

CH. 4: THE HOLOCAUST

IN

THE HOLOCAUST

A NORTH CAROLINA TEACHER'S RESOURCE

FEATURING THE NARRATIVES OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS
WHO BECAME NORTH CAROLINA RESIDENTS

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North Carolina Department of Public Instruction

IV ■ THE HOLOCAUST ■

OVERVIEW

- *“How did I survive such hell? I learned to accept the nightmarish camp as the real world and coped from one minute to the next. Blind luck also played a part.”*

—Susan Cernyak-Spatz

The term Holocaust comes from the ancient Greek word *holokaustos* which means “sacrifice by fire” and has come to refer to the Nazi policy of annihilating all the Jews of Europe.* During World War II, between 1939 and 1945, nearly six million Jews were murdered in mass shootings and in gas chambers, concentration camps, ghettos, forced labor factories, and more. Millions of others were also targeted for Nazi persecution and murder. The victims were grouped by “race”—those deemed genetically and ethnically inferior, and by “behavior”—dissidents and political opponents of the Nazi rule in Germany and German rule in Europe. Estimates of those murdered are below; exact numbers cannot be known.

PERSONS TARGETED by “RACE” (genetic inferiority, ethnic group, nationality, physical disability)

▪ Jews	6 million
▪ Soviet prisoners of war [†]	2-3 million
▪ Non-Jewish Polish civilians	1.8-1.9 million
▪ Soviet civilians	at least 7 million
▪ People with disabilities in institutions	at least 250,000
▪ Roma (Gypsies)	196,000 – 220,000
▪ Persons of African descent	3,000

PERSONS TARGETED FOR “BEHAVIOR”

▪ Homosexuals	hundreds, possibly thousands
▪ Criminals (recidivist) & asocials	> 70,000
▪ Jehovah’s Witnesses	1,900
▪ Political opponents & resistance fighters	Unknown

By categorizing people as “subhuman” and racially and lethally dangerous to the German people, the Nazis justified their brutal persecution of these groups. These were not accidental deaths or casualties of war, but systematically planned murder and mass annihilation.

CONCENTRATION CAMPS As soon as they came into power in 1933, the Nazis created a network of concentration camps to imprison political enemies and persons deemed threats to the regime, including Jews and non-Jews. In 12 years of Nazi rule, from 1933 to 1945, they operated nearly 40 major concentration camps in Germany, occupied Poland, and the occupied Soviet Union, including Dachau, Buchenwald, Mauthausen, Ravensbrück, Majdanek, and Auschwitz. Prisoners were starved and worked to death or used in merciless medical experiments conducted by German physicians and university scientists. With the coming of war, the German authorities expanded the camp network throughout occupied Europe.

* The Hebrew words *Shoah* (total annihilation) and *Churban* (catastrophe) are also used to describe this historical event.

[†] The figure for Soviet POWs includes some 50,000 Jewish soldiers. The figure for Soviet civilians includes at least 1.3 million Soviet Jewish civilians (Soviet borders of 1937). *Note:* We do not have the demographic tools to precisely distinguish between Soviet and Polish soldiers and civilians killed specifically for racial reasons or for “behavior” such as resistance to or non-compliance with the German occupation authorities. Nevertheless, we can state that the Germans conducted military and anti-partisan operations as well as responded to violations of occupation policies with a racist disregard for the lives of Polish and Soviet civilians and Soviet POWs. [Peter Black, Ph.D., Senior Historian (ret.), U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC.]

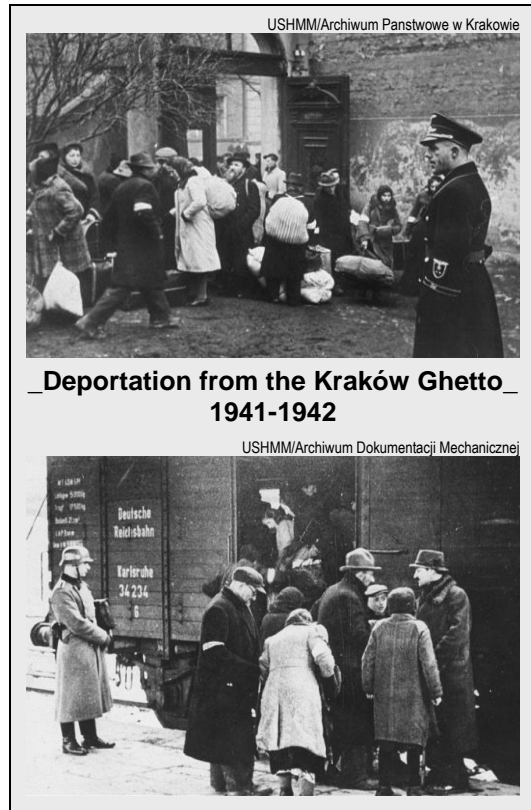
POLICY OF FORCED EMIGRATION In the prewar years, the Nazi government tried to entice German Jews to leave Germany by issuing harsh discriminatory laws and both initiating and encouraging waves of street violence against them. The regime officially encouraged Jewish emigration, which greatly increased after the government-initiated attacks of Kristallnacht in November 1938. Of the 523,000 Jews in Germany in 1933 (less than one percent of the population), about 282,000 had left Germany by September 1939 when the war began; of the approximately 200,000 Jews residing in German-annexed Austria, nearly half had left by 1941. After the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, and in the context of reaching a decision on annihilating the European Jews, the Nazi leadership officially banned Jewish emigration in October 1941.

JEWS FORCED INTO GHETTOS After the Germans invaded and defeated Poland in 1939, they confiscated personal and business property of both non-Jewish Poles and Polish Jews, as well as all Polish government property and facilities. In some areas Polish Jews were formally forced into ghettos or informally restricted to certain areas of cities.

These were meant to be temporary holding pens before the Nazi leaders finalized their plans for the fate of Europe's Jews. Jews from Germany and from parts of German-occupied Europe were later sent to ghettos in occupied Poland. The German authorities created hundreds of ghettos, primarily in occupied Poland and the occupied Soviet Union, from where they planned to remove all Jews from Europe.

ANNIHILATION POLICIES BEGIN After occupying Poland in autumn 1939, the Germans implemented a policy of mass murder aimed at the Polish leadership classes—political, military, religious, and community leaders from the national to the village level. They shot, hanged, and killed by other means tens of thousands of non-Jewish Poles, possibly more than 100,000, by the summer of 1940.

Later, after Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, German SS and police and military authorities conducted wholesale murder of civilians whom they deemed to be a threat to their



in the Soviet Union alone, as were thousands of Roma, Soviet officials and civilians, including persons with disabilities. Thousands were also killed in mobile “gas vans” by carbon monoxide gas pumped into sealed panels to asphyxiate those locked inside.

THE “FINAL SOLUTION” It is unknown exactly when Hitler abandoned forced emigration of Jews from Germany as official policy and authorized the “Final Solution of the Jewish Question”—the total annihilation of all the Jews of Europe. The transition had begun in late 1941 when the SS established the killing centers at Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka to murder the Jews living in occupied and annexed Poland. About 1.7 million Jews were killed in these centers, as well as non-Jewish Poles, German and Polish Roma, and Soviet prisoners of war, by carbon monoxide gas piped into gas chambers, or in the case of Chelmno into the backs of sealed paneled trucks. In 1942 the concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau was turned into a killing center with the addition of gas chambers and other equipment and structures to facilitate mass murder.

At an important meeting in January 1942 known as the Wannsee Conference, a group of top Nazi leaders and German high-level government officials met outside Berlin to plan the massive bureaucracy needed to implement the Final Solution.* They were told that Hitler had given sanction for the “evacuation of Jews to the East.” The officials knew what was intended. Jews from all over western, central, southern and southeastern Europe would be deported to killing centers—facilities designed specifically for mass murder. Jews were to be gathered at “concentration points” in cities on or near railroad lines and taken by train to the killing centers.

The five killing centers were located on the territory of German-occupied Poland due to the density of the Jewish population there, the good quality of transportation facilities in the form of railroad routes and roads, and the relative independence and depth of SS personnel stationed in German-occupied Poland. Each of these killing centers underwent renovation as the SS worked to streamline the mechanized process of killing. Despite frequent rail transport freezes due to German military needs on the Eastern Front, various SS agencies skillfully negotiated with the Reich railroads to devote the necessary resources to the annihilation process.

AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU The word “Auschwitz” has come to signify the depths of man’s inhumanity to man. Few prisoners who entered its gates survived to the end of the war; about two thirds died in the gas chambers or by lethal injection within hours of arrival.

Established by the SS as a concentration camp in 1940, the first inmates of Auschwitz were mostly Polish political prisoners rounded up as the German occupation authorities tightened their grip on Poland; at least half of the 140,000 Poles imprisoned there did not survive. Later



Auschwitz barracks (photograph taken after liberation)

* From Germany and most of the rest of Europe except for occupied Poland and the occupied Soviet Union.



thousands of Soviet prisoners of war were sent to Auschwitz; only 92 were alive at the last roll call. These victims died from direct killing, disease, starvation, beatings, brutal forced labor, and exposure. Some were killed in the first experiments with the poison gas Zyklon B, which came to be the primary murder weapon in Auschwitz. Other prisoners were the first victims of the infamous medical experiments, designed to cause unimaginable suffering, conducted by SS physicians, among them Dr. Josef Mengele.

In 1942, the first Jewish prisoners arrived in Auschwitz-Birkenau, also known as Auschwitz II, which would become the largest killing center operating under Nazi rule. From across Europe the trainloads arrived with doomed captives—from Poland, Slovakia, the Czech lands, Yugoslavia, Austria, Hungary, Greece, Italy, Germany, France, Holland, Belgium, Norway.

Railroad freight cars and passenger trains, packed with terrified prisoners, arrived in Auschwitz-Birkenau at a steady pace, sometimes two or three per day. SS guards forced the prisoners off the trains, often separated them by gender (children under 12 stayed with the women), and forced them to wait in line for the “selection” process. A few—the young, healthy, and those with useful skills—were selected for forced labor and allowed to survive. They were sent to the prisoner barracks, forced to give up their valuables, possessions and clothes, have their heads shaved, and be disinfected in showers. Approximately half of these prisoners eventually died of starvation, exhaustion, disease, exposure, direct killing, and horrific mistreatment.

The SS murdered about two thirds of those sent to Auschwitz on the day they arrived. Older people, women with children under 12, pregnant women, and those who appeared weak and sick were “selected” for immediate death in the gas chambers. Up to several thousand people a day could be killed in the four gas chambers, after which their bodies were burned in the crematoriums or open-air “ovens” made out of rail track. By mid-1944, thousands of people were murdered daily. Over 1.1 million people died at Auschwitz, including nearly one million Jews. The term “death factory” aptly describes the efficient and brutal process of mass murder in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

NAZIS TRY TO DESTROY EVIDENCE OF THE “FINAL SOLUTION” As German offensives met defeat in early 1942, special SS units in occupied Poland and the occupied Soviet Union were ordered to locate the mass graves of those previously shot and to dig up the bodies and burn them in order to hide evidence of their crimes. (They often used Jewish forced laborers to exhume and burn the bodies.) In 1943 the SS closed down and dismantled Treblinka, Sobibor, and Belzec; Chelmno had been closed earlier that spring and, after a short resumption of operations in summer 1944, closed down for good. The gas chambers at Auschwitz-Birkenau were destroyed in early November 1944.

The SS evacuated concentration camps beginning in the summer of 1944, as the Allied armies closed in on Germany from the west (American, British and British Commonwealth troops), and from the east (Soviet troops). As Soviet troops approached Auschwitz in January 1945, surviving prisoners were either shot or forcibly evacuated to camps farther west in Germany, where the SS hoped to maintain control over the prisoners as a labor force and also as a bargaining chip in a plan to negotiate a separate peace with the Western Allies. While two thirds of the surviving prisoners survived the brutal winter evacuations, many died later of disease and malnutrition. As the Allied armies closed in, the SS abandoned many camps before they could destroy all the evidence of what later would be termed “crimes against humanity.”

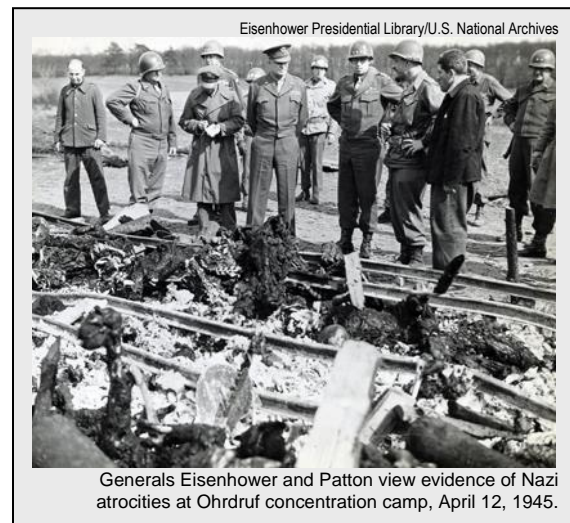
LIBERATION The liberating soldiers were stunned and horrified by what they found in the camps—thousands of starved, emaciated, and desperate prisoners abandoned to their fate by the escaping SS management and guards. Piles of unburied corpses, train cars full of emaciated bodies, crematoriums holding half-burned bodies.

Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, visited the liberated camp of Ohrdruf in Germany in April 1945 and soon conveyed his reaction:

“We continue to uncover German concentration camps for political prisoners in which conditions of indescribable horror prevail. . . . I have visited one of these myself and I assure you that whatever has been printed on them to date has been understatement. . . . the evidence of bestiality and cruelty is so overpowering as to leave no doubt . . . about the normal practices of the Germans in these camps.”

*“I made the visit deliberately in order to be in a 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.’”**

On April 29, 1945, shortly before he took his own life, Hitler wrote his last political testament. He blamed the war on the Jews, insisting they were solely responsible for causing the war and their own destruction. On May 7-9, 1945, Nazi Germany surrendered unconditionally to Allied and Soviet forces.



What was the Holocaust’s grim death toll of the European Jews? It is estimated that up to 2.7 million Jews died in the five killing centers, hundreds of thousands in the ghettos and concentration camps,[†] at least 1.6 million in mass shooting operations (in German-occupied areas of Poland and the Soviet Union, and in Serbia and Croatia), and at least half a million from other causes.[‡] By May 1945, six million Jews—two thirds of the Jews of Europe, who had numbered 9.5 million in 1933—had perished.



* Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, statement #1: telegram to Gen. George C. Marshall, 19 April 1945; statement #2: letter to Gen. George C. Marshall, 15 April 1945 [emphasis in original]. Eisenhower Presidential Library, US National Archives.

† The total for Auschwitz-Birkenau, originally established as a concentration camp, is included with the five killing centers.

‡ For estimates of the total deaths of Jews and non-Jews in the Holocaust, see “Victims of the Holocaust and Nazi Persecution” from the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/documenting-numbers-of-victims-of-the-holocaust-and-nazi-persecution.

ONLINE RESOURCES

■ Major Sources of Online Holocaust Resources (entry pages for curriculum materials)

- ♦ U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) www.ushmm.org/teach
- ♦ Yad Vashem (The World Holocaust Remembrance Center, Israel) www.yadvashem.org/education.html
- ♦ Facing History and Ourselves www.facinghistory.org/educator-resources
- ♦ Echoes and Reflections echoesandreflections.org/teach/
- ♦ New Jersey Commission on Holocaust Education www.nj.gov/education/holocaust/
- ♦ Holocaust Memorial Resource & Education Center of Florida www.holocaustedu.org/education/
- ♦ Holocaust & Human Rights Education Center hhrecny.org/curriculum/
- ♦ North Carolina Council on the Holocaust www.ncpublicschools.org/holocaust-council/
- ♦ Florida Center for Holocaust Education fcit.usf.edu/holocaust/resource/resource.htm

■ Resources from the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum

- ♦ Teaching About the Holocaust www.ushmm.org/teach
- ♦ Introduction to the Holocaust encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/introduction-to-the-holocaust
- ♦ Fundamentals of Teaching about the Holocaust www.ushmm.org/teach/fundamentals
- ♦ What is Genocide? encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/what-is-genocide
- ♦ Holocaust Encyclopedia (5800 entries) encyclopedia.ushmm.org/en
- ♦ The Final Solution encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/final-solution-overview
- ♦ Mobile Killing Squads encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/mobile-killing-squads
- ♦ Einsatzgruppen (mobile killing units), archival footage (1:43) encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/film/einsatzgruppen-mobile-killing-units
(NOTE: footage of mass execution of Jews in Latvia)
- ♦ Who Were the Victims? encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/osaic-of-victims-an-overview
- ♦ The Holocaust in Maps encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/gallery/the-holocaust-maps
- ♦ The Holocaust: Animated Map encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/animated-map/the-holocaust
- ♦ The U.S. and the Holocaust encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-united-states-and-the-holocaust
- ♦ The Aftermath of the Holocaust encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-aftermath-of-the-holocaust
- ♦ The Holocaust and World War II: Key Dates encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-holocaust-and-world-war-ii-key-dates
- ♦ Video: The Path to Nazi Genocide (38:31) www.ushmm.org/learn/holocaust/path-to-nazi-genocide/the-path-to-nazi-genocide/full-film
- ♦ War Crimes Trials encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/war-crimes-trials?series=48246

■ Resources from Echoes and Reflections

- ♦ Timeline (interactive) of the Holocaust echoesandreflections.org/timeline-of-the-holocaust/
- ♦ Lesson Plans echoesandreflections.org/teach/

■ Holocaust: Essays and Lessons (Facing History and Ourselves) www.facinghistory.org/topics/holocaust

■ Journeys through the Holocaust, online exhibition with video excerpts from Shoah Foundation

- interviews of survivors sfi.usc.edu/exhibits/journeys-through-holocaust

■ SEE the online Holocaust teaching resources recommended by North Carolina Holocaust educators. ■

www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/holocaust-council/resources/teachingresources.pdf



Access the valuable teaching resources of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum at www.ushmm.org/teach. The museum's offerings include lesson plans, teaching guidelines, online activities, interactive maps, audio and video collections, the *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, and other exemplary classroom resources.

