historical events?
- h. Did Si Lewen’s memories of the prisoners he saw at Buchenwald agree with the memories of the prisoners Hal Strauss saw in Dora-Nordhausen? Why was Morris Parloff unable to

identify with the Jewish prisoners he liberated at Dora-Nordhausen? Why did he say, “I felt as if I were no longer Jewish, not like that.”

- i. Why do you think that so many of the “Ritchie Boys” went on to enjoy remarkable civilian careers after World War II?
- j. Why, like Mr. Strauss, did so many of the “Ritchie Boys” and so many other GIs in World War II not speak of their experiences until many decades after the war ended?
- k. Which of the stories in the documentary did you find the most heart breaking?
- l. Which of the stories in the documentary did you find the most humorous?
- m. Which of the stories in the documentary did you find the most uplifting?
- n. Which of the “Ritchie Boy” witnesses in the film did you find the most memorable?
- o. What overall rating, out of four stars, would you give to this documentary and why?

4. Even many decades after the liberation of Dora-Nordhausen, Mr. Strauss could not forget how devastated he was by what he found there. Many American GIs, who liberated concentration camps, reported feeling the same.

How do excerpts from the following report from Dora-Nordhausen written by Lieutenant George Moise, an army historian attached to the Seventh Corps, help explain this devastating impact? Lt. Moise reports on what the GIs found in a group of barracks on the southern edge of the town of Nordhausen:

It was literally a charnel house with the distinction that a small proportion of the bodies were not quite dead. The living and the dead were found intermingled indiscriminately, and, in some cases, the bodies had to be examined by medical personnel to ascertain whether they contained life or not. Those who were living were in such advanced stages of starvation and frequently tuberculosis that there was little hope for them...Many lay...on the floor and others were in double-decker wooden bunks with as many as three to a bunk. Colonel Hardin (the commanding officer) personally removed one of the starvation cases from his position in a bunk between two corpses. ‘The man could hardly speak,’ Colonel Hardin said.

There was not the stench of death in the camp that might be expected largely because there was not enough flesh left on most of the bodies to rot. They were literally skin and bones. The inmates of the camp were starved to death, if not deliberately then at least callously. They were deemed no longer able to work (in the tunnels of Dora-Nordhausen) and were a burden to the state. They got practically no rations or consideration...They were placed in the Nordhausen camp in order to die.’ *1945: The Year of Liberation*, a publication of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (Washington D.C., United States Holocaust Memorial Council, 1995), pgs. 135-139.

5. As Mr. Strauss noted, the high-ranking Nazi prisoners he questioned sought to excuse their actions by saying that they were only following orders. They blamed Hitler and those around him, particularly Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS. However, the Allied victors in World War II, in Central Council Law # 10 issued on December 20, 1945, declared that those who committed violations of international law were to be held individually responsible

for their actions. "The fact that any person acted pursuant to the order of his government or of a superior does not free him from responsibility for a crime but may be considered in mitigation." *1945: The Year of Liberation*, p. 267.

This principle helped form the foundation for all postwar trials of Nazi war criminals. Why is this principle so important? What does it tell us about the need to assume personal responsibility and to make personal moral judgments?

Has there been an occasion when you or someone you know did not follow an order from an authority figure because it was felt to be immoral? What do you think you would do if you were given a command that violated your conscience and that you felt to be morally wrong?

6. The historian Robert Abzug wrote the following concerning the GI liberators:

When the liberators came home, they did try to tell people about the camps, but most (who heard them) responded with disbelief, disgust or silence. (The GIs in turn responded) with silence of their own.

Only a few...made a point of speaking to groups and showing motion pictures of the camps. Some had nightmares about their experiences, most did not. Sometimes at veterans' reunions the memories did come back, but even on these occasions, the talk rarely turned to the camps. Old comrades preferred to remember happier moments or smaller, more personal tragedies. Only as they got older and looked back on the important events of their lives did the encounter with the concentration camps begin to loom large.

For their own children and for the world in general, many of the liberators thought it important to finally set down their experiences.

Robert Abzug, *Inside the Vicious Heart: Americans and the Liberation of Nazi Concentration Camps*(New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 169-170.

Discuss: Why did GIs like Mr. Strauss develop a greater realization of the importance of their experiences with the Nazi camps, as they grew older? Why with age did they gain a greater realization of its significance?

7. Considering the war crimes and crimes against humanity that have been committed since the fall of the Nazi regime, Mr. Strauss observed: "I am not sure. I am not really clear how far we have come."

Present the question: There is no doubt that there have been many post-World War II crimes against humanity. However we do have a United Nations, an International Criminal Court, as well as courts in various countries that prosecute perpetrators of atrocities. Fascist, communist and other dictatorial regimes have fallen. Democracy has spread and human rights organizations have proliferated. Taking these developments into account, what is your assessment of Mr. Strauss' observation expressing doubt as to how far we have come since the end of the Second World War?

## Enrichment Activities Focusing on Nazi Concentration Camps and Their Liberators

1. American GIs had experienced the horrors of war—the loss of friends, the sight of dismembered bodies, the stench of the battlefield, nearly dying themselves—yet what they found in the camps caused them to experience shock, anger, horror, disgust and, in some cases, shame. Why do you suppose that some liberators felt shame when they saw the conditions in the camps?

The following passage from Primo Levi, a survivor of Auschwitz, should be of help:

The first Russian patrol came in sight of the camp about midday on 27 January, 1945...They were four young soldiers on horseback, who advanced along the road that marked the limits of the camp, cautiously holding their sten-guns. When they reached the barbed wire, they stopped to look, exchanging a few timid words, and throwing strangely embarrassed glances at the sprawling bodies, at the battered huts and at us few still alive...They did not greet us, nor did they smile; they seemed oppressed not only by compassion but by a confused restraint, which sealed their lips and bound their eyes to the funereal scene. It was that shame we knew so well, the shame that drowned us after the selections, and every time we had to watch or to submit to some outrage: the shame the Germans did not know, that the just man experiences at another man's crime; the feeling of guilt that such a crime should exist, that it should have been introduced irrevocably into the world of things that exist, and that man's will for good should have proved too weak or null, and should not have availed in defense.

Primo Levi, *The Reawakening* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), pp. 15-16.

2. On April 12, 1945, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, commander-in-chief of the Allied Expeditionary forces in Europe, visited the Ohrdruf sub camp of the Buchenwald concentration camp system. In a letter written on April 15, 1945 to General George C. Marshall, Chief of Staff of all American armed forces, he wrote:

The things I saw beggar description...the visual evidence and the verbal testimony of starvation, cruelty and bestiality was so overpowering as to make me a bit sick. In one room, where there were piled up twenty or thirty naked men, killed by starvation. George Patton (commander of the U.S. 3<sup>rd</sup> Army) would not even enter. He said he would get sick if he did so. I made the visit deliberately, in order to be in position to give *first-hand* evidence of these things if ever, in the future, there develops a tendency to charge these allegations merely to propaganda. *1945: The Year of Liberation*, a publication by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, pgs. 141-43.

Put forward the question to students: As the generation of GI liberators and Holocaust survivors passes away, how might the words of General Eisenhower help refute the claims of Holocaust deniers that the Holocaust never happened?

3. Based on the information in the introduction and in the learning activities above, ask students to assume the identity of an American GI liberator and compose a letter to family members about what he experienced in liberating a concentration camp. What sights, sounds and smells would he describe? What emotions would he convey? What message about the meaning of what he saw would he express?

Insofar as the last question is concerned, students should bear in mind that what GI's witnessed in the camps was the culmination of the systematic, bureaucratically administered extermination of millions of people deemed enemies of or inferior to the "master race." The camps vividly demonstrated that the Nazis broke a moral and political barrier in Western Civilization that had helped guard against genocide. The breaching of this barrier poses a temptation and an example to other dictatorial and autocratic governments. Thus Nazi actions serve as a warning that the world they created could again come into being.

4. In the camps, there were prisoner resistance organizations, that at great personal risk, attempted to damage or delay the production of armaments in factories operated with slave labor.

More than two hundred prisoners in the Dora-Nordhausen camp were accused of sabotaging V-2 missile production in Dora's large underground factories and developmental facilities. They were publicly hanged.

Holocaust historian Yehuda Bauer defines resistance during the Holocaust as any group or individual action deliberately and consciously taken in opposition to known or suspected Nazi measures, actions or intentions directed against Jews and other designated "enemies of the state." (*A History of the Holocaust*, revised edition (New York: Franklin Watts, 2001), p. 266.)

Ask students to apply this definition of resistance to the following acts carried out by victims in concentration camps despite the physical and psychological torture inflicted upon them. In what respect did each of the following seek to thwart a Nazi measure, action or intention:

- a. Prisoners formed cooperatives to share resources and provide mutual assistance.
- b. Prisoners sabotaged various kinds of work, slowed down the pace of work and planned production in faulty ways.
- c. Prisoners supported weaker prisoners during roll calls, helped them with heavy labor or reassigned them to physically easier jobs.
- d. Prisoners smuggled food and occasionally medicine by bribing concentration camp guards.
- e. In Auschwitz-Birkenau, locksmiths, who had special permission to enter any part of the camp, helped to maintain contacts among prisoners and spread news on the progress of the war.
- f. Religious Jews conducted secret prayer services and recited and studied holy texts from memory.

5. After the war, about 2,000 German civilians from Nordhausen and surrounding towns were ordered by American officers to bury the dead from the concentration camp and witness its conditions. They claimed they knew nothing about what went on there. Mayors from surrounding towns were also brought to Nordhausen to see the mass graves.

Why do you believe the American military made such a concerted effort to show German civilians the liberated camps?

6. During his trial statement following the war, SS First Lieutenant Hans Karl Moesser, head of the “protective custody” section at the Dora-Nordhausen camp, said:

“The same way, with the same pleasure you shoot deer, I shoot human beings. When I came to the SS and had to shoot the first three persons, my food didn’t taste good for three days, but today it is a pleasure and a joy for me.” *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, Vol. I, ed. Israel Gutman (New York: Macmillian, 1990), p. 400.

Moesser was sentenced to death by hanging.

Is there any way to explain the complete lack of remorse and lack of conscience displayed by Lieutenant Moesser? How is it possible for a human being to deny any moral responsibility for such heinous acts?

7. In the closing months of World War II, about 500,000 concentration camp prisoners endured death marches as they were transferred from camps in danger of being overrun by the Red army in the East to camps in Germany and Austria. Then, when these camps were in danger of being liberated by Western Allied armies, many prisoners were taken on foot and by train to camps further from the front lines. It is estimated that 250,000 camp prisoners died on death marches in the months between January and May 1945.

In his recent work, *The Death Marches: The Final Phase of Nazi Genocide*, the historian Daniel Blatman describes the role of local German officials and ordinary German citizens in the murder of these prisoners, both Jews and non-Jews. While some Germans provided aid and the majority of the population remained indifferent, there were various instances in which average citizens became accomplices to mass murder. For example, in the town of Gardlegren in east central Germany, American GIs in mid-April 1945 found the charred and twisted bodies of 1,000 prisoners in a burned out barn. These prisoners had been forced inside, and, once the doors were locked, gasoline soaked straw was set ablaze and hand grenades thrown in. Anyone attempting to escape was shot. Local militia, police officers, Hitler Youth and some soldiers were complicit in this massacre, but so were ordinary German civilians.

For an extra credit project, assign the Blatman work for students to read and then respond in a short essay to this question: As Allied forces were penetrating ever deeper into Germany and it was apparent that the war was lost, what motivated some ordinary German civilians to become murderers? What impelled some to take part in the slaughter of defenseless, weak and sick prisoners as the war was coming to an end?

## **Enrichment Activity Focusing on American Postwar Employment of Nazi Scientists**

Following World War II, the U.S. government brought a number of German scientists and engineers to this country to develop the United States missile program. This was code named Project Paperclip. Despite an order by President Truman to bar entry to Nazis, many of the scientists and engineers had Nazi backgrounds and some were involved in making the V-2 missiles at the Dora-Nordhausen concentration camp. In addition, the U.S. sought out German chemists and physicians to help with the development of its chemical and biological weapons, many of whom also had Nazi backgrounds

Among the brilliant German scientists brought to this country was Werner von Braun, a Nazi party member and SS officer, who worked for the Nazis and knew about the conditions in the Dora-Nordhausen camp endured by slave laborers. He became a key figure in the space race with the Soviet Union during the Cold War and made significant contributions to the Saturn rocket that enabled the United States to be the first nation to put a man on the moon. Another key German scientist brought here after the war was Arthur Rudolf, the operations director of the Dora-Nordhausen factory where thousands of workers perished.

Given the fact that a large number of German scientists and engineers working on the American space program in the post war years had Nazi affiliations, do you think that American intelligence agencies should have brought them here? Intelligence officers involved in the decision have argued that:

1. American national interests had to supersede concerns about the Nazi pasts of the scientists and engineers.
2. This was especially true because the U.S. was locked in a Cold War with a totalitarian adversary and had to use all means at its disposal to defeat the communist enemy.
3. The recruitment of these scientists and engineers would also deny their knowledge and expertise to Germany itself and to any Neo-Nazis in that country.
4. These considerations made it necessary to sidestep President Truman's order to bar immigration to this country to those who had actively supported Nazi militarism and to "cleanse" their files of links to the Nazi past.

Stage a class debate on the question: Should German scientists and engineers with Nazi pasts have been admitted to this country and used in the Cold War against the Soviet Union. Did United States national interests at the time outweigh the fact that a number of them had supported and participated in a genocidal regime?

### **Hal Strauss' Timeline**

1914-1918-World War I. One hundred thousand German Jews out of a population of 600,000 served in the German armed forces including Jakob Strauss, Hal Strauss' father.

Twelve thousand were killed and many more were wounded fighting for their “German Fatherland.”

June 18, 1919-Germany signed the Treaty of Versailles concluding the war. It was considered by many Germans to be a humiliating peace and engendered a sense of rage and bitterness among them. It exacerbated political divisions and created a climate in which extreme, vengeful nationalists could thrive.

August 14, 1919-The Weimar Republic was established replacing the imperial German government of the Second Reich. Hal Strauss’ early years were spent during the years of the Weimar Republic, 1918-1933. Jews enjoyed full civil rights and made enormous contributions to German cultural, intellectual, economic and political life. A number of Jewish organizations flourished.

1919-The forerunner of the National Socialist German Workers Party (Nazi) party was founded. Adolf Hitler joined it and rapidly rose to become its leader. In February 1920, its racist, anti-Semitic, anti-democratic, ultra nationalist platform was written. For the Nazis, the Jews served as a handy scapegoat for all of Germany’s ills and were viewed as their key antagonists. They would be vilified and demonized in Hitler’s autobiography, *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle) written in 1924.

June 1, 1922-A right-wing anti-Semitic extremist murdered German-Jewish foreign minister, Walter Rathenau.

1922/23-Germany experienced terrible inflation that wiped out the savings of many citizens including Jews.

March 9, 1923-The Nazis attempted a putsch, a violent takeover of the Bavarian state government, which they hoped would lead to Nazi rule throughout Germany. It failed, but its perpetrators, including Hitler, received only mild punishment. Thereafter, the Nazis sought to come to power through legal means.

1924-1929-The German economy stabilized, and Nazi strength appeared to ebb.

1929/1930-The Great Depression struck Germany, and political extremism on both the right and the left rose. In particular, Nazi electoral gains soared dramatically peaking in the summer of 1932.

January 30, 1933-Due to the machinations of a right-wing cabal around aged Weimar Republic President Paul von Hindenburg, Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany just as Nazi electoral appeal seemed in decline. Within the first month of his rule, freedom of speech and of the press were ended and freedom of assembly was restricted. The Nazis first arrested their political opponents-communists, Social Democrats, trade unionists and other political dissidents. In the following months, they gained total control of the German state in which pervasive regimentation, terror and anti-Semitic propaganda flourished.

March 20, 1933-The Nazis established their first concentration camp at Dachau, northwest of Munich. It became a training ground for the SS, the Nazi "racial" elite praetorian guard that was to run other camps and become the instrument of the Final Solution. Theodore Eicke, commandant of Dachau, set forth detailed camp regulations that would be instituted in other concentration camps. Large numbers of Jews would arrive in Dachau following the Kristallnacht pogrom of November 9/10, 1938.

March 24, 1933-The Enabling Act was passed giving Hitler and the Nazi government comprehensive legislative power. It provided a veneer of legality for Nazi edicts throughout the life of the Nazi regime.

April 1, 1933-Hitler proclaimed a one-day boycott of all Jewish shops. A number of acts of violence against individual Jews occurred.

April 7, 1933-The first anti-Jewish law was passed: all Jewish civil servants, with the exception of those who had fought in World War I, were forcibly retired. This was just the first of several hundred pieces of anti-Jewish legislation, the so-called Cold Pogrom, that would relentlessly ostracize German Jews, cruelly restrict their lives and turn them into social pariahs.

April 25, 1933-the Law Against the Overcrowding of German Schools was passed. It severely restricted the number of Jewish students in German schools and universities. Those who remained were increasingly subject to insults and discrimination. Although the law did not initially impact Mr. Strauss, he was discriminated against by a school official, and his parents did eventually enroll him in a Jewish school. The Jewish community had established more Jewish schools attended by growing numbers of students. The percentage of students in Jewish schools rose from 14 percent in 1932 to 60 percent in 1934.

May 10, 1933-Josef Goebbels, Hitler's propaganda minister and faithful acolyte, conducted the public burning of "degenerate books" including a number of Jewish ones. A century earlier, the German-Jewish poet, Heinrich Heine, had prophesied, "Where one burns books, one will in the end burn people."

Summer/Fall 1933-The Nazis cleansed the universities and the arts of Jewish influences. Jewish writers and artists were prohibited from practicing their professions.

July 1933-The Kulturbund, the Cultural Society for German Jews, was founded. It served as the cultural center for German-Jewish life and strove to find employment for Jewish artists and intellectuals who had been discharged from their posts. In its first year of operation, the Kulturbund staged 69 operatic performances and 117 musical concerts. It supported three theatrical groups, two symphony orchestras and numerous choirs.

September 1933-The Reichsvertretung, the national representative body of German Jewry, was established. Rabbi Leo Baeck and Otto Hirsch headed it. The Reichsvertretung engaged in a wide variety of activities on behalf of the German-Jewish community, especially in the realms of social welfare, education and preparation for emigration. It sought to strengthen Jewish dignity and resolve, thereby enhancing Jewish moral resistance.

October 1933-Jews were barred from journalism. In response, Jewish journalists successfully expanded the German-Jewish press that raised Jewish morale. Sixty-five Jewish newspapers and periodicals and forty-five organizational bulletins with a total monthly circulation of 956,000 were published before they were banned at the end of 1938.