LESSON ■ THE GHETTOS

- **Narrative: Gizella in the Lutsk Ghetto**
- **Narrative: Anatoly in the Zhmerinka Ghetto**
- **Narrative: Morris in the Łódź Ghetto**

The term “ghetto” does not conjure the images of horror that “concentration camp” does, yet their horrors were real and lethal for hundreds of thousands of Jews. The Nazis established over 1,100 ghettos to segregate and isolate the Jewish people of an occupied region before murdering them in mass shootings or deporting them to death camps to be gassed or worked to death. Armed uprisings occurred in several ghettos but were brutally suppressed. Many ghettos lasted for years, and thousands of Jews perished in the deplorable conditions and harsh forced labor—part of the Nazi plan for the ghettos.

Introduce the North Carolina survivors whose narratives are presented here.

- ♦ **Gizella Gross Abramson** was 13 when the Jews of Lutsk, in Nazi-occupied Poland, where she was staying with an aunt and uncle, were forced into a ghetto. She later joined the Resistance but was arrested and sent to the Majdanek concentration camp. In the U.S., she settled in Raleigh in 1970.
- ♦ **Anatoly Kizhnerman** was 5 when his family was forced into the ghetto of Zhmerinka in Nazi-occupied Soviet Union. They survived for three years, the last few weeks in hiding, until the Soviet army liberated the city. He moved to Greensboro in 1980.
- ♦ **Morris Glass** was 12 when he and his family were forced into the ghetto of Łódź, in Nazi-occupied Poland, where they survived for four years until deported to Auschwitz. He moved to Raleigh in 2000.

Have students consider these questions as they read the survivors’ narratives.

1. What were the physical living conditions and hardships in the ghettos?
2. How did ghetto residents survive? How did they deal with the scarcity of food?
3. What were the mental and emotional hardships of living in the ghetto?
4. How did ghetto residents cope with these hardships?
5. How did family bonds help them cope? How did memories of the past nurture them?
6. What were the ever-present threats from the Nazi guards and officials?
7. Conduct research on how food, medicine, and other necessities were smuggled into the ghettos. How was this done? How were children smuggled *out* of the ghettos?
8. What questions would you ask Gizella, Anatoly, and Morris about their ghetto experiences and survival?
9. What strengths and resources of your own do you think would have helped you survive in a Nazi ghetto? What would have been your most daunting challenges?
10. Choose one of these statements from the narratives and create a PowerPoint presentation in which the statement appears at the top or bottom of each slide. Choose photographs from the Nazi ghettos to illustrate the statement; access photos from the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum at www.ushmm.org/collections/the-museums-collections/about/photo-archives (scroll down to “Search the Catalog”).
 - ♦ Gizella Abramson: *“There was no food, no sanitation. There was typhoid and starvation everywhere. There were random killings every day. You could hear the sound of screaming and moaning every night.”*

- ♦ Morris Glass: *"I came to know well the grim reality of ghetto life—it was a life of hunger, disease, filth, fear, and death. It was like something out of a science fiction book. It was horrible beyond my ability to describe it."*
 - ♦ Anatoly Kizhnerman: *"I remember everything. Because when you're at this age—I was about five years old—and you see terrible things, when parents see how their children are dying because they don't have enough to eat—it's very deep in your memory."*
11. Memorials to ghetto victims have been created throughout eastern Europe. Study these memorials and do research to learn about their creation and reception. How do they honor and grieve the dead? How do they reveal the importance of remembering horrors? How do they say "Never Again"?
- ♦ Kraków Ghetto Memorial (Poland) www.tracesofwar.com/sights/29682/Memorial-Victims-Jewish-Ghetto-Cracow.htm
 - ♦ Lviv Ghetto Memorial (Ukraine) wikimapia.org/4945516/Memorial-to-the-victims-of-the-Jewish-Ghetto.htm
 - ♦ Minsk Ghetto Memorial (Belarus) wikimapia.org/181686/Memorial-The-Pit-of-Minsk-Ghetto-victims
AND commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_monument_to_victims_of_Minsk_ghetto_at_Pritytskogo_street,_Minsk,_Belarus.jpg
 - ♦ Łódź Ghetto Memorial (Poland) www.lodz-ghetto.com/the_radegast_station.html,38
 - ♦ Warsaw Ghetto Uprising Memorial (Poland) en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monument_to_the_Ghetto_Heroes#/media/File:Monument_to_the_Ghetto_Heroes_in_Warsaw_05.JPG



ONLINE RESOURCES

■ Resources from the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum

- ♦ Ghettos encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/ghettos
- ♦ Life in the Ghettos encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/life-in-the-ghettos
- ♦ Hidden History of the Kovno Ghetto www.ushmm.org/exhibition/kovno/
- ♦ "Give Me Your Children": Voices from the Łódź Ghetto www.ushmm.org/information/exhibitions/online-exhibitions/voices-from-lodz-ghetto
- ♦ Warsaw Ghetto Uprising encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/warsaw-ghetto-uprising
- ♦ Conditions in the Warsaw ghetto, archival footage (search for more archival footage of the Warsaw ghetto)
 - 0:48 encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/film/conditions-in-the-warsaw-ghetto
 - 1:16 encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/film/conditions-in-the-warsaw-ghetto-1

■ Resources from Yad Vashem

- ♦ The Ghettos www.yadvashem.org/holocaust/about/ghettos.html
- ♦ Mutual Assistance within the Ghetto Walls (lesson) www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/education/lesson_plans/ghettos.asp
- ♦ Warsaw Ghetto www.yadvashem.org/holocaust/about/ghettos/warsaw.html
- ♦ Voices from the Inferno: Holocaust Survivors Describe the Last Months in the Warsaw Ghetto yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/warsaw_ghetto_testimonies/index.asp

■ Resources from Facing History and Ourselves

- ♦ Ghettos www.facinghistory.org/topics/holocaust/ghettos
- ♦ The Jewish Ghettos: Separated from the World www.facinghistory.org/holocaust-and-human-behavior/chapter-8/jewish-ghettos-separated-world

"Translate statistics into people."

In its guidelines for teaching about the Holocaust (see Supplemental Materials), the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum recommends using first-person accounts of survivors

"precisely because they portray people in the fullness of their lives and not just as victims; [they] add individual voices to a collective experience and help students make meaning out of the statistics."

GHETTO ■ GIZELLA IN THE LUTSK GHETTO

Gizella Gross was born in Tarnopol, Poland, in 1928. She was 11 when World War II broke out and 13 when the Nazis took over her region of the country, soon beginning their persecution of the Jews.

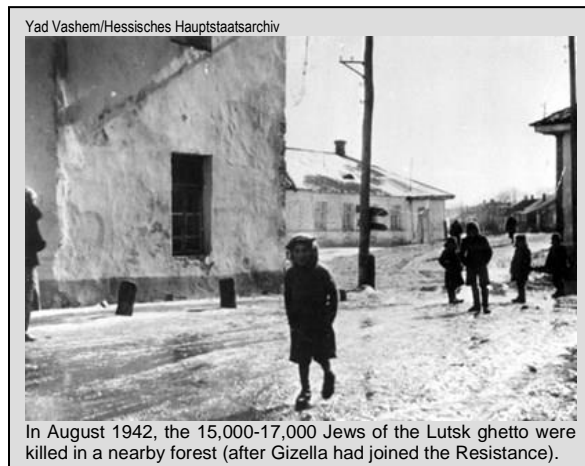
My family was very unusual because they owned land, and not many Jews owned land. My memories are of the house and of the soil, and how the house smelled on Shabbat [the Jewish Sabbath]. It was scrubbed clean and I remember the smell of the Sabbath dinner. The candles were on the table. Later when times were bad and I felt lonely, so alone and hungry, I always thought of the candles and of the family. And I always hoped that I would be able to experience this feeling once again.



Gizella, age 9 (left), with her cousin Bella and younger brother Zenon, 1937

Gizella's family was forced to move to a small apartment in a nearby city. Her parents sent her to stay with an aunt and uncle in the city of Lutsk, hoping she would be safer—but they were soon forced into a ghetto.

They created a ghetto at the edge of town and moved all the Jews into shacks. All of us had to wear yellow patches on our chests and on our backs. There was only one water pump, and it was padlocked except for one hour a day. There was no food, no sanitation. There was typhoid and starvation everywhere. There were random killings every day. One day I watched a work



In August 1942, the 15,000-17,000 Jews of the Lutsk ghetto were killed in a nearby forest (after Gizella had joined the Resistance).

detail coming back into the ghetto. All at once the Germans started shooting for no reason and cut half of them down. Each day trucks came and took people away, and every day the line at the water pump was smaller and smaller. You could hear the sound of screaming and moaning every night. The Germans said they were relocating people to safety where they could work with honor; a Jewish committee was forced to select who was to go. They forced the deported people to write postcards back to the ghetto so the people would not panic.

[Read "Gizella Joins the Resistance" in Ch. 5 (Resistance).]

ONLINE RESOURCES

- *Witnesses to the Horror: North Carolinians Remember the Holocaust*, by Cecile Holmes White in cooperation with the N.C. Council on the Holocaust, 1987 archive.org/details/witnessestohorro00whit
- The Lutsk Ghetto (Yad Vashem) www.yadvashem.org/untoldstories/database/index.asp?cid=815

Selection from Cecile Holmes White, *Witnesses to the Horror: North Carolinians Remember the Holocaust*, published in cooperation with the N.C. Council on the Holocaust, 1987, archive.org/details/witnessestohorro00whit. Reproduced by permission of the author. Family photograph reproduced by permission of Michael Abramson, son of Gizella Abramson.

GHETTO ■ ANATOLY IN THE ZHMERINKA GHETTO

Anatoly Kizhnerman was born in 1935 in the Soviet Union and moved as a young child with his family to Zhmerinka in the Ukraine, a Soviet territory at the time. When Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, the family found themselves in the midst of war.

As you know, the war between Germany and Russia started on June 22, 1941. In a couple of days the Germans were in the same city where I was living. Of course, most people didn't have time to leave the city.

You know, the Ukraine was invaded many times by Germany before the Bolshevik Revolution [Communist Revolution, 1917], and Jewish people, who often had suffered at the hands of the Russian military, had the opinion that German soldiers were very nice to Jews. You have to remember, the Ukraine was one of the most nationalistic and anti-Semitic republics in the U.S.S.R. [Soviet Union], and Jews suffered a lot from the Ukrainian people, too.



The Germans divided the city into two parts. Under the agreement between Germany and Romania, which was a satellite of Germany, part of the Ukraine had to belong to Romania. All the Jews living in the Romanian part were put into a ghetto. In the other part of the city, all Jews were killed.

I remember everything. Because when you're at this age—I was about five years old—and you see terrible things, when people can kill each other for a piece of bread because they don't have more to eat, when parents see how their children are dying because they don't have enough to eat. It's very deep in your memory. And you saw everything. And a child's memory keeps very well. Every human being—anyone, animals—when you see something which is dangerous, you will try to protect yourself. You saw how people were killed. You saw how the German soldiers looked, how they killed people. And, of course, you develop an attitude by which you protect yourself. And, as a child, you do the same. When you see a soldier, you would try to escape.

When they put us into the ghetto, they used adults for labor to work on their roads, to fix the bridges which were destroyed during the invasion, and which were destroyed by the Soviet army when they left.

It was not legal, but you would exchange your clothes for a meal, for food. And that was the only way to try and survive. Our house [in the ghetto], a three-bedroom house, was crowded—it was only a place to sleep—but it had a big garden and we had a lot of vegetables, and this gave us

I remember everything. Because when you're at this age—I was about five—and you see terrible things, when people can kill each other for a piece of bread because they don't have more to eat, when parents see how their children are dying . . . It's very deep in your memory.

the opportunity to survive. We ate potatoes, I remember. It's all we got. Again, I say, if you put a person in this situation, his only thought is to survive.

I don't know how they found out, but somebody, the non-Jewish people, told the Jews that the Germans were starting to prepare to kill the Jews. This day when somebody gave a message of orders to kill the Jews on that night, everybody left the ghetto. And every family around the ghetto, they started to save the Jews. I remember when we started to run, somebody started to shoot at us. I told my mom, "Don't worry. Run. Faster. Faster."

Anatoly's mother found a family who hid them until the Soviets liberated the region in March 1944. He completed college in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg), Russia, and married fellow survivor Rachel Giralnik in 1957. In 1980 they came to the United States with their son and a year later settled in Greensboro, North Carolina.

[See Rachel Kizhnerman's narrative in Ch. 6, Rescuers.]

ONLINE RESOURCES

- *Witnesses to the Horror: North Carolinians Remember the Holocaust*, by Cecile Holmes White in cooperation with the North Carolina Council on the Holocaust, 1987
archive.org/details/witnessestohorro00whit
- Invasion of the Soviet Union by Germany, June 1941 (U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum)
encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/invasion-of-the-soviet-union-june-1941
- The Invasion of the Soviet Union and the Beginnings of Mass Murder (Yad Vashem)
www.yadvashem.org/holocaust/about/final-solution-beginning/mass-murder-in-ussr.html



Anatoly with his son Jerry in the Soviet Union, 1963



Rachel and Anatoly Kizhnerman in Rome shortly before their arrival in the U.S. with their son, 1979

Selection from Cecile Holmes White, *Witnesses to the Horror: North Carolinians Remember the Holocaust*, published in cooperation with the N.C. Council on the Holocaust, 1987, archive.org/details/witnessestohorro00whit. Reproduced by permission of the author. Family photographs reproduced by permission of Rachel Kizhnerman and Shelly Weiner.

GHETTO ■ MORRIS IN THE ŁÓDŹ GHETTO

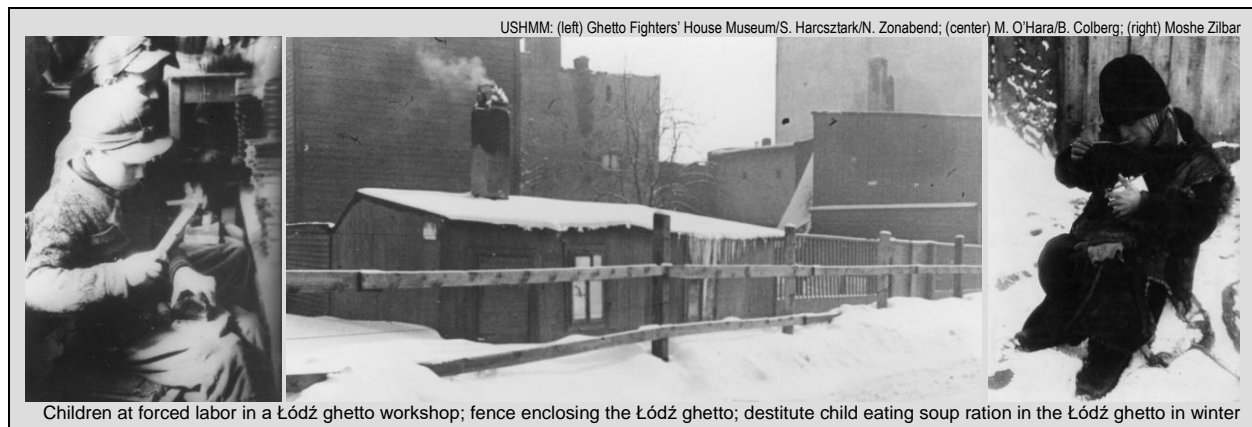
Born in Pabianice, Poland, Morris Glass was 11 years old when Germany invaded his country in 1939. He and his family endured four and a half years in the Pabianice and Łódź ghettos. In August 1944 the residents of the Łódź ghetto were sent to Auschwitz, where Morris, his father, and his brother were separated from his mother and two sisters, whom he never saw again.

For four and a half years, from 1940 to 1944, I lived in Jewish ghettos, first in my hometown, Pabianice, and then in neighboring Łódź. I was almost 12 when my confinement began, and I was 16½ when it ended. In the intervening years I came to know well the grim reality of ghetto life—it was a life of hunger, disease, filth, fear, and death. Because the conditions were so deplorable, many people died from starvation, malnutrition, and disease while confined in the ghettos. Along with the other ghetto dwellers, my family suffered greatly. But somehow we survived. Wretched as our situation was, as long as we were together and able to sustain and comfort one another, life had meaning.



I could not believe the sights and smells that greeted me when I reached the Łódź ghetto in August 1942. It was like something out of a science fiction book. It was worlds away from the Pabianice ghetto, and it was horrible beyond my ability to describe it. As we approached the ghetto, I could smell it—the stench was horrible. On entering, I saw dilapidated buildings, neglected pavements, flooded gutters, and crowded, narrow streets. I saw a barbed-wire fence topped by electric wires, and it had German guards stationed every hundred meters or so along it. Most startling of all were the people—they looked like walking death. The expressions on their faces were entirely different from any I had ever seen. It was as though they were not even human.