April 1933-September 1934-The German Zionist movement grew dramatically. It was especially attractive to a number of German-Jewish young people. The number of German-Jewish immigrants to Palestine rose. Barred from Nazified German youth organizations, German-Jewish youth formed their own.

End of 1933-By this time, some 63,000 German Jews had emigrated including some great artistic and scientific luminaries. Unfortunately, some of these emigrants had sought sanctuary in continental European countries such as Belgium, France and the Netherlands that would later be conquered by Nazi Germany. Mr. Strauss' mother wanted to leave Germany, but his father like a number of other German Jews, thought the Nazi regime would not last.

June 30, 1934-"Night of the Long Knives." Leaders of the SA (Nazi Storm Troopers) were arrested and murdered by their SS rivals. By doing so, Hitler eliminated potential opposition to his rule from within the Nazi party.

August 2, 1934-President von Hindenburg died thereby allowing Hitler to declare himself both President and Chancellor of the Third Reich. He became the "Führer" (supreme leader). All members of the armed forces swore a personal oath to Hitler pledging loyalty and total obedience to the Führer. In May of the following year, all Jews were dismissed from the armed forces of Germany.

September 1935-At the annual Nazi party rally in Nuremberg, two laws were promulgated that became the centerpieces of Nazi German anti-Jewish legislation. They were the Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor and the Reich Citizenship law. Marriages and sexual relations between Jews and "citizens of German or related blood" were prohibited. Jews could no longer be citizens, only "state subjects." These laws became the basis of broad discriminatory measures and were imposed on the countries overrun by Nazi Germany in World War II.

November 1, 1935-A supplement to the Reich Citizenship Law defined categories of Mischlinge or "part Jews." Whereas a "full Jew" had three or four Jewish grandparents, a Mischling of the first degree, for example, had two Jewish grandparents but did not practice Judaism and was not married to a Jew. So-called "racial scientists" spent months working out these absurd categories based on "Jewish blood." Hal Strauss and his family were classified as "full Jews" under these laws.

March 7, 1936-Germany occupied the Rhineland in open defiance of the Treaty of Versailles. Great Britain and France did nothing to halt the occupation, signaling their ongoing appeasement of Nazi Germany.

August 1, 1936-The Olympic games opened in Berlin. The Nazis temporarily suspended their anti-Semitic campaign in order to present a misleading picture to foreign tourists and to court international approval. Marty Glickman and Sam Stollar, two Jewish American Olympic stars, were benched by U.S. Olympic president Avery Brundage in order not to further embarrass Hitler who was upset that African American runner Jesse Owens had won four gold medals.

1937-Mr. Strauss and his family were fortunate enough to be able to leave Germany and immigrate to the United States where they settled in Monroe, Louisiana. Jakob Strauss went into business with his brother, and Hal Strauss enrolled in school, where he soon became an outstanding student.

December 7, 1941-Japan, dominated by ruthless militarists and imperialists, launched a devastating surprise attack on the American fleet at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii that brought the United States into World War II. Mr. Strauss was drafted into the American army in 1943 and was trained at Camp Ritchie Maryland as a "Ritchie Boy." The Ritchie Boys were trained to interrogate captured German soldiers and civilians in order to obtain information that could be useful in the war effort.

Late 1942/early 1943-Although the Germans had won the early battles in the European theatre and gained control of most of the continent, the tide of battle turned against them, especially with their defeat in the battle of Stalingrad in July 17, 1942-February 2, 1943.

June 6, 1944-Allied forces under the command of General Dwight D. Eisenhower landed on the beaches of Normandy in German occupied France in the greatest amphibious military invasion in history. By the end of the day on June 6, the D-Day invaders had gained a foothold in Normandy, though it came at great cost. Then, tens of thousands of Allied troops poured into France and swept across that country. Mr. Strauss and other "Ritchie Boys" landed in France shortly after D-Day and joined in the advance.

December 16, 1944-Hitler decided to make one last attempt to defeat his enemies in the west by launching an offensive in the Ardennes region of northern France. Known as the Battle of the Bulge, the Germans were at first victorious, but after bitter fighting their attack was halted. By late February 1945, they were forced to retreat across the Rhine River, the last natural obstacle to the invasion of the German heartland.

March 7, 1945-Allied forces crossed the Rhine over a bridge at Remagen captured by good luck and began their final drive against German forces. In the east, Soviet armed forces were moving steadily forward.

April 4, 1945-American forces liberated Ohrdruf concentration camp, the first Nazi concentration camp to be overrun by American troops. Ohrdruf was a sub-camp of Buchenwald located five miles northwest of the town of Weimar in east central Germany and, like Buchenwald, the site of barbaric criminal behavior against prisoners. Bodies covered with lime and other partially incinerated bodies were among the ghastly sights greeting American GI liberators. Generals Eisenhower, Patton and Bradley visited Ohrdruf on April 12. Eisenhower wrote that what he saw there "beggared description." Patton described

it as “one of the most appalling sights I have ever seen.” Eisenhower ordered all American troops in the area to visit the camp.

April 11, 1945-Mr. Strauss was with the 104<sup>th</sup> U. S. Infantry Division, nicknamed Timber Wolf that liberated the Dora-Nordhausen (also known as the Dora-Mittelbau) concentration camp. It was located in central Germany near the southern Harz Mountains. Dora-Nordhausen was the center of a large number of forced labor camps in the Harz Mountains constructed in 1944/45. The horrors Mr. Strauss witnessed there would forever be a part of his memory. The same day American forces liberated Buchenwald concentration camp.

April 25, 1945-American and Russian troops met at Torgau on the Elbe River. The 104<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division was among those U.S. forces that made contact with Soviet forces advancing into Germany from the east.

May 8, 1945-The war in Europe ended on V-E Day. Mr. Strauss, however, continued to work as an interrogator of captured Nazi war prisoners. When he was finally demobilized, he returned to his family in Monroe, Louisiana and to his fruitful and productive life in this country.

## Maps

Dora-Nordhausen/

<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005322>

Click on View Maps

## SELFHELP HOME HISTORY

*"What Selfhelp built will stand as a lasting monument to what this generation of Jewish immigrants contributed to Jewish welfare."*—Rolf Weil, Founder and former President of Selfhelp

### Beginnings

In 1938, a small group of Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany joined together to provide help to German Jews fleeing to Chicago, many of whom arrived with little more than the clothes on their backs.

"We had to do something," said one of the women organizers, Dorothy Becker. "We were saved. Anyone who was saved had an obligation."

Less than a year earlier, Mrs. Becker and her husband, Dr. William Becker, an orthopedic surgeon from Berlin, had themselves arrived in Chicago. They left Nazi Germany after a cousin was arrested following a traffic accident. The cousin's non-Jewish friend, who was also in the car, was let go with the warning that, "If he's ever seen with another Jew he'd be killed." Her cousin, however, was tortured and returned to his family with cigarette burns all over his body.

Spearheaded by Dr. Walter Friedlaender, a social welfare specialist from Berlin, the Chicago group of refugees organized a chapter of the New York City-based Selbsthilfe, Selfhelp of Émigrés from Central Europe. These immigrants came from the Jewish tradition that placed a great value on education and had higher than average educational levels and cultural interests. They brought with them the values of self-discipline, willingness to work hard and delay immediate gratification, ambition, thrift and above all a powerful desire to do everything they could to help their children succeed in a country that offered them sanctuary and opportunity. They also brought with them a deep belief in the Jewish value of social justice, the need to care about and to show compassion toward one's fellow human beings.

Over the years, the Selfhelp organization has touched the lives of nearly every German-Jewish émigré family in Chicago, and has provided shelter for more than 1,000 Holocaust survivors and refugees at its residential community for elderly victims of Nazi persecution.

From the beginning, Selfhelp volunteers visited the sick, helped the new immigrants with shopping and housecleaning, gave English lessons, provided clothing and assisted with childcare. The organization also helped the new émigrés find housing and jobs, and provided outright grants of funds to those in need, since the Nazis had robbed many of the refugees of nearly everything they had owned.

Those involved in Selfhelp did not want to rely on welfare. "We wanted to be independent," Mrs. Becker said. "We wanted to do everything ourselves, without help from anybody."

Dr. Rolf Weil, a former Selfhelp president who has been involved in the organization practically from the beginning, recalled that:

“Every family had a little box where you would put in pennies, nickels and dimes...there would be a box collection every few months.”

Dr. Weil had arrived from Stuttgart, Germany in 1936, attended Hyde Park High School and went on to earn a doctorate in economics from the University of Chicago. Dr. Weil joined the faculty of Roosevelt University in 1946. In 1965, he was named president of Roosevelt University, a position that he held for almost twenty-five years.

The core of Selfhelp in its early years was neighborhood groups on both Chicago’s South and North sides that organized social gatherings, lectures and book reviews, musical performances and current events discussions. The groups also provided physical and occupational therapy, visited the sick and isolated, and helped survivors and refugees complete requests for restitution from the German government.

After World War II, German-speaking refugees from Shanghai and other survivors began to arrive, swelling the ranks of German-speaking Jewish émigrés in Chicago, which by then numbered 12,000 to 15,000.

“One day we were sitting together and someone asked, ‘What are we going to do with our aging parents and with our grandparents?’” said Gerald Franks, the first president of the Selfhelp Youth Group, formed in 1941. He declared:

“And that was the question that got the Selfhelp Home started.”