My first impressions were supplemented later by images that are seared in my memory. Foremost among these is the image of people pulling carts full of sewage. The faces and clothing of these people still haunt me. Their clothes were rags, and their faces bore the mask of death. And the smell was overwhelming in its awfulness. It is simply impossible to describe. Men, women, and children desperate for food pulled these carts to receive an extra ration of



bread. I still remember the children moaning, “Mama, Mama.” Starvation is indeed a harsh master!

The Nazis had been sending Jews and Roma [Gypsies] from the ghetto to the Chelmno death camp. Soon after Morris and his family arrived, the Nazis deported over 20,000 victims in one week, primarily old and sick people, and children under ten. This became known as the Gehsperre [curfew].

The Gehsperre began when Rumkowski* announced that the Germans had demanded that 20,000 Jews be deported. Those designated were children under ten, the elderly, and the sick. The announcement was followed by eight days of agony and terror as the selections were made and the victims deported. No one went to work. Every day we were forced to stand in a line in front of our apartments until the selections had been completed. Anyone found inside a building was shot. Grouped in families, we stood silently, prayed, and waited for the arrival of the SS and the Jewish police. When they approached, we stood very still. I held my breath and looked straight ahead. I was terrified that I would do something to attract attention to myself. The SS would look up and down the rows of Jews and then they would point at a person and persons to come forward.

When a child was selected, the parents would fall on their knees, clutch the child, cry, beg, and plead. . . . It was heartbreaking; it was unbearable.

red when an elderly person was selected. The elderly knew that they were going to their deaths—I heard some of them repeating the schema [last prayers] as they were led away. It was heartbreaking; it was unbearable.

Although several people were taken from our building, my family and my aunt’s family were spared. My parents did what they could to look younger. My father shaved his beard, and my mother and my aunt rubbed red beets on their cheeks to give color to their faces. What I suspect really saved us was our ages and the fact that we were relatively healthy.

So after the Gehsperre we settled into a daily life of hard work and hoped that by working we could survive. At first we were wary of what might happen next. However, as the deportations became more infrequent and then virtually stopped, we became almost complacent. We developed a feeling that our lives would continue in this mode until somehow we were liberated. But it was not to be. The decision to destroy all the Jews under Nazi control had been made. We had simply been granted a reprieve in order to serve the interests of the Third Reich.

USHMM/Ghetto Fighters' House Museum: Moshe Zilbar/Nachman Zonabend/Photo: M. Grosman



A child selected for deportation during the Gehsperre roundup says farewell to his family through the wire fence of the central prison, September 1942.

Many terrible scenes took place during the Gehsperre—it was awful. When a child was selected, the parents would fall on their knees, clutch the child, cry, beg, and plead. The SS would respond by kicking, beating, or even shooting the mothers and fathers. If a child refused to come forward, the child was shot. In an effort to minimize the brutality, the Jewish police tried to hold the parents back and to keep them from running after their children. A similar scenario occurred

when an elderly person was selected. The elderly knew that they were going to their deaths—I heard some of them repeating the schema [last prayers] as they were led away. It was heartbreaking; it was unbearable.

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* Chaim Rumkowski was the Jewish man appointed by the Nazis as leader of the Jewish administration (Council of Elders) in the Łódź ghetto. Rumkowski and his family were deported on the last transport from the Łódź ghetto to Auschwitz, where they were killed.

Within the Nazi system of exploitation and control, my family and the other Jews of Łódź tried to maintain some semblance of normal life. As promised [by Rumkowski], my family was given an apartment in the building where my aunt Balcia Kantorowicz, her husband, and their seven daughters lived; it was on the third floor. Our happiness at being reunited with our relatives was muted when we learned that two of our cousins had already been deported and that another was dying of tuberculosis. I would watch as she died—she was only 13.

Our apartment consisted of three rooms and compared to our apartment in the Pabianice ghetto, it seemed small, cramped, dirty, and antiquated. However, we soon found out that it was luxurious compared to the lodgings of most people. My brother and I shared a bed in the kitchen, my sisters shared a bed in a small bedroom, and my parents slept in the living room. Sleeping was difficult, not because of the crowding, but because of the bugs. As soon as the lights were turned off, bugs would come out of the plaster walls; when you turned the lights back on, you could see them everywhere. Actually, we did not need to see the bugs to know that they were there; we could feel them as they crawled over our bodies and bit us. We always had bites, tiny red marks everywhere. Bugs were a plague throughout the ghetto.

One good feature of our apartment was a balcony. Father used this little space to grow tomatoes and other vegetables like beets and lettuce to supplement our meager diet. People grew food wherever they could find space.

Cramped, bitten, and lacking heat and sanitation,* we nevertheless had our family intact. Having a family to come home to, share concerns with and embrace, helped me cope with the hunger and fear which might otherwise have overwhelmed me. My family sustained me, and gave me a reason to live.

I especially remember how my parents comforted me whenever the SS appeared in the ghetto. The sight of the SS terrified me. You never knew what they would do—sometimes they snatched people and sometimes they seized property. I was a skinny little kid and the SS were big, or so they seemed to me. Their black uniforms were adorned with a death's head, and they carried guns and whips. Knowing how frightened I was, my parents would move close to me, and after the SS had left, they would comfort me with a hug and a kiss. I remember my mom saying to me, "Child, we will get through this." I was so frightened by the SS that, even after I came to America, I was still afraid whenever I saw someone in uniform.



* The apartment had no running water or indoor toilet, so the residents had to use a outhouse which "was almost always overflowing with sewage," Morris remembers.

We were all working. In fact, the reason that the Łódź ghetto lasted as long as it did was that its factories were producing materials that were vital for the German military. We produced everything imaginable. We had metal factories where parts for trucks and cars were manufactured. We made uniforms and boots for the soldiers, and we produced pots, nails, furniture, and many other necessary commodities. Everyone in Łódź worked. It was not an option. If you didn't work, you didn't eat. Furthermore, as far as the Germans were concerned, and as they had made abundantly clear during the *Gehsperre*, if you could not work you were worthless.

In a landscape with little humor, one play on words that circulated in the ghetto went like this:

Who is going to be the loser of the war?

The **JID** or Yid [slang for Jew]—**J**apan, **I**taly, and **D**eutschland [Germany].

Who is going to be the winner?

The **ACHSE** [the Axis: German for an alliance of two or more powers]—the **A**mericans, **CH**inese, **S**oviets, and **E**urope.*

Although I did not know about it at the time, the one authentic source of news in the ghetto was a radio that one of the residents, an engineer named Widawski, constructed. Father listened to this radio; however, he did not tell me about it until after we were deported. Not only having a radio but also listening to one was punishable by death. Somehow the Gestapo learned about the radio. When they came to arrest Widawski, he committed suicide so as not to betray anyone.

Once the radio was gone, we were cut off from any verifiable accounts of the war except our own eyes and ears. By the summer of 1944, we occasionally saw Allied planes flying eastward, and we could hear the artillery on the Eastern Front, presumably from the conflict raging in and around Warsaw. This could only be good news.

It was difficult to keep up with time. Whereas before the war, life seemed to move from one special day to the next, life in the ghetto seemed to lurch forward in some strange way without reference to the calendar. We lost any concept of time except in relation to how many days there were until we would get rations. We all knew when the food was coming: it was the only unit of time that mattered. Food was the main topic of conversation.



We usually received our rations every ten days, and, as anxious as we were for food, the process of obtaining it was grueling. First, we had to stand in a line to receive the ration card. Each family received one card with the rations for the entire family. You then had to stand in another line to receive the food allotment, and after that, you had to stand in a third line to receive the bread allotment. I hated standing

* The Axis nations were Germany, Italy, and Japan. The Allies included the United States, Nationalist China, the Soviet Union (Russia and its satellite territories), and European nations including the United Kingdom (Britain) and France (after the end of Nazi occupation).

in those lines. I would be exhausted from work, and then I would have to stand and wait and wait in some line. Our family took turns, and that made it a little more bearable.

The rations that we received were small, and the quality of the food was poor. We had barely enough food to survive for a few days, much less ten. The bread was not really bread; I don't know what it was made of, but it was rumored to contain a lot of sawdust. We received enough for each of us to have a small slice of bread each day. The food ration consisted mainly of potatoes, unbleached flour, and kohlrabi, a vegetable similar to a broccoli stem or a cabbage core. Kohlrabi was disgusting; I absolutely hated it. Occasionally we received beets, radishes, cabbage, or turnips, and sometimes we got a can of horse meat, some margarine, or a little brown sugar. On rare occasions, we would receive potato peels—yes, potato peels. They were extra food, and were considered a reason to celebrate.

Yes, the hunger was so terrible that there were times when I really didn't care to go on any longer, but fear of dying was greater than the hunger. It didn't help to sit and bemoan the circumstances, so I tried to accept the situation, adjust, and make the best of it. That was not always

easy to do, but I was born with an optimistic and cheerful outlook. These innate qualities helped me to plod on.

Added to the hunger and cold was the constant sight of the dead and dying. Everywhere there were beggars—skeletons begging for food. There was nothing to do but to ignore them. We were surrounded by the bodies of dead people. When I went to work there would be corpses on the streets; this was especially true during the winter. After a while, I became almost inured to the sight of dead people. In addition, there were the carts filled with corpses, maybe 20 to 30 bodies in a cart. These carts were pulled by



skeletal men, women, and children who were just one step away from death themselves. People were dying in such large numbers that the ghetto was forced to resort to mass unmarked graves where the bodies were just dumped in one after another.

About a year and a half without deportations, by the spring of 1944 we were beginning to think that maybe, just maybe, we would survive, that we would outlive the war. We were turning out an enormous amount of items essential to the German military, and we felt assured that this productivity insulated us against death. We simply could not imagine that a people as logical as the Germans would bite the hand that was feeding them. Yes, the Germans were logical, but unfortunately for us, they followed their logic even when it was self-destructive. At the heart of Nazism was the goal of creating a Master Race, primarily by eliminating inferior races and people. In the final year of the war, attaining this goal took precedence over winning the war. The Łódź Jews would perish.

In spring 1944 the Nazis began liquidating the ghetto—rounding up the residents to send them to their deaths in Auschwitz and Chelmno. At first they told the Jews they were being sent to Germany for forced labor and asked for “volunteers.” The Glass family went into hiding.



About a week after the evacuation announcement, when it became obvious that few Jews would volunteer for the transports, the Germans began to force us into the trains. They would seal off an area and then march the captured Jews to the station. At this point my family went into hiding.

Our hiding place was in the basement of a former soup kitchen. The manager of the kitchen was a friend of my parents, and my mother had worked there. Hiding there with our family were the manager, his wife, and his two children, and the manager’s brother,

his wife, and his three children. There were fifteen people in all. Fortunately, our hiding place was fairly large—we could all sit at the same time—and it was not too primitive. While I was totally ignorant about the plan to hide, it was obvious that preparations had been made well in advance. Canned goods, flour, potatoes, and even aspirin and Band-Aids had been stored there. We thought we could manage because we were sure that the Soviet army would liberate us shortly.*

I don’t remember how long we stayed in the cellar, but it must have been a number of weeks. After the first week or so, we began to leave the cellar at night to get some fresh air, and sometimes we slept on the floor of the kitchen. It was quiet at night because there were no roundups or transports—the Germans were wary of being in the ghetto after dark. During the day, we stayed in the cellar and wrote in journals, played checkers or cards, and read; we did not talk much because there was so little oxygen. After we had been in hiding about two weeks, we started to hear the Germans announcing on loudspeakers that anyone found hiding in basements, attics, or anywhere else would be shot on the spot. It was not long before we heard shots signaling executions.

The announcement and the shots caused some of us, especially the younger ones like me, to wonder whether hiding was the best plan. We started saying things such as, “Look, if the Germans find us, they will shoot us immediately, but if we go to Germany to work, we will have a chance to survive.” The more shots that we heard, the more afraid we became of being discovered, and the more convinced some of us became, including me, that we should leave our hiding place and join the deportees. Finally my father said, “Let’s make a decision, and let’s

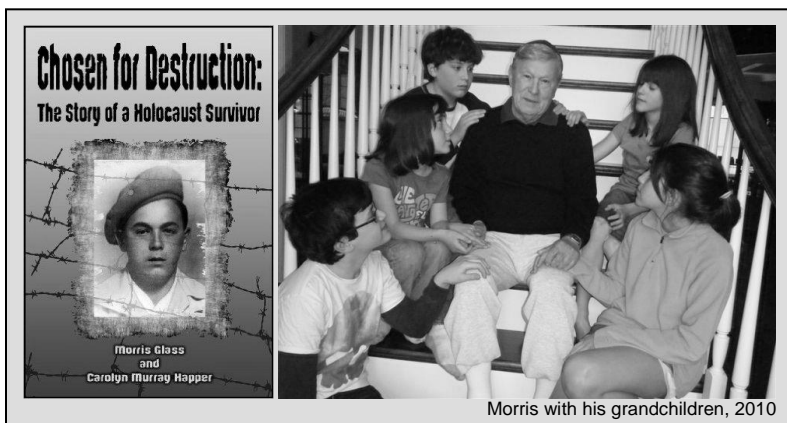
Once we were in the cattle car and the door was sealed, we knew we had made a mistake. Unfortunately, it was too late. We were now headed for Auschwitz, a place I had never heard of.

do it democratically by a vote using a secret ballot. Whatever the majority decides is what we will do.” Later Father said things to me that suggested that he was fairly sure of the fate that awaited us once we were on the trains. Nevertheless, he was not certain, and so he did not try to persuade us. The majority voted to come forward. Most of the young people felt relief and were happy; most of the adults were not happy.

* The Soviet army entered Łódź on January 19, 1945. Only 877 Jews were still alive, having been ordered to clean out the ghetto.

Once the decision was made, we dressed in our best clothes and started walking toward the train station. We were soon joined by an escort of Jewish police who helped us walk up a plank into a cattle car. Once we were in the cattle car and the door was sealed, we knew we had made a mistake. Unfortunately, it was too late. We were now headed for Auschwitz, a place I had never heard of.

Soon after the family arrived in Auschwitz, Morris's brother was sent to a work camp in Germany, and Morris and his father volunteered to work in Germany in order to leave Auschwitz. They arrived in the Dachau concentration camp in October 1944, where his father died from the hard labor and brutal treatment. In April 1945, as U.S. troops approached Dachau, most of the prisoners were marched to a train as the Germans evacuated the camp. Morris escaped the train and survived on the run until American troops secured the area.



Of 42 members of his family, only Morris, his brother, and a cousin survived. While in a Displaced Persons (DP) camp in Italy, Morris learned that his brother had survived and was in a DP camp in Germany. Through an uncle's sponsorship, they came to the U.S., arriving in New York City in June 1949. Morris settled in New Jersey where he bought and expanded a coat manufacturing company. There he met his wife Carol; they have seven children, 18 grandchildren, and six great-grandchildren. In 2000 they moved to Raleigh, NC, where three sons lived. For years Morris spoke across the state to school, military, and public groups about his Holocaust experience. In 2011 he published his Holocaust memoir, *Chosen for Destruction: The Story of a Holocaust Survivor*, co-written with historian Dr. Carolyn Murray Happer.

[Read other selections from Morris's memoir in Ch. 1 (Anti-Semitism) and Ch. 7 (Liberation).]

ONLINE RESOURCES

- Video: Morris Glass's presentation with Carolyn Happer (co-author of Mr. Glass's memoir, *Chosen for Destruction: The Story of a Holocaust Survivor*, 2011), Raleigh Weekend C-Span, 16 May 2013, 28:56
www.c-span.org/video/?313006-1/chosen-destruction
- Video: Morris Glass's presentation to the Naval Hospital Camp Lejeune, April 2013, video possibly taken by the U.S. Dept. of Defense, uploaded on YouTube by the *Jacksonville Daily News*, NC
www.youtube.com/watch?v=XSkq-kYI_o
- The Łódź Ghetto, overview and resources (U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum)
www.ushmm.org/collections/bibliography/lodz-ghetto
- Voices from the Łódź Ghetto, online exhibition (USHMM)
www.ushmm.org/information/exhibitions/online-exhibitions/voices-from-lodz-ghetto
- Łódź Ghetto, archival footage (1:35, USHMM) encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/film/lodz-ghetto

Selections from Ch. 8 of *Chosen for Destruction: The Story of a Holocaust Survivor*, by Morris Glass and Carolyn Murray Happer, 2011. Reprinted by permission of Morris Glass and Carolyn Murray Happer. Excerpts presented without ellipses for easier reading. Images credited USHMM reproduced by permission of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Photograph of Mr. Glass in 2010 courtesy of Mr. Glass.

LESSON ■ THE CAMPS

- **Narrative: Esther & Elias Are Sent to Auschwitz**
- **Narrative: Susan Aims for Survival**
- **Narrative: Morris Endures Four Camps**
- **Narrative: Hank Questions a German Officer**
- **Narrative: Julius Survives Close Calls**
- **Narrative: Rena Makes a Promise**

The statistics of the Nazi camp system are staggering. The Nazis created 938 concentration camps (and subcamps), 1,820 forced labor and transit camps, and the most infamous, five death camps—killing centers—at Auschwitz, Belzec, Chelmno, Sobibor, and Treblinka. Of the six million Jews murdered in the Holocaust, it is estimated that over 2.8 million died in the killing centers and other camps.* Very few who entered such a camp survived to see liberation, and thousands of the liberated were too ill and malnourished to survive.

The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum urges us to “translate statistics into people” in order to begin to grasp the vast reality of the Holocaust. Here we read the narratives of seven Jewish Europeans who came to the U.S. after the war and eventually settled in North Carolina. As young people in their teens or early twenties, they survived the brutalities of the Nazi camps.

- ♦ **Esther and Elias Mordechai** were young adults in Greece when the Nazis deported all the Jews of their town to Auschwitz. After the war, in 1951, they settled in Greensboro.
- ♦ **Susan Eckstein Cernyak-Spatz** was in her early 20s when she endured two grueling years in Auschwitz. She settled in Charlotte in 1972.
- ♦ **Morris Stein** endured hard labor as a young teenager in four concentration camps over four years. He moved to Concord in 2005.
- ♦ **Hank Brodt** was a teenager when he survived five concentration camps and a three-day death march. He moved to High Point in 2005.
- ♦ **Julius Blum** was 19 when he was deported to Auschwitz and then Mauthausen, enduring hard labor until liberation. He settled in Asheville in 1966.
- ♦ **Rena Kornreich Gelissen** and her sister were in their early 20s when deported to Auschwitz, where Rena promised her sister they would share the same fate. She moved to Hendersonville in 1988.

Have students offer their impressions of Nazi concentration camps from books and the media. Have they ever imagined if they would survive, and how? What qualities and circumstances do they think influenced one’s chances of survival in the camps? It is important to note that survival often depended on chance. Many died of starvation, disease, and brutality, regardless of their strength or will to live. Many were killed in the gas chambers soon after arriving in the death camps. Survivors emphasize the importance of remembering this.

As students read the narratives, have them consider these questions.

1. Overall, what were the shared experiences and emotions of the camp survivors?
2. In what ways did they differ in their responses to the hardships and brutality? What factors might have made the difference?
3. What do the individual survivors emphasize in their narratives? What do they want you to *learn* from their experiences?

* See “Documenting Numbers of Victims of the Holocaust & Nazi Persecution,” U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/documenting-numbers-of-victims-of-the-holocaust-and-nazi-persecution.

4. How do the survivors explain survival?
5. In what ways did human resilience and character survive in the camps? In what ways were they reduced or lost?
6. How did these survivors experience despair and dehumanization in the camps? How did they respond?
7. How did Hank get the courage to question the Nazi officer? What does he ask? How does the officer respond? How does Hank interpret his response?
8. Susan, Morris, Hank, and Julius were imprisoned alone, without family members. How did they deal with this added hardship? (Julius was arrested and deported with friends, but not family.)
9. Why did the Nazis make the concentration camps as brutal as possible, despite their need for the forced labor of the prisoners?
10. Why were escape and armed resistance nearly impossible?
11. Choose one of these statements from the narratives and write a dialogue between you and the survivor, or between the speaker and another survivor in this publication. Include the statement in the dialogue. What aspects of humanity and the Holocaust experience will you stress in the dialogue? How will you conclude it?
 - ♦ Susan Cernyak-Spatz, on survival in Auschwitz: *"You always had to have a support group. The support group might change because any time you changed kommandos [work groups], or changed jobs, or changed blocks, you had to have a new support group. Anybody who tells you that he existed by himself, especially in the lower kommandos, is lying. You had to have a support group."*
 - ♦ Rena Kornreich Gelissen, in Auschwitz with her sister: *"My one great feat in life, my fate, is to survive this thing and return triumphant with my sister to our parents' home. . . . There is no debate in my mind about my duty to my sister; the oath is the driving force behind all of my actions."*
 - ♦ Morris Stein, on learning that his parents, sister, and brother had all been killed: *"After all that, my personal life became meaningless, and I didn't care if I were to die today or live to the next day. Some days I wished to get it over with, all that suffering, but I didn't know how. . . I had nobody to talk to. The people I came with were all strangers and so were the ones that were in the camp before us. And besides, everybody else's problems were similar to mine."*
 - ♦ Julius Blum, on waiting with fellow prisoners in a city train station while the Nazis transferred them to another train: *"We were gathered in a corner in the railroad station, watching the people walking by with Christmas packages. We stood there starved and looking miserable, but not one person out of the hundreds passing by took notice of us or gave us so much as a morsel of bread."*
12. Why do first-person narratives "translate statistics into people"? That may seem obvious at first, but give it some thought.



"Translate statistics into people."

In its guidelines for teaching about the Holocaust (see Supplemental Materials), the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum recommends using first-person accounts of survivors

"precisely because they portray people in the fullness of their lives and not just as victims; [they] add individual voices to a collective experience and help students make meaning out of the statistics."

ONLINE RESOURCES

■ Resources from the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum

- ♦ Nazi Camps encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/nazi-camps
- ♦ Concentration Camp System: In Depth encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/concentration-camp-system-in-depth
- ♦ Killing Centers: An Overview (9 parts) encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/killing-centers-an-overview
- ♦ Auschwitz encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/auschwitz
- ♦ Auschwitz through the Lens of the SS (The Auschwitz Album)
www.ushmm.org/research/research-in-collections/collections-highlights/auschwitz-ssalbum
- ♦ Liberation of Nazi Camps encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/liberation-of-nazi-camps
- ♦ Behind Every Name Is a Story: 25 essays by survivors, including camp survivors, or their families
www.ushmm.org/remember/the-holocaust-survivors-and-victims-resource-center/benjamin-and-vladka-meed-registry-of-holocaust-survivors/behind-every-name-a-story

■ Resources from Yad Vashem

- ♦ Labor & Concentration Camps www.yadvashem.org/holocaust/about/camps/labor-concentration-camps.html
- ♦ The Death Camps. www.yadvashem.org/holocaust/about/final-solution/death-camps.html
- ♦ Daily Life in the Camps www.yadvashem.org/holocaust/about/camps/daily-life.html

■ Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum

auschwitz.org/en/

■ Identity in the Camps (Facing History and Ourselves)

www.facinghistory.org/holocaust-and-human-behavior/chapter-9/identity-camps

■ 70 Stories from Auschwitz: brief video clips from testimonies (USC Shoah Foundation)

sfi.usc.edu/exhibits/70-stories-auschwitz

■ “Why We Fight,” the liberation of Dachau; Episode 9 of *Band of Brothers* (HBO/YouTube)

youtu.be/sHcJtU9dr6I



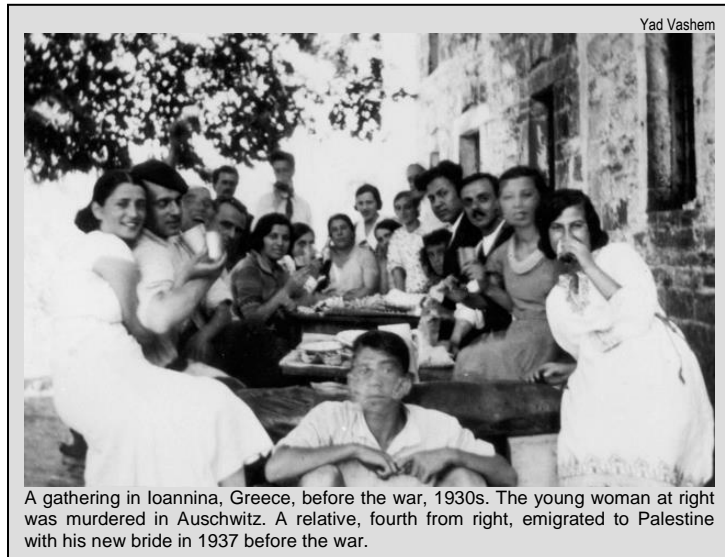
Access the education resources of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, especially Learn about the Holocaust (www.ushmm.org/learn) and Resources for Educators (www.ushmm.org/teach). The materials include lesson plans, online exhibits, the *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, interactive maps, photo/audio/video collections, and teaching guidelines.

■ THE CAMPS ■

ESTHER & ELIAS ARE SENT TO AUSCHWITZ

Esther Politis and Elias Mordechai were born in Ioannina, Greece. Esther, age 22, had been married less than a year to her first husband. Elias, in his early thirties, was married with a four-year-old daughter. On March 25, 1944, the Germans came to arrest all the Jews of the city. Nearly 1900 people were deported to Auschwitz that day; only about 160 survived.

ESTHER: Early on a Saturday morning in March 1944, around seven o'clock, somebody knocked on the door so hard. We didn't know what was happening. The Germans were outside. They gave us exactly two hours to get ready. Two of my brothers were begging my mother to let them go hide in the attic. My mother was screaming like anything. She said she was not going to leave anybody behind. Everybody, the whole family, was going. We were very close. The whole family was going to go together. So my two brothers didn't have any choice.



A gathering in Ioannina, Greece, before the war, 1930s. The young woman at right was murdered in Auschwitz. A relative, fourth from right, emigrated to Palestine with his new bride in 1937 before the war.

We all got ready. We took a couple of loaves of bread and a quilt or blanket. My grandmother had passed away a month before, and my mother had made a cake for the Sabbath prayer for her. When the Germans came in, my mother had it in her hands, and when they pushed us out of the door, the cake fell in front on the stoop of the house.

They took us to a big place and gathered everybody together. The Germans had a schedule. Everybody's name was written down. They knew how many people were there. And that afternoon they sent trucks, like they carry horses in, and everybody got in. It was March 25 and it was snowing. They called our names out and checked a list before they put us in the truck. I was completely lost. You know, I was 22 years old. I said, "What are they going to do to us? Where are they going to take us?"

ELIAS: There was no food, nothing, in the trucks. They took us to a little town. There we were put in one big building that used to be a warehouse. Two thousand—two thousand people—in one building. No food, not a thing, no water, no food. After eight days, a transport [train] came. Seventy-five people were put in each train car. The train traveled through Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and stopped at Auschwitz, Poland. Eight days and nights. A lot of people died in the train cars by the time the train reached Auschwitz.

ESTHER: Everybody was screaming, "What are they going to do? What are they going to do?" So two German men came in and took us out of the train. You know, if you sit eight days in a train and you don't stretch your feet—a lot of people couldn't walk. So they finally separated us when we came out of the train. They put the young people on the right, the old people on the left. Of all my family, only one of my brothers and I came out of Auschwitz. Everybody else went

that same night to the gas chambers. I told the German officer, "I want to go with my mother," and he said, "You cannot go with your mother because she cannot walk. You're going to walk. And you're going to meet them tonight." And we walked. And we never saw them again.

After the war Esther and Elias returned to Ioannina hoping to find their families, but most of their relatives had died in Auschwitz. They became friends and married in 1946. In 1951 they emigrated to the United States with their two daughters and settled in Greensboro, North Carolina, where other Jews from their town had emigrated before the war.

ONLINE RESOURCES

- The Holocaust in Ioannina (Yad Vashem)
www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/valley/ioannina/german_occupation.asp
- The Holocaust in Ioannina (Kehila Kedosha Janina Synagogue and Museum, New York, NY)
www.kkjsm.org/the-holocaust-in-ioannina
- A Greek Girl in Auschwitz: Rebecca Hauser's Story (North Carolina survivor), video, 28 min. (Center for Holocaust, Genocide, and Human Rights Education in North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC)
youtu.be/UbPudYTSWgs
- The Auschwitz Album: photographs taken by SS photographers as Hungarian Jews arrived and were selected for death or slave labor, May-June 1944 (Yad Vashem) www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/album_auschwitz/selection.asp
 - ♦ Arrival www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/album_auschwitz/arrival.asp
 - ♦ Selection www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/album_auschwitz/selection.asp



Selection from Cecile Holmes White, *Witnesses to the Horror: North Carolinians Remember the Holocaust*, published in cooperation with the N.C. Council on the Holocaust, 1987, archive.org/details/witnessestohorro00whit. Reproduced by permission of the author. Images credited USHMM/Yad Vashem in the public domain; access courtesy of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

THE CAMPS ■ SUSAN AIMS FOR SURVIVAL

Susan Eckstein was born in 1922 in Vienna, Austria, and moved to Berlin, Germany, with her family in 1929. They witnessed Hitler's rise to power and so returned to Austria and then, after the Nazis occupied Austria in 1938, they fled to Prague, Czechoslovakia. Hoping to smuggle his family out of Nazi-occupied Europe, her father was able to enter Poland—on August 31, 1939, one day before the Nazis invaded Poland and World War II began. He eventually arrived in Belgium, but Susan and her mother were unable to follow him. They were arrested in 1942.

We were deported to Theresienstadt [concentration camp] from Prague. My mother, due to some personal decisions, chose to go on a further transport [train]. So mother chose at that time to be deported east from Theresienstadt, and nobody knew where to. Well, we found out later—I saw her name on the transport list when I worked in the political department in Auschwitz—that she arrived on the transport but never came into the camp. So probably, I would say, that at that age—mother was 45—she was one of the fortunate ones. Because, at her age, she would have come into the camp and she would have suffered terribly and then gone into the gas. This way, she went into the gas, not knowing what was happening, not knowing what was going on.

I came into the Auschwitz death factory from one of the many collection camps for Jews in German-occupied countries. My transport consisted of 500 men and 500 women. Sixty women between the ages of 14 and 34, myself included, were selected for labor in the women's camp; the same number of men went into the men's camp. The rest were gassed at once. Men and women, separated in camps enclosed with electrified barbed wire, were guarded day and night by soldiers with machine guns.

I was "processed" into the camp on January 28, 1943. According to Hitler's master plan I was to live for two and a half months doing hard labor before being murdered. I was shaved all over, given the summer uniform of a dead Russian prisoner, a kerchief to cover my bald head, and a tin bowl for food, drink, and other purposes. I had no spoon, coat, handkerchief or rag, nothing for care and maintenance of my appearance. This was a means to dehumanize prisoners so that guards would feel no pity when they treated us like vermin.

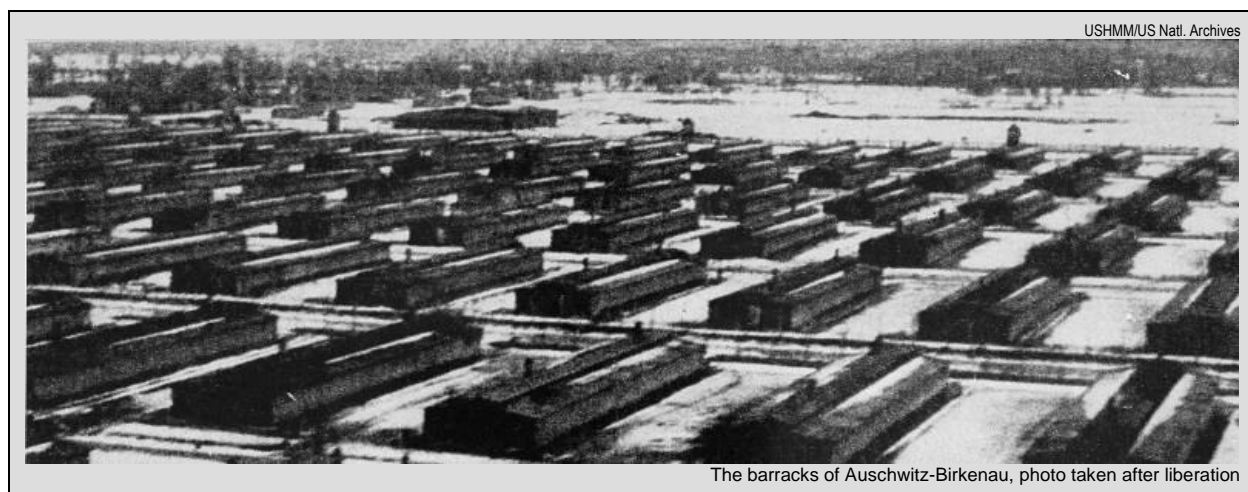
People ask how I survived such hell. I have only one explanation that makes sense to me. I learned to accept the nightmarish camp as the real world and coped from one minute to the next. Blind luck also played a part.

explanation for why some lived and others died. Survival depended on getting through selection alive or finding a kommando that worked inside the camp and was not subject to selections.



Susan's ID photo which she carried as a refugee in Brussels, Belgium, in late 1945 after the war ended

People ask how I survived such hell. I have only one explanation that makes sense to me. I learned to accept the nightmarish camp as the real world and coped from one minute to the next. Blind luck also played a part. Twice a day the SS guards made random selections from the prisoners' ranks. Those chosen went to the gas chambers. I have no



The barracks of Auschwitz-Birkenau, photo taken after liberation

Kommandos were work units that performed tasks inside and outside the camp. An inside unit might have five prisoners while an outside unit contained 200 to 300 laborers. Outside jobs included road building, demolishing bombed houses, digging stumps, cultivating fields, carrying ties and rails for railroad construction, all without the help of machinery. For eight months in 1943, between bouts of typhoid fever, jaundice, scabies, and other diseases, I served on an outside kommando and lived in a barracks built to house 200 people, but actually crammed with 400 to 500 women. There was one toilet and one water faucet for 25 overcrowded barracks.

On the first day of walking out with the kommando, not knowing the rules and regulations of the camp, I just acted on instinct. We were standing in line by the gate waiting to march out, and there was the work commander leader, an SS man, and I just blithely stepped up and said to him, "Reporting name so-and-so, number so-and-so, and I'm a secretary." And that man's mouth fell open because nobody had dared to do that, and somehow I suppose I must have made an impression. He wrote my number down and everybody in line said, "My God, he wrote your number down, you're going to go to the gas."