The Franks family had arrived from Germany in October 1939 following a long and anxious wait to secure a visa to this country. During World War II, Mr. Franks served in the U.S. Army, and upon his discharge returned to Chicago where he later launched a successful career in business. Mr. Franks, who is in his nineties, continues to serve as an active member of the Selfhelp Board of Directors.

## **Founding of the Selfhelp Home**

In 1949, under the leadership of Dr. Becker, Selfhelp decided to purchase and renovate an old mansion in the Hyde Park-Kenwood neighborhood of Chicago, the center of Chicago’s German-Jewish immigrant life at that time. This was made possible by a successful grassroots fundraising campaign, which managed to raise \$10,000 for the down payment on a home large enough to house nineteen people.

“We worked very hard preparing the home,” Dorothy Becker remembered. “We did everything with volunteers.” About 80 volunteers painted, furnished and decorated the house. Within six weeks, the home had more than 100 applicants for just 19 spaces. Within a year, the waiting list stood at 300. Mrs. Becker later served as the home’s executive director from 1963 to 1988.

To even get on the waiting list, the sole requirement was that the applicant had to be a victim of Nazi persecution. Although there was an admission fee, and a rental charge of \$125 per month, residents who were unable to pay lived free of charge.

The home was formally dedicated on July 7, 1951. Most of its residents had been in the country a short time, had little money, few relatives and spoke German. From the beginning, the idea was to create at Selfhelp a feeling of the home they had forever lost because of the Holocaust.

The residents celebrated Jewish holidays together. Volunteers cooked meals with recipes they remembered from the old country. There were frequent coffee klatches with cakes and cookies, and there was lots of talk and exchange of gossip. It wasn't an institution; it was a home.

"It was a very homey kind of place, people all knew each other," said Mrs. Weil

Mrs. Weil, who is married to Rolf Weil, is the longtime treasurer of the organization and chairs the home's house committee that maintains Selfhelp's quality of care and commitment to its residents. She remembered watching in Stuttgart, her hometown, a synagogue burn during the Kristallnacht series of attacks against the Jewish communities of Austria and Germany on November 9-10<sup>th</sup>, 1938. Her father was among the 30,000 Jewish men the Nazis arrested and sent to concentration camps. He was cruelly abused, but survived. She arrived in Chicago in 1939 with her family, shortly before World War II began.

Selfhelp had become a new home, but in the process it had also become a cause. For all the volunteers, there was a powerful need to try to recreate for their parents, and grandparents, or perfect strangers, a bit of home life that had been lost. For Jews whose lives had been fractured by the Nazis, sustaining Selfhelp became a lifelong commitment. Founders, their families, and many other members of the community devoted time and money to make sure the home would remain a refuge for those who needed it.

### **Growth of the Selfhelp Home**

Applications for the Selfhelp Home soared, and in 1957, a new addition brought its capacity to 41 residents. With a waiting list of more than 300 people, in August 1963, a second Selfhelp Home was opened on the North Side of Chicago, bringing the total capacity of both homes to 110. Dozens of volunteers put in thousands of hours each year to help run the facilities.

In 1974, under the leadership of Selfhelp Home Board President Fred Aufrecht, the North Side Selfhelp Home was enlarged and the residents of the South Side home were relocated there. The new facility was able to house 180 residents. It included units for residents able to manage light housekeeping and a health care unit for those too ill or infirm to live on their own. In addition, there was an arts workshop, rose garden, multipurpose room and lounges.

The Central European Jewish refugees, who lived there, enjoyed the atmosphere, comforts and activities of the residence, but remained scarred by their experiences, Executive Director Dorothy Becker recounted:

In the very beginning, nobody talked about it. I couldn't talk about it. Now they talk much more about it. The memories come back. You cannot forget it. You dream about it. How can you forget something like this? Not when you lose your whole family, or when you see your husband killed or when you see your child split in half. How can you forget it?

During the 1980s, Selfhelp built a nine-story building as an addition to the original North Side location. A high quality health care facility was opened on the seventh and eighth floors of the enlarged building, which provided skilled and compassionate nursing care.

Also, during that time, Dr. Weil, who served as president of Selfhelp from 1975 until 1992 and continues to serve on its board of directors, worked diligently along with others to put Selfhelp on a modern professional and financial footing.

What occurred, in his words, "was a major change from a hands-on operation and micro-managing board of directors to what you would call a modern board with increasing delegation." However, Dr. Weil was always mindful of what volunteers contributed to the facility, "Volunteers are motivated by love, and love is its own reward."

Herb Roth, who came from Germany with his family in the late 1930s, became president of Selfhelp in 1992 and championed the idea that the residents were living in a home and not an institution, and so their needs, concerns and welfare were primary. He believed that residents should feel a sense of belonging to a compassionate community which is dedicated to providing life enhancing cultural and social experiences and which honors their Jewish heritage.

During his tenure as president, Mr. Roth presided over the enlargement of the Selfhelp paid staff and worked to define their roles as well as the standards of excellence the home continually sought to live up to. He also helped secure a number of worthwhile renovations of the facility, which upgraded the residents' physical environment. In addition, during Mr. Roth's presidency, Selfhelp inaugurated an assisted living component stage of care, between its independent living and skilled nursing care components, so that the home was able to offer three care options to residents. Funding for the home continued to come from bequests, from ongoing fundraising efforts especially in Chicago's German-Jewish community, including an annual fundraising event, and from a private foundation.

The Selfhelp Home currently has about 150 residents and is overseen by a 26-member board of directors, headed by Austin Hirsch, whose parents were German Jews and volunteered at Selfhelp. He and the board now control an operating budget of \$9.4 million. Board members are fully aware that Selfhelp must continually be cognizant of and seek to fulfill evolving requirements and expectations of seniors.

Recently, the home unveiled three new resident spaces. First, is a theater with custom designed chairs and special lighting and acoustics with seniors in mind. Second, is a media resource center, which includes four computer stations designed for use by senior citizens who may have declining vision, including a station where they can scan a document (even as small as a prescription label), which will be read aloud to them. Finally, there is a new sanctuary whose services are led by volunteer surrogate rabbis.

Volunteers continue to play a vital role in the home, driving residents to medical appointments, socializing with them and conducting classes.

The last 20 years have seen a changing demographic at Selfhelp. In the mid-1990s, as the population of refugees and survivors began to shrink, Selfhelp began to admit residents from the general Jewish community. In 2007, there were just 30 victims of Nazi persecution living at Selfhelp. By 2013, there were less than a dozen. Nevertheless, Selfhelp has a viable and bright future. Those who have been, and are currently involved with it, can rightfully affirm, "We are our brothers and sisters keepers."

\*The information on Selfhelp history was gleaned by interviews conducted by Ethan Bensinger with Gerald Franks, Rolf and Leni Weil and Herbert Roth in 2007, from an interview Mr. Bensinger conducted with Hedy Ciocci in 2009, from the pamphlet *Selfhelp of Chicago: A Short History, 1938-1988*, by Kurt Schwerin, from the book, *The Spirit Builder, The Life and Times of Dorothy Becker: A Breakthrough View of Aging*, by Ursula Levy, from recently issued publicity regarding Selfhelp and from an interview with Dorothy Becker on January 24, 1989 conducted by Norman Schwartz for the Chicago Jewish Historical Society.

## **Sought Learning Objectives**

Students will:

- \* Realize the importance of taking the initiative to deal with social issues in their own community.
- \* Appreciate the moral and ethical imperative to care for the elderly when they can no longer fully care for themselves.
- \* Comprehend the need for the Selfhelp organization and the Selfhelp Home to assist refugees from Central Europe.
- \* Recognize that the positive contributions and commitment of each individual can make a difference.
- \* Understand the impact that volunteers who give of themselves can make in the lives others.
- \* Be inspired to implement the values guiding the Selfhelp Home in the student's own life, including the need to have high expectations for oneself.
- \* Become more empathic and sensitive to the needs of the elderly and how to meet those needs.
- \* Become aware of the need to adapt to change and meet ongoing challenges.

## Key Questions

1. What was the goal of the Selfhelp organization founded in 1938, and how did it seek to fulfill that goal?
2. What was the goal of the Selfhelp organization in founding the Selfhelp Home in 1951, and how did it seek to fulfill that goal?
3. Why was there such a need to aid Central European refugees when the Selfhelp organization and Selfhelp Home began?
4. What were the contributions of the following men and women in film, “Refuge: Stories of the Selfhelp Home”: Gerald Franks, Rolf and Leni Weil and Herbert Roth?
5. How do the Selfhelp organization and the Selfhelp Home show the importance of volunteer activity?
6. What is the philosophy guiding the Selfhelp Home today?
7. Why do so many of its residents regard the Selfhelp Home in such positive terms?
8. What are the reasons for optimism about the future of the Selfhelp Home?

## Learning Activities

1. Ask students why Selfhelp was the name chosen for the organization and the facility. Why is Selfhelp an appropriate name?
2. Discuss with students: Before seeing “Refuge: Stories of the Selfhelp Home” and reading about the history of the home, what was your idea of the experience of residents in a senior care facility? After viewing the film and reading the history, did your idea of residents’ experiences in senior care change?
3. Assign the following question to students to submit in writing: In what respect do they see the following values reflected in the founding and development of the Selfhelp organization and home: a. Acting in a loving and compassionate manner toward fellow human beings. b. Honoring and respecting the elderly. c. Courage and resilience. d. Appreciation of the role that the arts can play in life. e. The importance of belonging to a community.

Ask them to give examples of these values from their own lives or from the lives of someone they know.

4. Ask students: From the account of the Selfhelp Home that you have read, what have been the major changes that Selfhelp has undergone throughout the years? Why did these changes come about? Although Selfhelp has been in existence in Chicago since 1951, there are certain elements in the “Selfhelp spirit” that have remained the same. Can you identify these elements?
5. Three Selfhelp Home founders, Gerald Franks and Rolf and Leni Weil, are in the film, as is Selfhelp Home past president, Herbert Roth. If you had the opportunity to meet and speak with one of these people, which one would you choose and why? What would be some of the questions you would ask him or her?

6. Divide the students into groups. Ask each group to formulate a series of questions to ask a survivor at Selfhelp. The questions should include the name of the survivor and his or her name at birth, the survivor's date of birth, place of birth and the names of members of his or her immediate family. Other questions should deal with issues such as education, religious life, social life, and experiences with anti-Semitism, immigration to America and adjustment to life in this country.

The class should then reassemble and a group representative (not the group leader) should share the results. The class will develop a composite set of questions to ask. However, some of the questions can also be used to interview an elderly relative. The class should also think about other general questions that might be asked of a relative, in order to preserve the memory of his or her life.

7. Schedule a class visit to a senior care facility. Each student should be paired with a resident. For several weeks before the visit, students should keep a journal of their daily activities. The journal might include information about the student's family, school, social life and emotions. They should share the highlights of the journal with a resident of the facility, along with a description of the student's life.

The senior resident in turn will share his or her life story with the student, an account of a typical day and the overall experience of living in a senior care facility. When the class reassembles, students will share what they learned.

8. Divide students once again into groups. Now that they have had the experience of visiting a senior care facility, ask each group to come up with some questions for Hedy Ciocci, the current administrator of the Selfhelp Home, about the facility. The class should then reassemble and a member other than the group leader should share the results. The class will develop a composite set of questions to ask. Ideally, Mrs. Ciocci could Skype with the class to respond to the questions.

Mrs. Ciocci has been the administrator of the Selfhelp Home for the past nine years. Her parents were born in Germany, and when they arrived in Chicago from New Jersey in the 1960s, they volunteered with their local Selfhelp group. Hedy Ciocci met her husband, Peter Ciocci, when the volunteer leader of the Selfhelp Home arranged a date between Hedy and Peter, who was her grandson. They have been married for close to fifty years and have two daughters and several grandchildren.

Mrs. Ciocci came to Selfhelp with a background in nursing and has worked both as a nurse and a nursing care administrator. She came to Selfhelp in October 2004.

Following is a summary of Mrs. Ciocci's philosophy as Selfhelp Home administrator:

The administrator must always be 'in the know'. This means knowing the residents and their families, knowing the staff and their families, and knowing what should and should not be done as far as the facility is concerned. It is very important for an administrator to be a good delegator although there are times when the administrator must stay 'helicopter' length to make sure that everything is getting

done. There are times when the administrator must step back and allow something to fail because that can be a learning experience for someone, but never at the expense of our residents. The staff is caring, competent and concerned with the welfare of the residents and the institution. Most of the staff has been at Selfhelp for many years.

This is due in part to the fact that there is a cheerful, positive atmosphere in the home, and that environment is important because we make every effort to make residents feel at home. I greet everyone each morning with a smile and a cheerful face. I encourage festive social events and parties. I also encourage a sense of community. I want everyone here to have the feeling that we are all one community.

Everyone on the staff wants the residents to be both physically and intellectually active, to attend exercise sessions and also concerts, trips to galleries, arts and crafts activities and current event classes. One should never stop learning, never stop growing never stop experiencing what life has to offer. Selhelp is focused on respecting and enhancing the dignity of each of our residents. Our home also honors the residents' Jewish heritage, for example with our Shabbat dinners on Friday evenings and celebration of Jewish holidays. All of these occasions are wonderful times for families to come and visit. We view maintaining family connections and family communication as very important.

My door is always open to residents, their family members and our staff to speak with me. I strongly believe in transparency. I report to our board of directors on everything that is going on in our home. Finally, I believe that it is important to be open to change. We cannot resist change just because some things have always been done in a certain way. Being open to change is part of continually striving for excellence.

I love what I do. My job is stimulating, challenging and fulfilling.

9. Among the skilled professionals working at the Selfhelp Home, there are physical therapists, occupational therapists, speech therapists, social workers, dieticians and nurses. In addition, there are medical professionals who hold regular office hours at Selfhelp, including doctors who specialize in geriatric care, a podiatrist, a dentist, an audiologist and an optometrist.

Divide the class into pairs according to interest. Ask each pair to research the amount of training and education required to become a professional in one of these fields as well as the services that each professional would provide in his or her field. Each pair of students will report their findings to the class as well as why they have a personal interest in the profession.

10. Pretend that this is 1939 and Jewish refugees are arriving from Nazi Germany with little more than the clothes on their backs. Create an advertisement for a Jewish newspaper to let them know about the services that Selfhelp offers. Use a tone that is warm and caring.

11. Selfhelp has an ongoing intergenerational program involving fifth and sixth graders from a nearby Jewish day school who come to the facility and work on art projects with residents. Pose this question to the class: Can you think of projects (including music, art, drama, dance, creative writing) that children, ages 10 and 11, could work on with senior citizens that would be interesting and productive for both?

12. At the Selfhelp Home, there is an ongoing need for volunteers. The following volunteer opportunities are found on the Selfhelp web site: Gardening: “If you have a green thumb, help make our roof garden beautiful and assist with our garden club in the spring”; Companionship to Residents: “spend some time visiting with a resident who is lonely and doesn’t have family in the area or many visitors”; Computer assistance: “help our residents learn computer skills and assist them with email”; Transportation: “driving residents to shopping” and Appointments: “take a resident to a doctor’s appointment or to do some shopping.”

Ask students: Which one of these activities would you like to volunteer for and why?

13. Selfhelp has a number of committees staffed by volunteers. For example, there is a membership committee, a health initiatives committee, a finance committee and a marketing committee. There is also a house committee. House committee members ask residents if they are satisfied with the care, programs, facilities, meals and so on, and, if not, what improvements should be made. Thus, the house committee provides continual evaluation and assessment.

Self-assessment is also valuable on a personal level. Ask students to think about what changes they would like to make in themselves and how they would like to go about measuring these changes. Encourage them to do this in writing for their private use.

14. Over the years, the Selfhelp Home has hosted several interns from a nonprofit organization called Action Reconciliation Service for Peace. Action Reconciliation is a German organization that sends a number of young German volunteers around the world to work with Holocaust survivors. In 2012-13, 19-year-old Pia Kulhawy helped residents work on their computer skills, socialized with them and helped them with daily tasks. Pia explained:

“It is very important for Germans to remember the past. I belong to the last generation that is able to talk to survivors. Probably because of that, I have the feeling that I have to do something.”

Pose the question: Why is the name of the organization, Action Reconciliation Service for Peace, which sent Pia to Selfhelp, an appropriate one?

15. Read the mission of the Selfhelp Home: “Selfhelp Home, a not for profit organization, was founded by and for the victims of Nazi persecution. It is a residential setting for the elderly, dedicated to providing the highest quality lifelong care at affordable prices. Selfhelp Home seeks to provide a family like environment that encourages maximum independence

for its residents. Selfhelp Home welcomes residents from the Jewish community while seeking to perpetuate the religious and cultural German-Jewish traditions of its founders. Ask students why a mission statement is important and how the Selfhelp Home has fulfilled its mission?

## Glossary

**Affidavit of Support:** Document submitted by an American citizen or permanent resident that accepts financial responsibility for another person, often a close relative, who is coming to the United States to live permanently. The sponsor would prevent the applicant from becoming “a public charge.”

**Allies:** The group of nations including the United States, Great Britain, British Commonwealth (e.g. Canada) Free France and Soviet Union whose armed forces were at war with Nazi Germany and its allies during World War II.

**Anti-Semitism:** Beliefs or behaviors that are hostile to Jewish people simply because they are Jews. Anti-Semitism has been termed “the oldest hatred,” but is still very much alive in the 21st century. It takes the form of making untruthful, dehumanizing, demonizing and negative stereotypical statements about Jews and the State of Israel (viewed by anti-Semites as the collective Jew), as well as engaging in discriminatory behavior towards Jews or carrying out physical assaults on their religious and communal institutions. Among other false allegations, Anti-Semites claim that the Holocaust is a hoax, that Jews are engaged in an international conspiracy to control the world, that Israel is a racist state with no right to exist and that Jews are to blame for everything that is wrong and harmful in society.

**Auschwitz:** The largest Nazi concentration camp and extermination center in the Third Reich (Nazi German empire). Auschwitz is located 37 miles west of Krakow Poland. It consisted first of Auschwitz I, the main camp, established in May 1940 to house Polish political prisoners. Auschwitz/Birkenau (Auschwitz II) was built in early 1942. It became a killing center after its construction and by the following year the quintessential site of industrialized mass murder. Auschwitz/Monowitz, (Auschwitz III), a forced labor camp, was opened by the Nazis in October 1942, and 39 sub-camps were administratively connected to it. The I.G. Farben corporation built the Buna Werke, a large synthetic rubber plant in Auschwitz III. Other large German firms also exploited prisoner labor in Auschwitz III. The name “Auschwitz” has come to symbolize the Holocaust.