But three days later, I and some other people who had given their profession as secretary were called to work in the political department* to serve as temporaries. I guess they had a lot of investigations down there and they needed people to take transcripts of the investigations. And through that, after about two or three weeks, I got a job in the political department, which was the elite department, clean and relatively well fed. But after about a month or so, somebody in the secretarial kommando was caught smuggling information out of a file, probably out of a personal file. Like in all jobs, last hired, first fired. The example was made with me and two others who were on the bottom rung. And we were kicked out of Auschwitz and back to Birkenau to the extermination camp.



Women in the barrack bunks soon after the liberation of Auschwitz, 1945

* Among other roles, the political department managed the crematoria and prisoner arrival/selection, maintained prisoner files, and conducted investigations and interrogations (which usually involved physical torture).

And then I made my way through typhoid fever, scurvy, hepatitis, and the whole bit. Well, I survived.

A lot of people, when they came into Auschwitz-Birkenau, which was a surrealistic nightmare situation, couldn't accept the fact that they were there. Why were they there? They couldn't live like that. No normal being could live like that. They totally refused to adapt or even attempt to cope within the frame of that nightmare. And I think, if I remember, from the first day on, whether it was walking around in Russian prisoners' uniforms and with a shaved head, and with one bowl for eating and elimination and everything, I accepted it. I accepted it and I manipulated to cope with anything, and I think that that was one of the most important things, that you accepted the frame of the situation and lived from one minute to the next, or from one day to the next, with no other aim but survival.

***Survival was the utmost thing
and survival needed to be within
the frame of that given world.
That was the world I lived in.***

Because I have seen people who simply would lie down and die because life like that's not worth living. And, just like today where the physician will tell you your own mental condition was part of your cure, it was the same thing there. Your mental condition was part of your

survival. Survival was the utmost thing and survival needed to be within the frame of that given world. That was the world I lived in.

You always had to have a support group. The support group might change because any time you changed kommandos, or changed jobs, or changed blocks, you had to have a new support group. Anybody who tells you that he existed by himself, especially in the lower kommandos, is lying. You had to have a support group.

In January 1945, the Germans evacuated the camp because the Russians were too close. They did not release us. Instead we endured an infamous death march in the subfreezing Polish winter. Women who had survived for two or three years in Birkenau died on that march. Those who could not walk anymore got a bullet in the head. Survivors were stuffed into the overcrowded concentration camps in Germany proper. I spent three months after that death march in the Ravensbrück women's camp near Berlin.

When the Russians entered Berlin [late April 1945], the Germans marched us deeper into Germany. They hoped to exchange their prisoners for German prisoners held by the Allies. But when we arrived at the first American checkpoint near a small German village, German hopes were dashed. The SS guards went straight into prisoner-of-war camps. The Americans put me in a displaced persons camp.

It felt strange to walk down streets without guards or barbed wire. It took a long while to get used to freedom. I was alive but six million Jews had died as a result of governmental hatred and prejudice. These deaths, called the Holocaust, must be remembered to prevent mankind from being diminished again. The Holocaust must never be repeated.



Susan was reunited with her father in Belgium soon after the war. She married Hardy Spatz, an American GI, and they came to the U.S. on July 4, 1946. They have three children and two grandchildren. After completing a Ph.D. in Germanic Literature & Language at the University of Kansas in 1972, she moved to Charlotte, North Carolina, where she taught German and



Susan Cernyak-Spatz, ca. 2013

French at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte for 33 years. In 2005 she published her Holocaust memoir, *Protective Custody: Prisoner 34042*. For many years she spoke to students and other groups across the state.

ONLINE RESOURCES

- Oral testimony of Susan Cernyak-Spatz, audio, 1979 (3¼ hrs., U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum)
collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn47955
- Oral testimony of Susan Cernyak-Spatz, video, 1994 (6 hrs., USHMM)
collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn509009
- Susan Cernyak-Spatz, video introducing audiobook of *Protective Custody: Prisoner 34042* (2013)
www.youtube.com/watch?v=mLS0y2Bh68M
- "Holocaust survivor discusses experiences, lessons, for the current generation," *The Appalachian*, Sept. 22, 2015
theappalachianonline.com/2015/09/22/holocaust-survivor-discusses-experiences-lessons-current-generation/
- The Auschwitz Album: photographs taken by SS photographers as Hungarian Jews arrived and were selected for death or slave labor, May-June 1944 (Yad Vashem)
www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/album_auschwitz/selection.asp

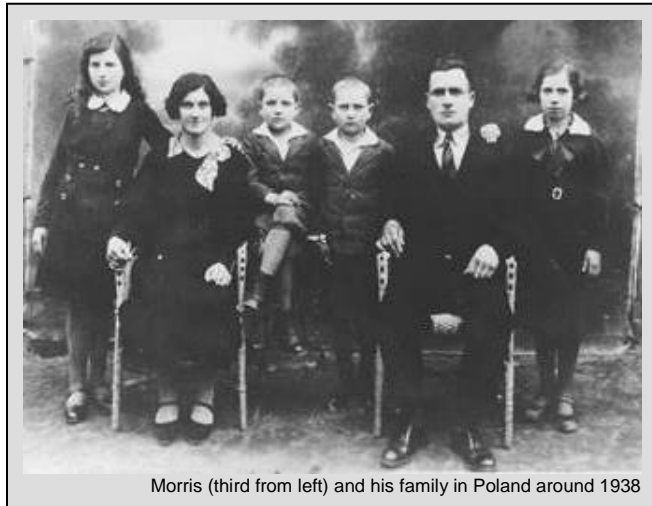
Adapted from: (1) Susan Cernyak-Spatz, "Inside Auschwitz-Birkenau," *Tar Heel Junior Historian*, 25:3 (Spring 1986), published by the North Carolina Museum of History, archive.org/details/tarheeljuniorhis2527tarh; (2) Cecile Holmes White, "Inside a Concentration Camp," interview with Susan Cernyak-Spatz, ch. 2 of *Witnesses to the Horror: North Carolinians Remember the Holocaust*, published in cooperation with the North Carolina Council on the Holocaust, 1987, archive.org/details/witnessestohorro00whit. Reproduced by permission of the author. Images credited USHMM reproduced by permission of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Photos of Dr. Cernyak-Spatz reproduced by permission of Dr. Cernyak-Spatz and her daughter Jackie Fishman.

THE CAMPS ■ MORRIS ENDURES FOUR CAMPS

Morris Stein was born in 1928 in a small town in Poland. His father was a businessman who traded in cattle. When Morris was 11, the Nazis invaded and occupied Poland, leaving his town alone for a while. But after a year the Germans started coming to the town and demanding young Jewish men for labor—nobody ever knew where they were sent. In 1941, Morris's ordeal began: he endured hard labor in four concentration camps before liberation in 1945.

In the beginning of 1941, the Nazis ordered that every Jew must wear a white band with a yellow star on the left arm so that we would be recognizable. And they started to stop over more often, sometimes in the middle of the night. In the morning we found a few Jewish people shot to death in the streets for no reason at all, just because they were Jewish.

In the middle of 1941, the German military ordered all the Jewish community in our town to concentrate in another town about ten miles from ours, in a specific place and on a certain hour and date. Everybody was scared, because we had heard rumors of what happened in other places. But we still didn't want to believe that human beings, even Germans, were capable of such atrocities against other humans. Besides, children had no say and grownups followed the orders.



Morris (third from left) and his family in Poland around 1938

Nobody dreamed that this was the beginning of the end.

People started leaving on foot and followed the orders of the Germans. We had to leave everything behind. As soon as a house was vacant, the Polish people and neighbors waited outside like scavengers to take our possessions. My parents, two sisters, and one brother (I was the youngest; we were all two years apart from each other) decided not to follow the orders of the Germans.

My father and brother joined the underground organization. They were called "partisans" (today they would be called "guerrillas"). Their aim was to fight the Germans any way they could and disrupt the German military machine wherever possible, like undermining a military train or attacking a German military convoy and taking their weapons and ammunition. My father became a leader of a group, and their main aim was to kill as many German soldiers as possible and take their weapons, since there were a lot of people, including Poles, who wanted to join them but couldn't afford to buy a rifle on the black market. The more people they had, the stronger the group became, and they could attack bigger German outfits. My oldest sister had a boyfriend. She and her boyfriend joined a different group of partisans.

My mother, my other sister, and I were hiding in another village in the attic of a farmer's house. My parents paid them a monthly fee for taking that risk. The German authorities had warned the Polish people not to aid in any way, especially not to hide anybody who was Jewish. Aiding a

Nobody dreamed that this was the beginning of the end.



Jewish person would be punishable by death, and everyone was required to report to the authorities if they knew that someone was helping or hiding Jews. Some Poles took the risk for the money, and others risked their lives because they were good hearted or for religious reasons. But there were more people helping the Germans than the Jews.

My father used to come at least once a week at night with my brother and a few of his soldiers to bring us food and money. He used to tell us of the operations they were involved in. After an hour or two, he would disappear in the darkness of the night, back into the woods to his headquarters.

They had to change their hiding places very often so that the Germans couldn't trace them to a certain place. They were not a national organization. Each group operated independently like a unit. Sometimes they united with other units for a bigger undertaking. Of course, a lot of times there were armed clashes with German soldiers, and some got killed or injured, but there was no other way to survive.

The Germans passed a law that each farmer had to give to the German army a certain amount of what he grew, according to the size of his farm. Small farmers couldn't afford to give anything, so the Germans went from farm to farm and confiscated whatever they found. Through informers, my father found out the date they were coming to the village where we were hiding. In the middle of one night, we (my mother, sister, and I) left that village to go to another village where our father made arrangements for us to hide until it was safe to return.

After a few days I went back to the first farmer to find out if it was safe to return. I had to go through woods and fields and was approaching a railway crossing when I heard the order in Polish, "Stop! If not we will shoot." I was handcuffed by two Polish guards, who were guarding the railway against the underground, and brought to a prison in another village.

After a few days, the Polish police took me to another town and handed me over to the German Gestapo. They told the Gestapo that I threatened them, that if they didn't let me go free, my father in the underground would kill them for arresting me—which was a complete lie. Those Poles knew my family personally, and they knew about my father, because to survive in the underground my father had to raid some farms for food supply, some of which my father used to bring us on his visits.

The Gestapo locked me up in a room by myself. A few hours later they took me to another room. After a while, two officers and a dog, a German shepherd, came to the room. They interrogated me with all kinds of questions about my parents and my family, where my father was hiding, and so on. To all their questions I answered that I didn't know and that I was all by myself. They got mad and started beating me with a leather strap and, while they were beating me, the dog was biting me all over. When they stopped, the dog stopped. I don't know how long it went on like this, but I didn't tell them anything, because I knew that they were going to kill me anyway, so I made up my mind not to disclose anything about the rest of my family. When the interrogation stopped they locked me in a dark room.

I didn't tell them anything, because I knew that they were going to kill me anyway, so I made up my mind not to disclose anything about the rest of my family.

After a while they brought me to a prison. There were about 50 Jewish men, women, and children in one big room. I sat in a corner on the floor crying and bleeding from the dog bites. There was nothing anybody could do for me. There was no toilet or any water in the room. All we had was the dirty clothes on our bodies.

After a few days in prison I remember, on a Friday, they took us outside the prison. A German officer looked us over and he picked out seven men and seven women including me. They put us on a truck and we thought this was the end for us. After a while, we found ourselves in a camp with barbed wire and guards on the towers. A few days later we found out that they had shot all the others from that prison.

BUDZYN _____ 1½ years: 1941-1942.

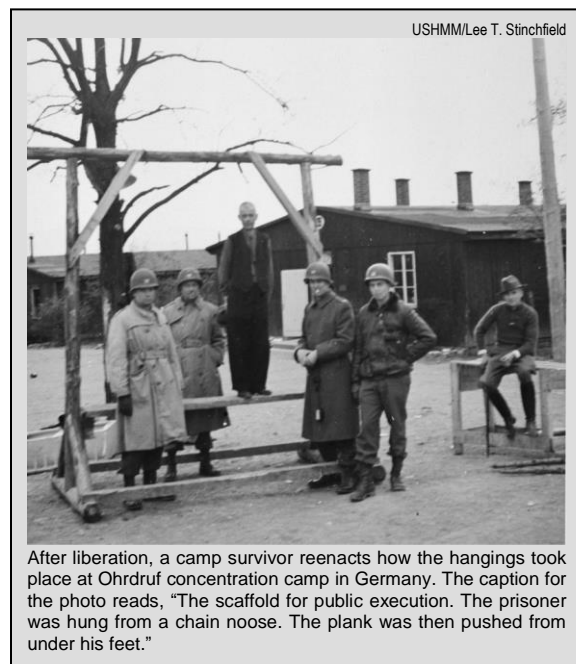
The first camp I was in was Budzyn. It was about 15 kilometers [about 9.3 miles] from my hometown. There were about 5,000 people, all Jewish, some from my town including some of my relatives and neighbors. I was assigned to a barrack [living quarters]. The next day we were awakened at five o'clock in the morning. At six we were lined up in the barrack and received a portion of bread and tea and sometimes coffee. At seven they lined us up in groups. Each group had a different task of work. I was assigned to a group whose job was to dig out the stumps from big trees in a wooded area where they cut the trees down.

The conditions in that camp were terrible. After we got a piece of bread and tea in the morning, we went out to work all day without water or food, all day. We received a bowl of soup when we returned to camp. We were just as hungry after we ate as before. After a while a lot of people got swelling in their feet, especially their ankles, from malnutrition. In time, they just couldn't walk anymore. Either they died or were selected to be killed.

They marched us every morning and evening to work and back with guards on both sides of the road. I was warned by the people in camp not to go to the doctor and not to complain about my wounds from the dog bites, because whoever couldn't work was eliminated. My wounds got infected and it took quite a while until they healed.

Then I thought to escape. It was almost impossible to escape from the camp with the high barbed-wire fence and the guards, but where we worked was an open wooded field and some guards with rifles. Every once in a while, one or two people attempted to escape. Some were shot trying. Others succeeded, later to be caught by the Poles and handed over to the Germans. In that case, they brought the individual to the camp, lined up the whole camp and brought the prisoner to the middle of the camp with a few guards. They told us what his crime was (escaping), and we all had to watch him being hanged. They left the body hanging for two days. Whenever we had to go to the field bathroom we had to pass the body. It was like a warning to the others not to try to escape.

After a while they designed a new punishment. Whenever somebody escaped, they lined us up five deep and they took every tenth person starting from the front until they had ten people and ordered them to kneel and shot them in front



Every week, after we went to work, the Germans took the sick people outside the camp and killed them. Somehow, I don't know how, I survived all that.

could, until it was impossible to get up from bed. Every week, after we went to work, the Germans took the sick people outside the camp and killed them. Somehow, I don't know how, I survived all that.

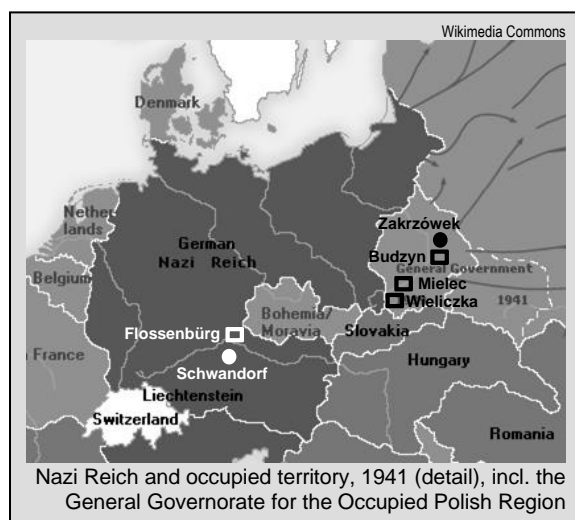
In 1942, they moved the camp closer to where most of us worked, about four kilometers from the old camp. It was a smaller camp but it was cleaner. A short time afterward they randomly selected a few hundred of us. They put us on trucks to the train station. They locked us in box cars without windows. I don't know how many days we traveled. We ended up in another camp near Kraków, a place called Mielec.

MIELEC_____one year: 1943-1944.

There was already a camp there with Jewish men only. (In the first two camps there had been both men and women. In those camps, the women were kept in separate barracks with high barbed-wire fences around them.) In Mielec we worked in very big one-story buildings. We were building airplane bodies without the engines. In other buildings, they made the engines. The conditions in that camp were a little better because we had Poles and German civilians supervising and coming every day from outside, and they brought us some food scraps.

of the whole camp. Since I was caught by the Poles already once, I hesitated to escape, but it was on my mind for quite a while.

Then an epidemic of typhus spread in the camp, and I got infected too. We tried to be productive and go to work as long as we



In the first two camps, there were some of my relatives and some of my hometown people. Some of them were brought to the camp after I was, and I found out that my brother had been caught in the woods with a rifle and the Germans had executed him. Then my father got injured in a partisan operation against the Germans, and he went to stay with my mother and sister on a farm. One day the Polish police, together with the Gestapo, attacked the place and killed them all. My other sister was also killed while in the underground organization. That is all I know and what I was told by people from our hometown and relatives that came to the camp after me.