**Bergen-Belsen:** A Nazi camp complex located near Celle in northwestern Germany. In late 1944, as Allied forces converged on Nazi Germany from the east and the west, Bergen-Belsen experienced an influx of thousands of Jewish prisoners evacuated on death marches from camps closer to Eastern Front. Totally inadequate food, water supplies and shelter coupled with horrendous sanitary conditions led to outbreaks of diseases such as typhus, typhoid fever, dysentery and tuberculosis resulting in tens of thousands of deaths among the Bergen-Belsen prisoner population. Anne Frank, whose diary has made her a symbol of the hundreds of thousands of children murdered during the Holocaust, and her sister, Margot, died in Bergen-Belsen in March 1945. During the five years of its existence about 50,000 prisoners perished in the camp complex. After the British liberation of Bergen-Belsen on April 15, 1945, more than 13,000 of the approximately 60,000 liberated prisoners perished. The British burned the camp to the ground to prevent the spread of disease, but after the war’s end they established a Displaced Persons camp near the camp’s original site that operated until 1951. A thriving cultural, social and political life

developed among the approximately 12,000 survivors in the Displaced Persons camp.

**Boycott:** The first state sponsored Nazi anti-Jewish boycott occurred on April 1, 1933, with uniformed Storm Troopers, or SS men, posted in front of Jewish stores and businesses to prevent clients from entering. The boycott was limited to one day as a result of international protests and met with only limited success, but the Nazis continued to encourage the boycotting of Jewish businesses through anti-Semitic propaganda and through terror tactics, thereby forcing many to go out of business.

**Buchenwald:** A concentration camp established in July 1937 near Weimar in eastern Germany. Buchenwald soon became notorious for its harsh conditions and eventually had more than 130 subcamps. Between 1937 and 1945, its prisoner population numbered about a quarter of a million people from many European countries. More than 56,000 perished in Buchenwald including over 18,000 Jews. As American forces approached Buchenwald on April 11, 1945, the camp underground rose up and seized control of the facility. United States troops liberated some 20,000 prisoners, among them 900 children, including the noted survivor Elie Wiesel, who had been protected by the camp underground.

**Chanukah:** An eight-day Jewish holiday beginning on the 25th day of the Hebrew month of Kislev and marked by the kindling of lights on a Chanukah menorah. Chanukah celebrates the victory of the Jewish Maccabees over the larger Syrian Greek army in 165 B.C.E., which eventually secured temporary Jewish independence. It also celebrates the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem and the miracle of a small jar of oil found in the Temple that lasted for eight days.

**Concentration Camp:** A key element in the “kingdom of death” founded by the Nazis. Concentration camps were constructed throughout Nazi dominated Europe to incarcerate, punish and exploit the labor of so-called “enemies of the state,” including political and religious opponents, Jews, Roma (Gypsies), male homosexuals and others. In the concentration camps, the Nazis acted without any legal or moral restraints and subjected prisoners to a merciless regime that included systematic starvation and suffering resulting in countless deaths. During World War II, the concentration camp empire expanded dramatically to hold some 750,000 prisoners by January 1945. In addition to approximately 980 concentration camps, the Nazis established about 30,000 forced labor camps as well as ghettos, euthanasia centers, “care centers” where pregnant women were forced to abort their fetuses or whose infants were murdered shortly after birth, brothels, prisoner of war camps, transit camps and extermination centers. Recent research has uncovered the shocking number of 42,500 Nazi sites of torture and death dramatically illustrative of the capacity of human beings to inflict inhuman treatment on other human beings.

**Crematorium:** A facility containing a furnace or multiple furnaces designed to burn dead bodies and reduce them to ashes. Auschwitz/Birkenau had crematoria complexes with adjoining gas chambers used to murder and burn some one million European Jews. When the crematoria could not cope with the number of bodies needing to be destroyed, the SS dug cremation pits in which bodies were burned.

**Dachau:** The first regular concentration camp established by the Nazis, Dachau was opened in March 1933 near the village of the same name adjacent to the city of Munich in southern Germany. The first prisoners in Dachau were political enemies of the Nazi regime. Then came Roma, male homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses and common criminals. After Kristallnacht (November 9th and 10th, 1938), more than 11,000 Jewish men were incarcerated there. Dachau was a school for cruelty where SS concentration personnel were trained and concentration camp organization and protocols established. Thus, it became the model concentration camp. Eventually 160 sub camps were linked to Dachau. There were more than 188,000 prisoners incarcerated in Dachau. Between January 1940 and its liberation on April 29, 1945, by American troops, over 40,000 perished in Dachau as well as many unregistered prisoners.

**Displaced Persons: (DPs) and Displaced Persons Camps:** The Second World War displaced some seven to nine million people. By the end of 1945, more than six million had returned to their country of origin or had immigrated to other countries. Two million others remained including 250,000 Jews. In order to deal with these homeless individuals, Displaced Persons camps were established by the western Allies in Germany, Austria and in parts of Italy. Eventually, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration assumed responsibility for running the camps. Despite the grim housing conditions in the Displaced Persons camps, Jewish DPs managed to establish an active social, educational and cultural life in them. Zionist groups were an influential and inspirational force in the camps, and many Jews strove to reach Palestine despite restrictions imposed by the British. Following Israel's Declaration of Independence on May 14, 1948 and the liberalization of U.S. immigration quotas to allow a number of Displaced Persons into this country, thousands were able to leave Displaced Persons camps. By 1952, almost all the Displaced Persons camps were closed.

**Exit visa:** A document appended to a passport allowing the bearer to leave Nazi Germany and Austria. As time went on, the Nazi government increased the paperwork and penalties required to obtain an exit visa, so that ultimately all those attempting to flee the Third Reich could take with them were ten German marks. Thus they often arrived penniless in the countries to which they had fled.

**Forced Labor:** From the outset of World War II, Jews were assigned to forced labor. Jewish ghetto authorities were compelled to deliver able-bodied Jews for deportation to special labor camps where they experienced cruel and inhumane conditions. The Nazis also imposed forced labor on other subject populations, but Jews, viewed as the most dangerous Nazi "racial" enemy, suffered most from the brutality of the forced labor regime. Forced labor was also imposed on all concentration camp prisoners. During World War II, there were Germans who wanted to exploit Jewish labor as much as possible to aid in the war effort. However, those who were primarily ideologically driven wanted to annihilate the Jews. The latter view prevailed in 1942 and 1943 as millions of Jews were murdered. The following year as labor shortages increased and the Allies attacked on several fronts, Germany and its allies used large numbers of Jews as forced laborers. Starvation, disease and sadistic treatment resulted in countless deaths of Jewish slave laborers, but factors such as luck, youth, resilience and determination helped some Jewish forced laborers escape annihilation.

**Gas Chamber:** A fixed installation used to asphyxiate prisoners with poison gas. Gas chambers were first used by the Nazis in their euthanasia program in which they murdered what they considered to be “life unworthy of life,” that is, the mentally and physically disabled who were deemed unfit to live in a healthy “racial community.” They were murdered with carbon monoxide. Euthanasia personnel used their experiences to help equip and operate gas chambers in the Belzec, Treblinka and Sobibor extermination centers in Poland where carbon monoxide gas was also used in gas chambers. Internal combustion engines generated the gas. Jews and Roma were murdered in hermetically sealed gas vans in the Chelmno extermination center in Poland. The largest gas chambers were constructed in Auschwitz/Birkenau. There, victims were murdered in gas chambers disguised as shower rooms with Zyklon B gas because this gas brought about death more quickly than carbon monoxide. Zyklon B gas was also used in the extermination/concentration camp at Majdanek.

**Genocide:** A systematic mass killing in which a government or another authority succeeds in a deliberate intent to destroy a political, religious, ethnic, racial or cultural group. The extermination of the group may take place directly through mass murder or indirectly by creating conditions that lead to the group’s destruction.

**Ghetto:** A defined quarter in those areas of Nazi dominated Europe where Jews were forced to live under conditions of the utmost deprivation. Ghettos were first established in Poland. The Nazis appointed so-called Jewish Councils (Judenrate) to administer each ghetto. These bodies were expected to follow all Nazi orders. Ghettos in larger communities were closed, sealed by a wall or closed in other ways. Ghetto inhabitants suffered from malnutrition, severe overcrowding and disease, yet in a number of large ghettos, Jews engaged in moral and spiritual resistance. The largest ghetto was that of Warsaw, which at its height contained some 450,000 Jews in a tiny area. The Warsaw ghetto and others were temporary sites for segregating Jews until, once the Final Solution was decided upon and implemented in early 1942, they were sent to extermination centers. Researchers have identified some 1,150 Nazi ghettos. The last ghetto liquidated was the Lodz ghetto. Its residents were sent to Auschwitz in August 1944.

**Kindertransport** (children’s transport): The name given to rescue efforts between 1938 and 1940 that brought thousands of refugee children to Great Britain from Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland. Begun in the wake of Kristallnacht, the Kindertransport project saved some 10,000 children under the age of seventeen, 7,500 of whom were Jews, from the Nazis. Private organizations and citizens sponsored the children. Most of the Kindertransport children never saw their parents again.

**Holocaust** (literal meaning--“completely burned sacrifice”): A term used to describe the state-sponsored systematic murder of six million Jews and millions of others carried out by the Nazis and their collaborators. The Nazis defined the Jews as their primary “racial enemies” and were obsessed with murdering every single Jewish man, woman and child in order to extinguish what they considered to be the pernicious Jewish “racial spirit” inherent in them. In addition, the Nazis murdered millions of others, including Poles, Russian

prisoners of war, Roma, political opponents, “a-socials.” disabled persons and members of anti-Nazi underground organizations.