After all that, my personal life became meaningless, and I didn't care if I were to die today or live to the next day. Some days I wished to get it over with, all that suffering, but I didn't know how. My mind and my thoughts were occupied with how to fill my stomach because I was hungry most of the time. I had nobody to talk to. The people I came with were all strangers and so were the ones that were in the camp before us. And besides, everybody else's problems were similar to mine.

WIELICZKA_____several weeks in 1944.

I was in Mielec about a year when they liquidated the whole camp to another place called Wieliczka. The camp wasn't far from the train station. Before we started marching they took a group of us and gave each of us five loaves of bread to carry to the camp. We were separated from the others. On the way, some of us ate some of the bread. When we arrived in camp, they checked everybody and whoever was missing even a piece of bread they locked up. The next

day they lined up the whole camp, brought us out, and each one of us got spanked 25 times on the bare butt, including me, with a special leather strap. The pain and suffering for a few days were indescribable.

In Wieliczka, we met some of the people from the first two camps. We found out that the reason they kept us moving was because the Russian army was closing in on us. We were in that camp about two or three weeks when they put us on trains again.

FLOSSENBÜRG _____ late 1944 until liberation in April 1945.

After a few days, in the winter of 1944, we arrived in Germany to a concentration camp called Flossenbürg. In this camp there were tens of thousands of people from all nationalities, including Germans, Russians, Poles, Gypsies—mostly non-Jewish. There also was a crematorium where they burned the bodies of people who either died on the way from Poland to Germany or in the camp itself. Some of our people died so we had to carry them to the crematorium.

On arrival, they put us in a big hall underground and ordered us to undress, completely naked. They gave us soap and we took a cold shower. They took all our clothing away and gave us uniforms like pajamas, with blue and white stripes, and shoes with wooden soles. Instead of a haircut, they cut a strip from the forehead to the neck in the back. They registered us and each one got a number with a colored triangle on it. We had to sew it on the jacket, on the left side of the chest. My number was 16335.

We got assigned to different jobs. I worked on body parts for Messerschmitt airplanes. Others worked on engines or in stone mines. My job wasn't too hard. I worked with an electric drill all day and every day, but the marching to work and back with the wooden shoes took its toll. In the winter the snow got stuck to the soles and in the summer we got blisters.

The food was terrible. In the morning they gave us a loaf of bread, two pounds for ten people. In the evening, we got soup, which was like hot water. Sometimes we found a piece of potato in it. After a while, we looked like skeletons: skin and bones. Each morning there were dead people in the bunks who died from starvation. We had to report it to the authorities and bring the bodies to the crematorium to be burned.

After a while, we looked like skeletons: skin and bones. Each morning there were dead people in the bunks who died from starvation. We had to report it to the authorities and bring the bodies to the crematorium to be burned.



A French survivor shows the Flossenbürg crematorium to a photographer after the camp was liberated, May 1945.



The airplane factory near Flossenbürg where Morris and other inmates worked, May 1945

This last camp was the worst of all. The food was the worst, no doctors, no medicine. If somebody got sick they continued working until they dropped dead.

LIBERATION _____ April 1945.

In the beginning of 1945, we started seeing American and English planes overhead. Then they flew over us almost daily. Then, in March, they ordered only Jewish people to line up in the middle of camp. They marched us to the train station where the box cars were waiting for us.

Their purpose was to transfer us to Dachau where there was a large concentration camp with a gas chamber and crematorium. They loaded us on the train with two engines, one in the front and one in the back. As soon as the train started moving we were attacked from the airplanes. The planes made a few circles from the front train engine to the back engine, shooting at us and bombarding the railway.

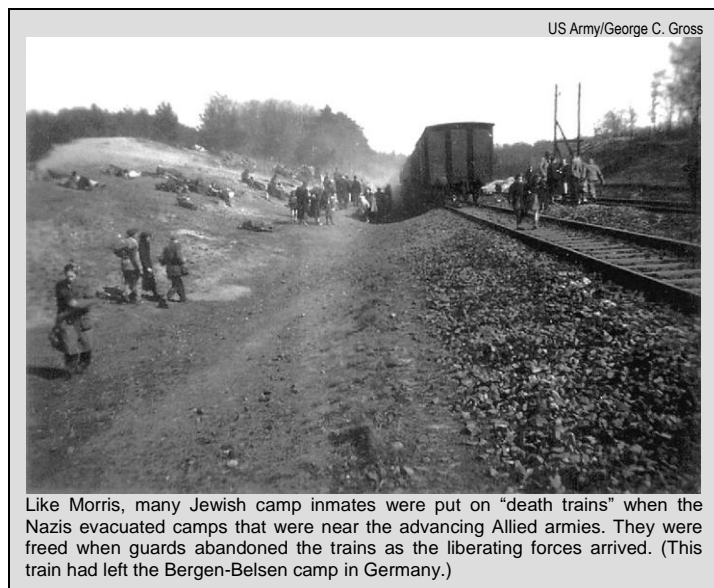
The German guards, who had been watching us standing on the train, started to run for cover in between the train cars. We broke loose to try to escape. But after the air raid was over, the guards started collecting us back to the train. People all over were dead or injured from the raid. We were ordered to bring all the injured to one spot, and they all were killed. They marched the rest of us to the woods and kept us there for the rest of the day. In the evening, they marched us all night.

That was how a new ordeal started for us. To avoid all the air raids we marched at night and rested in wooded areas at day. Anybody who fell behind from exhaustion was killed. We passed some villages on our way. The German people just stood on the side roads looking at us. Some days they brought us some food scraps or some water and some days nothing. We ate grass, roots, even leaves: anything that was chewable.

This suffering went on for about two weeks. All that time we saw planes and heard bombardments, especially at night when it was quiet. Then, one day after we marched all night and we lay down to rest on the ground, they lined us up again and left us standing in a wooded area. All the guards left. We waited for a while and they didn't come back. So we started to disperse in all directions.

We heard intense shooting and bombardment very close to us. Some of us started going in the direction where the shooting was going on. Others went the opposite way. On the way, we saw German soldiers running away in the fields everywhere. When we came to the first houses in the village, women and children greeted us with food and water and told us the Americans were here.

After a few minutes we reached the main streets of the town where we found hundreds of tanks and other vehicles full of U.S. soldiers still fighting some German resistance in the streets. When they saw us with the camp uniforms, they bombarded us with food, cigarettes, chocolate, everything, they threw at us! Food we never saw in our lives! People



When they [U.S. soldiers] saw us with the camp uniforms, they bombarded us with food, cigarettes, chocolate, everything, they threw at us! Food we never saw in our lives!

***There was such confusion! Unbelievable!
We didn't know what to do and where to go.***

days, some died from overeating. And we found out, after we were liberated, that some German soldiers were searching in the woods and shot whomever they found. That march before the liberation lasted from the middle of March until April 23, the day of liberation.

There was such confusion! Unbelievable! We didn't know what to do and where to go. We formed groups of three or four and slept in barns, thinking all the time this can't be true, that it must be a dream—and afraid that soon Germans would come and get us back to camp or kill us. In the meantime, the U.S. Army moved forward and we were left to ourselves. There was no law or order anywhere. Some individual German soldiers who were hiding in some homes or in the woods came out at night and shot some of our people whom they found.

After a few days, the U.S. Army and an organization called UNRRA* started to get us organized and help us with daily needs and problems. They gave us identification cards stating that we were D.P. (Displaced Persons) and ordered us to leave that town and go to the next bigger town—Schwandorf, in the region of Bavaria. When we got there, they concentrated us in a camp that had been a military base. UNRRA didn't force us to obey their orders, but they explained that having us in one place would make it easier for them to take care of us.

On the way to Schwandorf, we saw some empty houses that some German families deserted. We went inside to look for clothes to get rid of our camp uniforms so the Germans wouldn't stare at us. We occupied one of the houses. It is hard to believe that some of the houses we went in looked like palaces with the most valuable things imaginable. Our group of boys, 14 to 16 years old, weren't interested in material things. We looked like skeletons—skin and bones—and it took a while to realize that all this was real and the German army would not come back after us.

All those years in camp I never thought about freedom or ever getting out. It seemed that my destiny and that of the others would end in one of the camps, either getting killed or dying from starvation.

UNRRA, in addition to giving us identification cards, took pictures with our names on the picture, to be sent all over Europe to look for relatives. They formed a kitchen in the camp and whoever wanted could come three times a day to get food. But we had no transportation, so most of the time we skipped the free meal. The four of us (we lived in one house) realized we had to find a way to survive. Sometimes one of us went to the camp and brought a meal for all four of us.

Except for a place to live in and the clothes on our bodies, we had almost nothing. What we did have was a couple of pistols and a gun that we found in the unoccupied houses. We went to the end of town and we would hide on both sides of the main road waiting for German ex-soldiers walking or riding bicycles on their way somewhere. We would stop them, search them, take their

started eating and getting sick from all that food that our bodies weren't used to. In the first few



* UNRRA: The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (1943-1947) was founded by 44 nations, and primarily funded by the U.S., to aid the millions of war refugees in Europe. It established nearly 800 resettlement camps, providing shelter to about seven million people.

bicycles away and if we found watches we also took them. We occasionally saw some of them walking on dirt roads in the fields. Those were mostly ex-SS men. We tried to stop them too, but a couple of times they shot at us and we shot at them. They were more experienced with weapons than we were, so we abandoned the whole adventure.

By then, we had bicycles and watches. The bicycles we used for our transportation, and we sold the watches to other Displaced Persons in the camp. This way we had some money to buy food. In times when we had no money,

we rode out of town to farmers and we told them that we were in concentration camps and we asked them for food. Most of the time they gave us some. If one refused or didn't have any, we went to another farmer. Usually we brought back food for a few days. We also rode to the camp to get a hot meal in the kitchen almost daily. That is how we survived from day to day. Another way to survive was to live in the DP camp which we and lots of others didn't like. It gave us the feeling of the concentration camp again. The only thing missing in the camps was the guards.

After a while, in 1945, UNRRA registered young boys to emigrate to England. In the meantime, one of my friends and I decided to go to Poland and smuggle some watches and sell them for a big profit. We crossed the border from Germany to Czechoslovakia, then to Poland, illegally. We sold the watches within two days for Polish money, but when we tried to exchange the money on the black market to German money we got caught by the Polish police and put in prison. After a few days we were brought to court to be sentenced by a military court marshal. We were ready to get a harsh sentence because it was right after the war and mainly because it was now a Communist country. Luckily, when the judge started questioning us and I told him which camp I was in, he asked me if I remembered a certain name and I said yes. It turned out he was in the same camp I was in. Not only did he let us free, but he went around in the court house and tried to change some of our money into German marks!

After other close calls, Morris and his friend arrived back in Germany. In October 1945, UNRRA sent him, his friend, and other displaced young men to England. Morris was 17 when he arrived.

I described in brief the suffering in the camps. It would be too gross and too graphic to describe in details the killings, the beatings, people starving, others eating human flesh, and so on.

Every one of us survivors has suffered in those few years in camp more than anyone can imagine. Lots of times, even now, I sometimes wonder how different my whole life would have been if I had my parents and brother and sisters, and I had grown up in a family. But I guess I will never know.

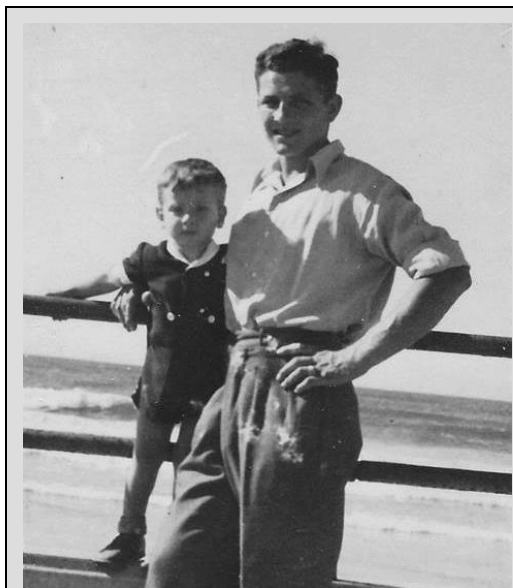
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Morris worked in England before moving to Israel, where he married Rivka Pichota in 1949. They moved to the U.S. in 1961 with their three children. When Morris became an American citizen, he changed his name from Moszek Sztajnkeler to Morris Stein (and Rivka changed her name to Michelle). With an uncle's help, Morris learned the butcher business. They lived in New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Florida before moving to North Carolina around 2005. They have eight grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.

ONLINE RESOURCES

- Morris Stein, "Reflections on Hell," Holocaust autobiography, 1995
bit.ly/2mHx03r
- "Moszek Sztajnkeler [Morris Stein] Identified," U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2016
rememberme.ushmm.org/updates/
moszek-sztajnkeler-identified
- Forced Labor (USHMM)
encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/
article/forced-labor-in-depth
- Displaced Persons (USHMM)
encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/
article/displaced-persons
- United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration: UNRRA (USHMM)
encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/
united-nations-relief-and-rehabilitation-administration



Morris with his young son Jack in Israel after the war



Morris and his family in Israel about 1960



Morris (right) with his wife Michelle and son Jack, ca. 2010

Excerpted and adapted from "Reflections on Hell," by Morris Stein, 1995, bit.ly/2mHx03r. Reproduced by permission of Jack Stein, Mr. Stein's son. Images credited USHMM reproduced by permission of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Family photographs reproduced by permission of Jack Stein.

THE CAMPS ■ HANK QUESTIONS A GERMAN OFFICER

Born in a Polish village in 1925, Hank Brodt was 16 when the Nazis occupied his region in 1941. He endured forced labor and the brutality of several concentration camps before liberation in May 1945. He recounts this interchange with a Nazi officer while in the Melk labor camp.

One day, a German officer stopped me to ask a question. I immediately took off my hat, my eyes cast down.

"Who are you?" he asked me.

"I am a Polish Jew," I replied.

"Where were you born?"

"I was born in Poland."

"So, you are Polish?" he said.

"No, sir, I am a Polish Jew."

We went back and forth like this for a while, and I could feel my ire building, though I was, of course, careful to maintain my composure. Finally, I asked him if I could ask him a question of my own.

To this he responded angrily, "How dare you ask a question of a German officer of the Third Reich!" Nevertheless, he granted me a question.

I tried to choose my words carefully, but there was something I had been longing to understand from the beginning of this ordeal, and I saw this as a chance to articulate the essential question. "I am Polish," I said. "I have committed no crime other than being Jewish. Why am I here?"

There it was, at last. Out of my heart, out of my mouth, and into the open. Why was I here? Why were any of us here? Why was this happening to us?

There was an awkward silence, and then a moment passed between us. The officer turned and walked away without uttering a single word.

I considered this a triumph, and I knew that this brief conversation was enough to get me killed. Maybe it was my imagination, but I like to think that he had some internal struggle with what Germany was doing, and his part in that cause.

I came to realize that not all Germans were Nazis. People were afraid. A German soldier never knew who was around him. Who was a true follower? Who swore allegiance to Hitler? Perhaps that German officer believed the propaganda, perhaps not. However, for the length of a conversation, this German officer was perhaps trying to make sense of the insanity in his own way.



In 1953, Hank testified in the war crimes trial of Fritz Hildebrand, the SS commander of one forced labor camp that Hank had endured. Hildebrand was sentenced to eight years and released after two years. With new evidence, Hildebrand was tried again in 1967 and, with the testimony of Hank and others, was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment.

Hank's mother and sister were murdered by the Nazis (his father had died when Hank was an infant). His brother had been drafted into the Soviet army, survived the war, and lived in the Soviet Union and Israel until his death in 1986. Hank was unable to locate him until 2007, when his daughter made contact with his brother's family in Israel through JewishGen Family Finder. Hank immediately visited his brother's family and honored his brother at his grave.

Hank emigrated to the United States in 1949 with the help of an American soldier he met after being liberated. Drafted into the army during the Korean War, he served in Germany for two years (1950-1952), where he married his wife Kathe (whom he had met soon after liberation). They settled in New Jersey and raised their two daughters. In 2005 Hank moved with his second wife Aida (Kathe had died in 1978) to High Point, North Carolina. He has two grandchildren. With his daughter, Hank wrote his memoir, *A Candle and a Promise*, in 2016. He continues to speak to audiences about his Holocaust experience.

ONLINE RESOURCES

- Oral testimony of Hank Brodt, 2006 (1½ hrs., U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum)
collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn126323
- Presentation of Hank Brodt, High Point University, NC, 2015 (1 hr. 13 min., HPU: YouTube) youtu.be/k73HYDPWtbY

"Conversation with a German Officer," ch. 23 in Deborah Donnelly, *Hank Brodt Holocaust Memoirs: A Candle and a Promise*, The Netherlands: Amsterdam Publishers, 2016, amsterdampublishers.com/books/candle-and-a-promise/. Reproduced by permission of Amsterdam Publishers. 1945 photograph from the U.S. Natl. Archives in the public domain; access courtesy of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Family photographs reproduced by permission of Deborah Donnelly.



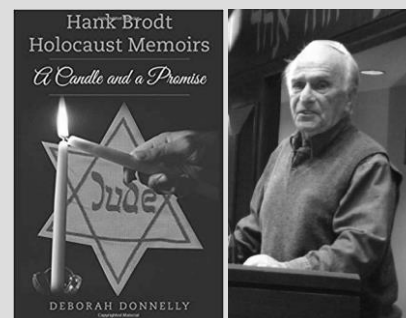
Hank and Kathe Brodt on their marriage in Germany, August 1952



Hank speaks with a North Carolina teacher at a Holocaust workshop, 2010.



Hank with his daughter, Deborah Donnelly, with whom he wrote his memoir



The yellow star with "Jude" (Jew) on the cover of Hank's memoir is the one worn by his wife's mother in then Czechoslovakia.

THE CAMPS ■ JULIUS SURVIVES CLOSE CALLS

Julius Blum was born in 1925 in Munkács, Czechoslovakia, a mountain town with a strong Jewish community. In 1938 the area was annexed by Hungary as part of the Munich agreement that gave most of Czechoslovakia to Hitler. The Jews of Hungary were relatively safe until Nazi Germany invaded the country in March 1944. By late May, all the Jews of Munkács had been sent to Auschwitz to be killed.

In March 1944 the German army occupied Hungary. Shortly afterwards, laws were put in place requiring Jews to wear yellow stars and observe a curfew after sunset. All other rights Jews had previously had as citizens—owning their own businesses, attending universities, practicing a profession, and even owning a radio, the only source of news that they had—were taken away from them.

I was 19 years old. I lived with my family in a small town about 100 miles south of the Polish border. A small group of young friends and I, 20 of us total, decided never to wear a yellow star. Using false papers identifying us as non-Jews, we at first avoided capture. At night we secretly listened to the BBC [radio] broadcasts from London. We never learned about what was happening to Jews in other parts of Europe. Had we known it, we would have organized and fought behind the lines, gladly giving our lives or perhaps helping to end the war sooner.

Not long after the Germans ordered Jews to wear the yellow star, we were forced to leave our homes and move into the ghetto. My grandmother, grandfather, aunt, her husband, their two children, and his parents, and my uncle and his family all shared two small rooms. Instead of moving into the ghetto, we 20 fellows decided to go into the woods where we hoped to survive until the war was over. We pretended to be migrant workers accepting odd jobs from the farmers. We worked on one farm taking care of pigs and carting wheat to the flour mill. Close to the end of April, the farmer we worked for informed on us to the Germans. We were captured by German soldiers and taken to the brick factory, which was the transport area for Jews being deported to Auschwitz. At the brick factory, we were severely beaten and then interrogated to find out if we knew anyone else hiding in the woods. Unfortunately, I had a note written in Hebrew in my pocket which a German officer found. Thinking it was a secret code, he took me to the group leader. I was questioned and beaten until I passed out. Luckily, I was taken to a first-aid station and the doctor looking after me happened to be a close family friend. He made sure I was put in a cattle car with the rest of my friends.

No one in the train knew where we were heading. A day later the train stopped. The Germans opened the cattle car doors and allowed Hungarian Jews from the nearby labor camp to bring water into our car. The big bucket that served as a bathroom for the whole train car was emptied. Immediately they locked the doors again and the train headed east.



USHMM/Yad Vashem



Selection on arrival at Auschwitz, spring 1944

USHMM/Yad Vashem



Selection for slave labor at Auschwitz, spring 1944

About three or four days later, the train stopped, and the doors opened to a bedlam of noise. Voices in German, Yiddish, French, and Polish shouted for us to get out of the car, leave everything behind. Men and women were told to line up separately. Immediately they marched us forward and we passed the first selection in front of [Dr. Josef] Mengele. I shall never forget Mengele. He was dressed immaculately from his uniform to his very highly polished boots. I could see my reflection in them. He looked at me. I was still showing bruises on my face, and despite the fact that I was young and otherwise in excellent condition, he wasn't sure if I should go right or left. Finally he asked me, "Can you run?" I loudly answered "Yes." Then he pointed to his left and I started running. This was the difference between life and death.

We were taken to an empty barrack where we sat wondering where we were and what was going to happen to us. Late that evening a fellow in a prison uni-

form came to our barrack, hoping to find somebody he knew. He had heard that a transport from Hungary had arrived. He told us that we were in a camp called Birkenau, an adjoining camp to Auschwitz, and that we had been selected to work, but he doubted that many of us would survive the harsh conditions and the lack of food. We asked him about the others who were directed to Mengele's right, mostly the elderly, frail, or women with children. He told us we would never see them again. He pointed to the chimneys spewing smoke and sparks, letting us know that was where they were. We realized the odor we were smelling was burning flesh. The rest of the night not one of us slept a wink. We just stood by the windows and looked at the chimneys.

Early in the morning several prisoners took us to the showers, ordering us to strip naked and leave everything behind except for our shoes. First the barber shaved our bodies. After the shower, we were disinfected and given a towel, a piece of soap, and a bowl with a rusty spoon. They also gave us a uniform of lightweight striped fabric and marched us to Auschwitz, about a mile and a half away. There we were assigned to a place in a barrack and a number was tattooed on our left arm. Then the guards asked everybody about their profession. Other prisoners had advised me to claim a profession; I told them I was a plumber.

One day they came and called out certain numbers. The men with these numbers were assigned to be taken to a labor camp. I was one of the 200 men taken in a transport to a new camp built to

He told us that we were in a camp called Birkenau and we had been selected to work, but he doubted that many of us would survive the harsh conditions and the lack of food. We asked him about the others who were directed to Mengele's right . . . He told us we would never see them again.

house workers for a nearby factory. I was assigned to a drill machine used in producing cannons for the German army. We worked seven days a week, 12 hours a day on the day shift, and another group worked 12 hours on the night shift. We were considered luckier than most other people who worked outdoors and in the mines which was much more difficult.

Our life followed a certain routine. We got up at six o'clock in the morning and lined up for appel, which was the roll call or counting. We got a dark hot liquid that they called coffee and marched to work.

Seven o'clock at night the night shift arrived, and the day shift marched back to camp. We were given a soup which sometimes contained one or two pieces of potatoes or turnips. It was a daily struggle figuring out where to stand in line to reach the kettle just before it was empty. People at that point in the line were the lucky ones. They were in the right place to receive the piece of potato and turnip in the bottom of the soup kettle. We were also given a slice of bread, one sixth of a loaf.

Little communication took place among prisoners. We were not allowed to talk while working or marching, or during roll call. The only time we talked to each other was during mealtime when the subject was invariably food—what our mothers used to cook and our favorite dishes, and what we were going to do when we were liberated. I was going to spend all my money eating in a pastry shop until I was sick to my stomach. My dream was to have enough bread to satisfy my hunger along with one slice of bread for tomorrow.

Luckily, for me, the patient underneath had died during the night and the doctor, risking his life, changed the tag from my bed to the dead man's bed, and I survived a close call.

after I developed a high fever. My fever started just as the inspector from Auschwitz came to take away the dead and half-dead. At night he passed through the hospital and if he saw somebody too weak to return to work, he tagged the bed, assigning the person to be taken back to Auschwitz. In the morning I woke up and saw the tag on my bed. My fever had broken and I felt much better. I asked the doctor to help me since I felt good enough to go back to work. Luckily for me, the patient underneath had died during the night and the doctor, risking his life, changed the tag from my bed to the dead man's bed, and I survived a close call. Two days later I was back at work.

In December [1945], just before Christmas, we heard heavy machine gun fire and knew Russian soldiers were coming closer. The Nazis gathered us together, gave each of us half a loaf of bread, and marched us to the railway station. The factory where we worked produced one gun a day, the



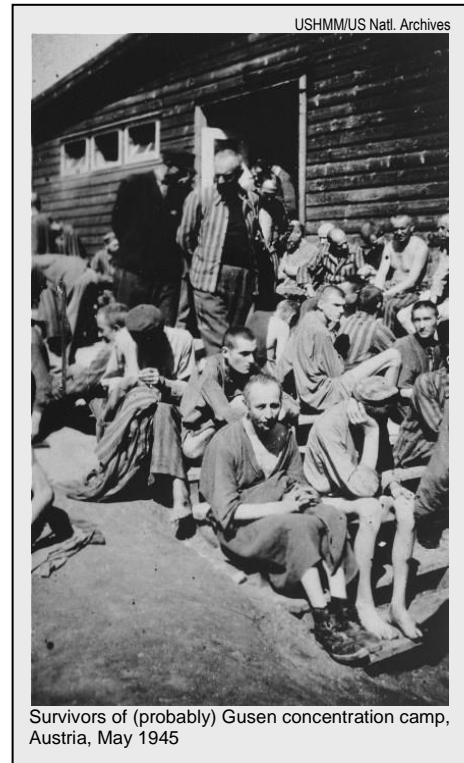
best gun of World War II, but for the previous few weeks not a single gun was taken to the battlefield because the Germans lacked the fuel or trains to carry them. Yet they had no problem getting a train to take us to Austria. We ate the bread on the first day of the trip. For the rest of the trip, we had no bread or water. We picked up some snow from the top of the car through a small window. In Munich, Germany, the train was taken away from us and we waited for a day outdoors for another. We were gathered in a corner in the railroad station, watching the people walking by with Christmas packages. We stood there starved and looking miserable, but not one person out of the hundreds passing by took notice of us or gave us so much as a morsel of bread. A day later we arrived at Mauthausen, a concentration camp in Austria. We had to get off the train and walk about a mile to the station in knee-deep snow. Weakened by starvation and brutal treatment, many could not make it. Those who fell in the snow were killed. At least one third of the group died.

Mauthausen was at the foot of the Alps mountains. It was mid-January and extremely cold. We kept ourselves from freezing by huddling together to get the warmth of our body temperatures. After three weeks, we were taken to Gusen, a labor camp working for the military. I was assigned to assemble machine guns. The camp was in a valley, and the factory was on top of a hill. From the camp to the factory we had to climb 21 rough uneven steps, and these steps became the test to determine if we were still fit to work. If anyone fell while walking those steps, his number was reported and the next day he was told to stay in his barracks. Staying in the barracks usually meant you would be taken to the crematorium to die.

Again I was in luck. My barrack was the very last one on the road before the cart headed for the crematorium. . . . The cart came, but it was so overloaded with corpses that the fellows pulling the cart said to me, "We will come for you tomorrow." The next day . . . the same thing happened again. The cart was too full.

afternoon, the cart came, but it was so overloaded with corpses that the fellows pulling the cart said to me, "We will come for you tomorrow." The next day, two of us sat on the steps, waiting for the cart. Our minds were so numb that it really didn't matter that this would be our last day on earth. The same thing happened again. The cart was too full. Again they told us that they would be back for us tomorrow. I didn't know whether I was happy or sad to be given another day to live.

That afternoon, at five o'clock, we again lined up for an appel [roll call]. Always exactly at five o'clock the gates opened and the German soldiers appeared. But on this day it was five minutes after five and the gates were closed. Suddenly I saw two soldiers in green uniforms peeking through the gates. Then the gates opened and suddenly some prisoners shouted, "We are free."



Survivors of (probably) Gusen concentration camp, Austria, May 1945

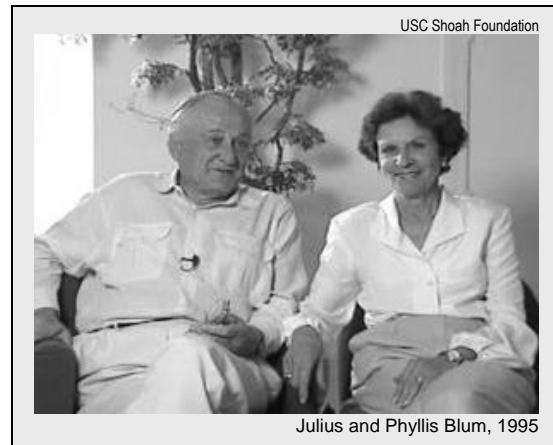
On the second day of May, as I was going to work, I fell on the steps. My number was recorded and I was told not to go to work. After everyone left for work, I sat on the steps waiting for the cart to come for me to take me to the crematorium. Again I was in luck. My barrack was the very last one on the road before the cart headed for the crematorium. In mid-

Everyone ran towards the gates to surround the [American] soldiers. They looked at us as if we were creatures from outer space, while we looked at them as if they were angels from heaven.

We stared at each other without saying a word. Then I remembered my English lesson from school and I shouted "God Save the King." A soldier looked at me and said, "We are Americans, not British." The silence was broken and we started communicating. Thus my captivity ended and my second life began.

The German soldiers had fled as American GIs approached the camp. We started singing our national anthems. Every European country was represented. Then everyone ran towards the gates to surround the soldiers. They looked at us as if we were creatures from outer space, while we looked at them as if they were angels from heaven.

Julius was reunited with his mother and father in the United States. His brother and the rest of his family died in the Holocaust. Julius came to the United States in 1947 on a scholarship to study in Georgia; he earned his degree in textile engineering from the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta. After working in textile mills in South Carolina, he opened his own textile plant, Blue Jay Knitting, in 1966 in Asheville, North Carolina. Julius retired in 1988 after establishing several other textile plants in the region. He and his wife Phyllis have three sons and five grandchildren.



ONLINE RESOURCES

- Oral testimony of Julius Blum, video, 1 hr. 50 min., no date: first seconds of video, likely including the interview date, omitted (U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum)
collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn520398
- Julius Blum, profile in *Choosing to Remember: From the Shoah to the Mountains*, 2000, p. 15 (Center for Diversity Education, UNC-Asheville)
diversityed.unca.edu/sites/default/files/choosing%20to%20remember%20small.pdf
 - ♦ Study Guide for *Choosing to Remember*
diversityed.unca.edu/sites/default/files/Choosing_Student_Guide.pdf.pdf
- Julius Blum, profile in *Coming to the Mountains: Immigration and Western North Carolina*, p. 9 (Center for Diversity Education, UNC-Asheville)
diversityed.unca.edu/sites/default/files/ComingtotheMoutnains.pdf [sic]
 - ♦ Study Guide for *Coming to the Mountains*
diversityed.unca.edu/sites/default/files/ComingtoMountains_Studyguide.pdf
- Julius Blum, brief biography in research for the project SHOAH: Survivors and Witnesses in Western North Carolina (Center for Diversity Education, UNC-Asheville)
toto.lib.unca.edu/findingaids/oralhistory/SOAH/blum_julius.pdf

Excerpted from the Shoah Foundation interview of Julius Blum, 1995, from the archive of the USC (University of Southern California) Shoah Foundation. For more information, see sfi.usc.edu/. © USC Shoah Foundation. Reproduced by permission of the USC Shoah Foundation. Images credited USHMM reproduced by permission of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Blum family portrait courtesy of the From the Shoah to the Mountains Collection (OH-SHOAH), Special Collections and University Archives, D. H. Ramsey Library, University of North Carolina at Asheville.

THE CAMPS ■ RENA MAKES A PROMISE

Rena Kornreich was born in 1920 in Tylicz, Poland, and her younger sister Danka was born two years later. Rena looked after her sister throughout their childhood, never expecting that her devotion would be crucial through the horrors of Nazi concentration camps. In March 1942, when the sisters were 20 and 22, they were on the first transports of Jews to Auschwitz. Five months later they were moved to the newly created women's camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

How will we survive this place? What do we have to do in order to live? What does this life mean? What is there to know? We did not receive a ticket when we entered Auschwitz-Birkenau saying, You will leave on such and such a day; you will leave alive. There are no guarantees. Birkenau is a cruel awakening. In Auschwitz there was a lot of death, but it was not such a daily fact of life.* Now we see death every day. It is a constant, like our meals. And there are not just one or two girls dying, like before, but tens and twenties and losing count.

I know that I must be with my sister. I know that I must make sure she lives; without her I cannot survive. I do not admit that to myself, but I know she is a part of my truth, my being. We cannot be separated; there is danger in separation.

There is only one thing that exists beyond the gates of Auschwitz-Birkenau. It lies in wait for me like a beacon of light shining through the fog. I hold it before me constantly, every second of every day. It is the only thing that keeps me going—Mama and Papa. They beckon to Danka and me from the fringes of my mind. Their hands wave against a backdrop of snow and winter sky. *We're here!* they cry. *We're waiting for you to come home.*

We're coming, Mama, I remind them. *Don't leave us here alone.* And they don't. I hear Mama's voice comforting my troubled mind, soothing the worries of our existence. The only thing she cannot help is the hunger, but even that dulls in comparison to the knowledge that Mama and Papa are waiting for Danka and me to return to Tylicz. I frame this picture in my mind and hang it on a mental wall where I can gaze at it constantly. I know they are there. I work because they need me. I live because they are alive.

Mama, I brought you the baby back, I repeat over and over in my head. It is the refrain in the song that keeps me strong and healthy and spirited. *Mama, I brought you the baby back.* My one great feat in life, my fate, is to survive this thing and return triumphant with my sister to our parents' home.



Rena (far right) with her parents, her older sister Zosia, and her younger sister Danka, mid-1920s



Sisters Rena (left), Danka, and Zosia with their mother and Zosia's children, ca. 1940

* These were the earliest months of Auschwitz before the camp fully transitioned from a labor camp to a death camp.

You have to have a brain to figure out all that is going on, the tricks to being camp smart. . . . The new arrivals barely have time to figure out how to survive before they die.

These first few weeks we are barely surviving. The food is less than it was, which means it has gone from a crust to half a crust. The soup is so thin there is no use to wait at the end of the line for a piece of turnip or meat, and the tea is practically clear. Every morning that we wake up, at

least one of the girls has died on our block. There are no exceptions. We are dropping like flies.

You have to have a brain to figure out all that is going on, the tricks to being camp smart: where it's the warmest, who's the most dangerous, who doles out a bit more soup. The new arrivals barely have time to figure out how to survive before they die.