These murders were justified by Nazi racial ideology and a view of the world in which eternal struggle was the rule and might makes right. The Hebrew word, Shoah, is sometimes used in place of Holocaust.

**Jewish Holocaust Survivor:** Any Jew who lived for any length of time under the rule of the Nazis or their allies and who was discriminated against, persecuted or displaced due to the policies of the Nazis and their collaborators during the years 1933 to 1945.

**Kapo:** A prisoner in a concentration camp or a forced labor camp selected by the SS to have authority over other prisoners. Many Kapos oversaw prisoners on labor details. A number of them, though not all, imitated the cruelty and brutality of their SS overseers. There was a broad range of behaviors among Kapos.

**Kristallnacht** (“Crystal Night” or the Night of the Broken Glass): The state-organized pogrom (violent attack) during the night of November 9th and 10th, 1938, against the Jews of Germany, Austria and the recently-annexed Czech Sudetenland. Kristallnacht resulted in the murder of close to 100 Jews, the incarceration of 30,000 Jews in concentration camps, the destruction of 267 synagogues and the damage of many others and the plundering of some 7,500 Jewish businesses. Hitler authorized the pogrom, and Storm Troopers, SS men, Nazi party members and members of the Hitler Youth Organization carried it out. After the pogrom, the Jews were totally driven out of the German economy. In addition, Nazi anti-Semitic measures became even more radical, the SS became more responsible for dealing with “the Jewish Question” and any hope Jews had for continuing to be able to live under the Nazi regime evaporated. Many historians view Kristallnacht as the beginning of the Holocaust.

**Mengele, Josef (1911-1979):** The notorious Auschwitz SS physician who presided along with other SS doctors over numerous selections of newly arrived prisoners, deciding who would be chosen for immediate murder in the gas chamber (including pregnant women, mothers with small children, other children deemed unfit for labor, the sick, the weak and the aged) and who would be selected for forced labor, particularly the young and able-bodied. Dr. Mengele conducted horrific medical experiments on inmates, especially twins, motivated by Nazi racist ideology. Like other Nazi doctors he totally disregarded the norms of moral scientific inquiry, and like many other Nazis he escaped being tried for his crimes after the war.

**Meningitis:** An inflammation of any or all of the three membranes enclosing the brain and the spinal cord. Meningitis is usually caused by a bacterial infection.

**Nazi:** A member of the National Socialist German Workers Party, whose forerunner, the General Workers Party, was founded on January 5, 1919. The party subsequently became known as the National Socialists. It had an authoritarian and centralized structure, a supreme charismatic führer (leader) in Adolph Hitler, and an ideology based on ultra-nationalism, militarism, racism, anti-communism and anti-democratic thinking. The Nazis

came to power on January 30, 1933, aided by the Great Depression, German resentment against the Treaty of Versailles that set harsh terms for Germany defeated in World War I, divisions among Nazi political opponents and the fatal miscalculations of a group of right-wing politicians. Upon assuming power, the Nazis embarked on building a “New Order” based on a one-party state, the supremacy of the Führer, racial conflict between the master race and its racial opponents, chief of whom were the Jews, the quest for Lebensraum (living space) and the total disregard of traditional moral constraints.

**Nuremberg Laws:** The fundamental pieces of Nazi anti-Semitic legislation consisting of the Reich Citizenship Law and the Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor, which was initially promulgated at the annual Nazi Party Nuremberg Conference on September 15, 1935, and later supplemented. The Nuremberg Laws deprived Jews of German citizenship and civil rights, and made marriages and extra marital sexual relationships between Jews and Germans punishable by imprisonment. Subsequent legislation defined a Jew as someone with at least three Jewish grandparents (by religion) or who had two Jewish grandparents and practiced Judaism or was married to a Jew. There were also “racial” definitions for Mischlinge (part-Jews) of varying degrees. The Nuremberg Laws legalized the political, social and economic ostracism of German Jewry and legitimized anti-Semitic discrimination and persecution. They were followed by several hundred pieces of other anti-Semitic legislation. Supplemental legislation to the Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor extended it to the Roma and other minorities deemed “racially inferior.”

**Red Army:** The army of the Soviet Union that was ultimately successful in its struggle against Nazi Germany and its allies after their invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. The Red Army’s victory came the cost of millions killed and wounded.

**SS (Schutzstaffel or Protective Squadron):** Originally a protective service of Hitler and other high Nazi party functionaries, the SS grew in importance under the leadership of Heinrich Himmler into the most important organization in the Nazi state. The SS was considered its so-called “racial elite.” The SS assumed control of Nazi Germany’s security apparatus including police functions, intelligence gathering and concentration camp administration. In 1940, it added a military component, the Waffen SS. Thus the SS was in control of a vast police, economic and military empire. Members of the SS played a central role in the planning and implementation of the Holocaust.

**Shabbat:** The Hebrew term for the Jewish Sabbath ordained in the Ten Commandments, “Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy.” Shabbat begins on Friday evening with the lighting of two candles accompanied by a prayer praising God for bringing holiness into the lives of Jews by commanding the kindling of the Shabbat candles. The Jewish Sabbath concludes on Saturday at sundown. Shabbat is a day of rest and prayer, and an opportunity to cease from work and come closer to others and to God.

**Shanghai:** A port city in China under Japanese control from 1937-45 to which Jewish refugees could flee even without generally required documents. The Nazi government supported immigration to Shanghai because it was believed that Jews would perish in a city whose economy was shrinking and which was overrun by some one million Chinese refugees fleeing the war between China and Japan. By the outbreak of World War II on September 1,

1939, some 17,000 Jews had found refuge in Shanghai. Several hundred more would follow. Although life in Shanghai was difficult and often bitter, the great majority of Jewish refugees who arrived there survived.

**Shema:** The most well-known prayer in Judaism. The first six words of the Shema are found in the book of Deuteronomy (6:4). They may be translated as, “Hear O Israel, the Lord is Our God, the Lord is One,” thus proclaiming the Jewish belief in the unity and the sovereignty of God. These words are then followed by the recitation of three paragraphs from the Five Books of Moses proclaiming the obligation to love and serve God, reward and punishment and God’s redemptive power. The Shema is recited in both the daily morning and evening Jewish prayer services.

**SA ( Sturmabteilung or Storm Troopers):** Also known also the “Brown Shirts,” this paramilitary organization was the instrument of Nazi terror that facilitated the Nazi Party’s rise to power during the years of the Weimar Republic (1918-1933) through its struggle against Nazi political opponents, especially the communists. At its height, the SA boasted a membership of four million. After the purge of the SA, carried out by the SS on the order of Hitler on the night of June 30-July 1, 1934 (known as “The Night of the Long Knives”), the SA declined in political significance though it continued to exist for the duration of Nazi rule.

**Synagogue** (from the Greek meaning assembly): A Jewish house of worship, study and assembly, and the central institution in Jewish life today. Synagogues existed for several centuries before the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 C.E. As long as the Temple stood, it was the central place of Jewish worship and the site of the sacrificial cult. After the destruction of the Temple, individual houses of prayer, instruction and community were created wherever Jews lived. Therefore, the synagogue contributed to reinforcing and preserving the Jewish people’s identity and continuity. The synagogue contains an Ark holding Torah Scrolls (the Five Books of Moses), a bimah (raised platform) from which the Torah is read, an Eternal Light and a seven branch Menorah. Siddurim (Jewish prayer books), Chumashim (The Five Books of Moses and prophetic writings), kippot (head coverings) and tallitot (prayer shawls) are also found in a synagogue.

**Theresienstadt** (in Czech Terezin): A former Austrian imperial fortress that from November 1941 became a ghetto for Jews in Nazi occupied Czech lands. It also became a “settlement area” for special categories of German Jews, such as those over the age of 65, celebrities and special classes of German-Jewish World War I veterans. Nazi propaganda portrayed Theresienstadt as a “model Jewish settlement” to deceive foreign governments and agencies such as the International Red Cross whose representatives visited an artificially beautified Theresienstadt in June 1944. Due to malnutrition, disease and ill-treatment, more than 33,000 Jews perished in Theresienstadt, and more than 88,000 passed through the ghetto on their way to ghettos and extermination centers in the East, mainly Auschwitz. Despite the deplorable conditions in the ghetto, Jews were able to maintain an active cultural life there including theatrical and musical performances. Theresienstadt was liberated by Soviet forces on May 8, 1945.

**United States Immigration Quotas:** Nativist and isolationist pressures in the United States led to the establishment of a strict quota system that culminated in the 1924 immigration act that set an annual cap on immigration to this country of 164,000. The quotas were discriminatory, designed to reduce immigration from “undesirable” European countries located in eastern and southern Europe. However, though the annual German quota was set at 25,957, only a portion of it was filled in the early years following the Nazi assumption of power in 1933, due to U.S. State Department restrictions. After Germany annexed Austria in March 1938, the Austrian and German quotas were combined and used to the full until the outbreak of World War II in September 1939. Fewer Austrian and German Jews were then admitted due to fear of spies. At no time after the Nazis came to power was Congress or the White House willing to increase quotas. By 1940, about 90,000 Central European Jews had found sanctuary in America.

**Visa:** An officially authorized document added as a supplement to a passport allowing entry into and travel within a particular country or geographical area. Jews persecuted by the Nazis desperately sought, often in vain, to acquire visas to nations or areas which were viewed as havens. Visas came to be seen as “tickets to life.”

**“Winston”:** This refers to Winston Churchill, the British Prime Minister from 1940 to 1945 and again from 1951 to 1955. Winston Churchill was one of the few high-ranking Western politicians who recognized the threat posed by Hitler and the Nazi regime to Western Civilization. His courageous and determined leadership throughout the war years helped to inspire the British people in their struggle against the Nazis and their allies.

The terms defined above have been used in the film *Refuge: Stories of the Selfhelp Home*. A more comprehensive glossary of terms relating to the Holocaust can be accessed through the “Resources” page in this study guide.

## Study Guide Resources

There are a number of resources in print and online as well as films, listed under “Learning Activities” in the various sections of the Study Guide. They are relevant to the specific topic focused upon in that section. In addition, the instructor might consult the following resources that can be accessed online.

1. Anti-Defamation League. See: Holocaust Education-Anti-Defamation League, Echoes and Reflections: A Multimedia Curriculum on the Holocaust <http://www.echoesandreflections.org/> and Dimensions: A Journal of Holocaust Studies [http://archive.adl.org/braun/dimensions\\_toc.asp](http://archive.adl.org/braun/dimensions_toc.asp)

2. Facing History and Ourselves. This organization offers a wide variety of tools for teaching about the Holocaust. See: The Holocaust, Facing History and Ourselves at <http://www.facinghistory.org/resources/collections/holocaust>

3. Simon Wiesenthal Center. See Teacher’s Resources-Simon Wiesenthal Center : <http://motlc.wiesenthal.com/site/pp.asp?c=gvKVLcMVluG&b=394657>  
Click on: “The Courage to Remember”, “Glossary of the Holocaust”, “Education”, “Library” and “36 Questions About the Holocaust”.

4. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The Holocaust Encyclopedia is a valuable resource for Holocaust educators with a host of relevant well-researched articles on the topic <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/> .

See also: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum-Online Exhibitions: <http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/>  
and United States Holocaust Memorial Museum-Teaching About the Holocaust: [http://www.ushmm.org/education/foreducators/will/pdf/teaching\\_holocaust.pdf](http://www.ushmm.org/education/foreducators/will/pdf/teaching_holocaust.pdf)

5. Yad Vashem. See International School of Holocaust Studies, Yad Vashem <http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/education/>  
Click on topics under: “Educational materials” and “Resources”.

## **A message from the Director of the film, *Refuge: Stories of the Selfhelp Home***

The social and economic upheavals of Germany in the 1930s have impacted me since my earliest childhood. My life has been shaped by the trauma of my family's experience of being uprooted from Germany in the years preceding the Holocaust. Leaving behind family, home, friends and everything that was familiar and comfortable, they were just one of hundreds of thousands of Jewish families whose lives were dislocated by the Nazi regime. Able to flee as refugees to pre-state Palestine, and becoming refugees yet again in coming to America, they were the lucky ones; twenty-five members of my family were murdered by the Nazis.

This personal experience of dislocation and loss is one of the reasons I wanted to document the story of Selfhelp, its founders and its residents in the film, "*Refuge: Stories of the Selfhelp Home*." Selfhelp, which has been a refuge for over 1,000 victims of Nazi persecution, is an unusual microcosm of the Central European Jewish experience. It is home to concentration camp survivors, as well as Jews who left before World War II to become refugees in the United States, Palestine, Shanghai, and South America. At Selfhelp, there are those who went into hiding in France, and residents, who as children, were brought to safety in England through the Kindertransport. How did all of these people survive during the Holocaust, in hiding, in concentration camps or as refugees? Hope. Luck. And something else: strength of character, perseverance and resiliency.

What continues to be found at Selfhelp is a strong sense of community and of comfort, which is known in German as "gemütlichkeit." Underlying this feeling, is a profound sense of grief shared by survivors and refugees alike. At heart for them, Selfhelp is a story of dislocation. These residents share a history of separation from family and place, of loss, but also of rebirth in America. This is also the story of my family.

Our film explores a community that will not exist for much longer. Within 10 years, there will be no Jewish victims of Nazi persecution living at Selfhelp. In fact, of the 30 refugees and survivors I originally interviewed in 2007, just nine are still alive today, all in their 90s and above. As a filmmaker, I feel obligated to give a voice to these last eyewitnesses to life as it was before, during and after the war, so that future generations understand the consequences of intolerance, injustice and unmitigated hatred. Through the inspiration of my own family's experience, the story of Selfhelp is one that had to be told.

Ethan Bensinger

### **Learning Activities Focused on the Film**

The instructor should ask the students what they think the goal of Ethan Bensinger, the filmmaker of "*Refuge: Stories of the Selfhelp Home*," was in making his film. The instructor should then tell the students what Mr. Bensinger said his aim was.

The following are some of Mr. Bensinger's additional thoughts about why he made his film:

"I wanted to capture some of the experiences of survivors from Central Europe who were German speaking and part of German culture. Many of the stories are gut wrenching and deal with separation from families and place and incredible losses. Each story is so different, so compelling and often sad. However, I also wanted to show that these people who lived through horrific experiences had the resilience and character to become productive individuals in their new home in America. They persevered and built good lives.

In addition, I wanted to celebrate the creation of the Selfhelp organization and acknowledge the dedication and services of volunteers to the Selfhelp Home. I hope this film will encourage the spirit of volunteerism and show how just a few dedicated people can change lives and truly make a difference through kindness, care and devotion. I want to help our young people understand how their involvement can change the world, one person at a time. The stories are sad, but the triumph of the human spirit prevails, and it is important for our children to hear the message of a generation that is disappearing."

2. In keeping with one of Mr. Bensinger's key goals for the film, ask students to discuss any volunteer activities in which they have participated, as well as volunteer activities they would like to try. Students should go online and do an Internet search of volunteer opportunities in their own community. Remind students that even contributing a small amount of time to a worthwhile cause or institution can be significant not only for the cause or institution, but also for the student personally.

3. Ask students why they think Mr. Bensinger's film is titled, "*Refuge: Stories of the Selfhelp Home*?" Is the title appropriate? Is there an alternative title students might suggest? If students could make a film, what subject would they choose and why? What title would they give to their film?

4. How would students rate "*Refuge: Stories of the Selfhelp Home*" on a four star basis? In evaluating the film, remind students they should consider its aim, whether or not this aim was achieved, how engaging the film was for them, whether the stories or elements of the stories will remain with them, whether they gained new insights or pieces of information and the quality of the film (camera work, sound, editing, music and contributions of historians).

5. A recent project by German national broadcaster Deutsche Welle traced the remnants of Germany's thousand-year-old Jewish community around the world. The series focused on ten different countries, including the United States. In this country, Deutsche Welle profiled Mr. Bensinger's film and the Selfhelp Home. Cornelia Rabitz, the project coordinator for the Deutsche Welle, stated:

Through this project, we want to show the great loss to Germany as a result of the genocide and the emigration of the Jewish people and also to show the richness of the Jewish culture that landed in the rest of the world. At the hands of the National

Socialists, German society lost authors, artists, directors, philosophers and leading researchers. Germany's loss enriched the rest of the world.

Ask students: What do you think the Deutsche Welle project will teach Germans and others? What are the lessons that you think we can learn from what happened to German Jews under the Nazi regime? What did the project co-ordinator mean when she said: "Germany's loss enriched the rest of the world?"

6. Assign students to research the life and contributions of one of the following people who fled Nazi persecution for sanctuary in the United State. The purpose is to illustrate concretely "the great loss to Germany as a result of the genocide and emigration of the Jewish people." The research should focus on the meaningful contributions the individual made to American society. Research subjects are: Theodore Adorno, Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits, Albert Einstein, Henry Kissinger, Hans Morgenthau, Nelly Sachs, Sir Georg Solti, Leo Strauss and Billy Wilder.

7. Ask students to go to the web site of the film: [http://refugestories.com/?page\\_id=12](http://refugestories.com/?page_id=12) and click on the "Media" tab. There, they will find a series of articles, and radio and television reports, about the film in chronological order. Assign students to each read an article and then write a three-paragraph summary about what the article says about the film and the filmmaker. The summary should begin with the title of the article and the name of the writer and include key pieces of relevant information the writer conveys to the reader.

8. Ask students to design a poster for the film. What wording would they use to describe it? What visuals would they put on it? How would they emphasize the major goals the filmmaker had in making the film? In order to assist in this endeavor, students should look at the "Home" and "About" segments of the "*Refuge: Stories of the Selfhelp Home*" web site.

9. Pose the question to students: If you could make an educational film about a topic of interest to you, what film would you make and why? What would be the most important piece of information that you would want viewers to gain from your film? What would be the most important lessons you would want viewers to learn from your film? Would you use any animation in your film? Why? Would your film be in color or in black and white? Explain.

10. Ask students whether they think film is a powerful medium and why? What can film convey that the printed word cannot convey? What can the printed word convey that film cannot?

## Curriculum Vitae-Dr. Elliot Lefkovitz

Elliot Lefkovitz received his doctorate in European history from the University of Michigan. He is Adjunct Professor of History at Loyola University of Chicago where he teaches a course on "The Holocaust and Twentieth Century Genocide." Dr. Lefkovitz is also Adjunct Professor of Jewish History and Jewish Education at Spertus Institute in Chicago. He is the former Education Director and current Adult Studies Coordinator at Am Yisrael Congregation in Northfield, Illinois. Dr. Lefkovitz has been the historical advisor on several Holocaust related films including "*Refuge History of the Selfhelp Home*" and is the author of several histories of Chicago Jewish institutions. He has conducted oral interviews with a number of Holocaust survivors and serves on the Board of Directors of the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center.