After roll call you don't know anything else that's happening. You can't keep brooding about what is befalling you and everyone else because then you won't have the energy to go on, and you have to keep going. The work you do may kill you, but if you don't do it you will be killed. No matter what the detail, we work, we dig, we carry, we sift, we push, we die.

It is Sunday. It is fall. We get off our shelves. Get our tea. Eat our half piece of bread. There is a rumor that there is going to be a selection.

"What's a selection?" we ask among ourselves.

We groom all day, pulling lice from our armpits and clothes. There is no frightening these creatures; they are everywhere. I spit on my shoes and wet the crease on my pants. It is important to look good if there is going to be a selection—whatever that means. I want to look right. Sunday fades with the light of a pale sun.

Four A.M. *"Raus! Raus!"* [*"Out! Out!"*]

We grab our tea as we step outside. I

notice that something is different immediately. The guards do not count us at once. Instead they stand at one end of camp, ignoring our neat lines and perfect rows. We wait and wait. Well after the sun is up, we wait. The row at one end begins to move forward slowly. We strain our eyes to see what is happening but they are too far away. "They are selecting us." The whisper scurries down the rows, informing those of us who are not yet moving toward the SS.

"What's it mean?" Danka asks.

"I don't know," I lie. I have an idea, but it is not something I will share with anyone I care about. We stand in our lines, forced to contemplate what new Nazi trick this is.

"They're deciding who will live and who will die," the whispers confirm. Our ranks grow silent and still. How can this be true? How can they do that? We have seen how they step on us like cockroaches—why does this next thing come as such a surprise? We move forward. I take Danka's hand, squeezing it reassuringly. "I will go in front of you," I whisper.

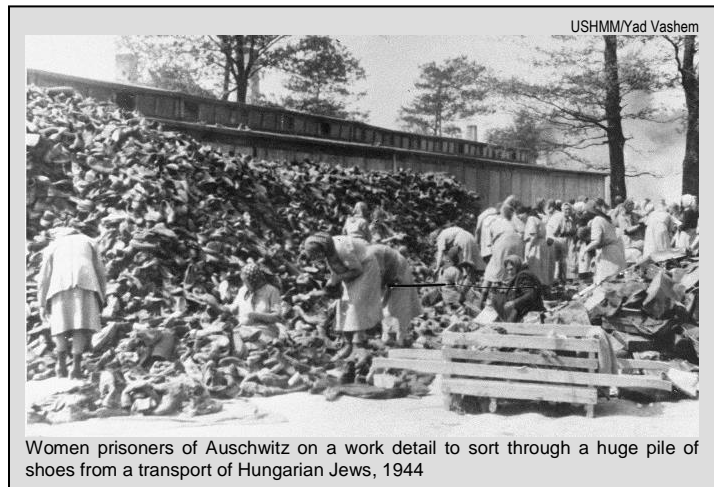


Jewish women who have been selected for forced labor at Auschwitz-Birkenau march toward their barracks after disinfection and headshaving, May 1944.

There are two sisters at the head of the line. I recognize them from the first transport. Like me, they've been here since the beginning. They step up to the table of SS officers. An SS points for one to go left and the other right. "No! Please!" the one who has been chosen for life cries, falling on her knees. "Let me go with my sister," she begs the officer, careful not to touch him. She huddles at his glossy obsidian boots, weeping for mercy. He points. She follows her sister. Hand in hand they step toward the flatbed trucks.

I squeeze Danka's hand one last time before stepping in front of those who will judge me fit or unfit. Tomorrow may have no meaning for us if we do not pass this selection—and if we do pass? Tomorrow may have no meaning for us. I hold my breath. The thumb points for me to live. Stepping forward cautiously, I wait for my sister. The thumb points for Danka to follow me. I breathe.

I am concerned about Danka's depression. She doesn't seem to care about ever getting her own bowl of soup again. This is something beyond her fear of the kapos[†] serving the food. She seems so downtrodden, as if she's giving up on any hope of survival, and this depression is eating away at her soul. She is absent; her eyes are glazed over most of our waking hours. I don't think that she's too far away, but I know I must try to do something before she goes beyond my grasp. Struggling with what to do about my sister's failing faith, I finally decide that there is no other course but to confront her.



It is late. The rest of the block is sleeping fitfully. "Danka," I whisper into the dark, "are you asleep yet?"

"No."

"What's bothering you? Something's wrong, I know it. Why're you so sad?"

"I don't know."

"Please talk to me. How can I help you if I don't know what's going on in your head? I feel you shrinking away from me. You have to tell me what's wrong."

"What sense is there to this?"

"To Auschwitz?" I'm puzzled.

"To everything." She pauses. "What if there's a selection and I'm selected to die?"

"What makes you say that?"

"You look better than me. You aren't losing so much weight, and you're still strong. What if I can't make it?"

Slowly it dawns on me. "Remember those two sisters?" I take her hand. "And how the one begged to go with the other one?"

^{*} After being hit by a guard who accused her of returning to the soup line for seconds, Danka refused to go through the soup line again.

[†] Kapo: a camp prisoner forced to act as a guard of prisoners in labor groups.

***I cannot lie to my sister, but
I can promise one thing.***

She nods in the shadows.

"I will do the same, if it comes to that."

"They don't allow it all the time, though. That was the first selection; they were soft. Now if someone begs to go with their mama or sister or daughter, they laugh and push them away."

"I will do whatever it takes, even if I must strike the SS."

"Then they will kill you immediately—that's no good."

There is something else lurking behind her eyes. It isn't dying alone she's afraid of, but I'm not sure which fear is possessing her.

"What is it you're really afraid of?"

"Being thrown in the truck," she confesses. "They treat us like rotten meat. I don't want to be discarded like that, thrown onto the flatbeds. I'm afraid of what Erna said. Maybe there won't be enough gas, and I'll go into the crematorium still alive. What if they're trying to conserve the gas?"

I cannot answer that question. How can I assure her that there will be enough gas to kill us when we arrive at the ultimate destination of all prisoners in Auschwitz-Birkenau? I cannot lie to my sister, but I can promise one thing.

"Sit up, Danka. Come on, sit up." I hold out my hand. "You see my hand here." I put her hand on mine and look into her eyes. "Our parents are standing here in front of us and my hand is our Talmud, and on this holy book and before our parents I make the oath to you—that from this day on, if you are selected I will join you no matter what. I swear that you will not go onto the trucks alone."

It is pitch-black in the blocks, but I can almost see the light flicker back on in my sister's eyes as I make this promise. Exhausted, I release her hand, and we fall back against the cold wood, pulling our blankets close around our bodies. Sleep comes swiftly, carrying us to a land where there are no shadows.

At lunch the next day, Danka stands in line and receives her first full helping of soup in months.



The SS walk up and down our rows counting the evening crew, making note of those who collapsed and died during the day. A hush descends through the columns of women. Dr. Mengele has come into camp. We know who he is; there are rumors about him. He stands before us, the glorious angel of doom.*

An SS motions for a portion of our ranks to move away from the main group. Danka and I are in the group separated from the rest of roll call. Dr. Mengele walks slowly among us looking for the healthiest, most able-bodied specimens. It is a moment I have been hoping for; sometimes he chooses prisoners for inside work details. This may be our lucky day, the day we find a way to leave Birkenau. He walks by us like a butcher inspecting his meat.

He points at me but passes over Danka. I step out, walking to the front of the line, moving away from my sister. Danka is discarded with the rest of the unfit specimens. Roll call is dismissed. Thousands of women hurry to their respective blocks to grab their bread and a place on the shelves to sleep.

We march away from the regular blocks toward the quarantine block. Turning my head, I catch a glimpse of my sister as the pit in my stomach grows wider and wider. The anxiety of not having her next to me is unbearable. I do not know if this detail is for life or if it is for death. I do know that

* Dr. Josef Mengele is the most infamous of the Nazi physicians who conducted brutal medical experiments on prisoners in the concentration camps.

the only way I can keep my promise to my sister, though, is to keep her with me at all times—too much can happen in a moment. There is no debate in my mind about my duty to my sister; the oath is the driving force behind all of my actions.

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That night, Rena offers her bread portion to a kapo guard to let her leave the quarantine block and get Danka. Reunited, the sisters wait several days in quarantine with the other selected women, wondering what work they will be doing.

Danka drifts off into a world of her own. I watch her become oblivious to her surroundings, knowing that this is how she survives. Meanwhile, I listen to every bit of information I can gather; this is how I survive—always being aware.

“Raus!” “Line up!” It’s the fourth morning. An attendant from the hospital enters the block. “March out!” We follow her lead, stepping out of quarantine, marching across the length of camp toward another building. The sign over the door reads SAUNA. Inside, the kapo informs us, “Leave your old clothes in a pile here. You no longer need them. There are new uniforms on that table. “Schnell!” [“Quick!”]

Stepping naked over to the table, we snatch up the new one-size-fits-all uniforms, pulling them over our bodies. They’re exactly like our other blue-and-gray striped dresses, rough as unworn sandpaper.

“Put these aprons on!” We tie clean, white, pressed aprons around our waists as we line up again, filing out of the building in twos. We march back across the length of the compound in front of the rest of the women in camp already lined up for morning roll call. The next building we enter is in the middle of the camp; it’s a small, one-room building across from our blocks. It’s Mengele’s office. Inside, the nurse orders us to hold out our arms so that the secretary can write down each of our numbers on a list. Outside, we line up facing the camp roll call, in neat rows of five, ten to each line, forming our new exclusive work detail.

Out of the corner of my eye I see a woman with a list in her hand and make a note that her presence is odd. She comes from behind the building, nervously looking this way and that as if she’s afraid. She stands for a moment, scratching something out on the list, then cautiously she takes one of the girls by the hand and leads her out the back of the line and behind Mengele’s office. They disappear.

My heart races as the realization sinks in. “Danka, this is not a good detail to be in.”



It takes less than a second for me to decide the course of action we must try to take if we are to survive. "Come with me."

Danka's eyes bulge with fright. "Why do you say that?"

"One of the elite just took a friend or relative out of the lineup."

"Who?"

"I don't know who she is, but she's important enough to walk around while the rest of us are standing roll call. She would know if this was a bad kommando [work detail]. We're not going to work under any roof. This is for death."

"You can't be sure."

"Yes, I can." I look around. My mind runs through every scenario possible. It takes less than a second for me to decide the course of action we must try to take if we are to survive. "Come with me."

Her eyes pop out of her head. "Where?"

"Back to the sauna." I look at the dreaded dresses we're wearing. How could I have missed the signs? No numbers on the breast, new dresses, clean white aprons exactly like the experiment victims were wearing.* "Our only chance is to get our old uniforms back before they remove them and we're lost for good."

"We can't do that!"

"We have to." I am fierce.

"How?"

My mind has catapulted beyond the situation we are in, to the particulars that could save our lives. "We're going to pretend that we're just as important as any block elder or kapo. I'm going to take your hand and we're going to march across the compound and I'm not letting go until we're in the sauna."

"In front of everybody?"

"It's a gamble."

"We can't. They'll shoot us for sure."

"Danka? This is something for experiments. Remember the women with the faces?"

"Gathering herbs?"

"You want to be a zombie?" I glare into her face.

"No."

We fall silent as an officer passes.

"You're going to be if you don't come with me now. We have one chance to live and once chance to die. If we cross the compound we might live or die. If we stay here we're dead for sure."

She wants to follow me, I can tell, but fear has her feet rooted into the ground. "I can't," she whispers.

I lean very close to her ear. "I'm going to break my oath to you. I swore I'd die with you, but that was only if you were selected, not if you chose to die. I don't owe that to you anymore!" Our

* One day the sisters witnessed the march of skeletal women with "bottomless eyes" to the gas chamber. Another inmate tells them the women are experiment victims: "They torture them until they are dead or vegetables. After they are done experimenting with them, they go to the gas."

voices are sparse and speculative. The SS are busy counting the prisoners on the other side of the Lagerstrasse [camp main street].

"If you don't want to listen to what I'm saying, then you're deciding to give up your life—but I'm not. I'm going back to the sauna whether you come with me or not." I pray I've scared her enough to come with me.

"What do I do?" Her voice wavers.

"Just walk with me. That's all you have to do. Keep your chin high and believe you're important." Her eyes glaze over. She will do as she's told. "Now give me your hand." Like a cold clammy fist, her fingers wind around mine.

Passing Stiewitz and Taube [SS officers], we walk with the air that we are doing exactly what we've been told to do. My fingernails dig into her flesh. I'm not letting go of my sister's hand. We walk, convinced that no one will stop us. We are important. We have been ordered to return to the sauna. I repeat this to myself over and over. Chins up, eyes forward, never look back.

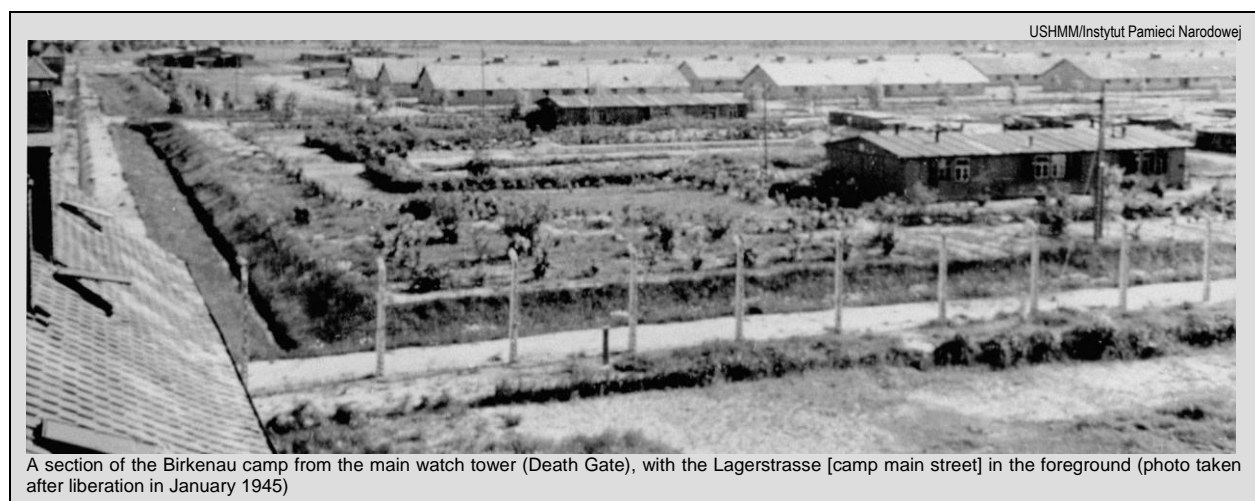
The distance seems to remain the same. The sauna gets closer. The lines and rows of prisoners seem to continue on forever. Through the desert of Birkenau we walk invisible. Seconds slow to hours as our feet trudge through the mud. Our heads held high, our gaze never veers from our path. Danka's hand turns blue from the tightness of my squeeze. Chins up, eyes forward, never look back.

I open the sauna door without looking behind me. There are no voices behind us ordering us to halt, no gunshots firing at our backs. There's only roll call, the lifeline that we must grab as quickly as we can change our clothes. We step inside, shutting the door behind us.

"Quick, Danka. We have to hurry!" I whisper urgently. "Undress and give me your clothes. I will do the rest." Tearing the uniform of an experiment victim off my body, I search the pile of discarded uniforms in my underwear. Danka cannot move. She stares at me like a small animal frozen by fear, incapable of helping me as I fumble through the clothes looking for her number, repeating "2779, 2779" over and over, out loud. My hands tremble uncontrollably as my nerves unravel.

There is no time. Our lives depend on getting back to roll call. We must be counted. We must disappear before anyone notices we're missing from the special detail. Finally, her uniform is on the floor in front of me. I toss it to Danka.

Rena finds her uniform in the pile and, when they both have changed, she opens the sauna door and views her goal—the lines of women standing for roll call.



"Ready?" I don't wait for an answer, pushing Danka out ahead of me and into the neat ranks of five. "Please move up," I whisper to the girl-women around us. "Please move over. Make some room, please." No one pushes back, no one argues. The rows of fated women we depend on move as silently as water, swallowing us into their bosom until we are one with the ranks.

The SS move up our row. We hold our breath. They pass us. We have been counted. Roll call ends.

We are outside digging, building, rather than in Mengele's and Clauberg's hands. It feels good to work. It feels good to be alive.

*As the Soviet army approached Auschwitz in early 1945, most prisoners were forced on a death march to the Ravensbrück camp in Germany. There Rena and Danka were liberated on May 2, 1945. Rena believes her parents perished in Auschwitz. The fate of their sister Zosia is unknown. (Their older sister Gertrude had immigrated to the U.S. in 1921.) After the war, Rena and Danka worked for the Red Cross in Holland. Rena married one of the Red Cross commanders, John Gelissen, and in 1954 they emigrated to the United States (two years after Danka had arrived with her husband). In 1988 Rena and John retired to Hendersonville in the North Carolina mountains. The couple have four children and three grandchildren. In 1995 Rena published her Holocaust memoir, *Rena's Promise: A Story of Sisters in Auschwitz*.*



ONLINE RESOURCES

- *Rena's Promise*, website accompanying the 2015 edition of Rena's memoir; follow the Education tab for teacher and student resources and the Promise Project www.renaspromise.com/
- Video: Shoah Foundation oral testimony of Rena Gelissen, 1996 [Access via sfi.usc.edu/vha](http://www.sfi.usc.edu/vha).
- Video: Presentation by Rena Gelissen on her Holocaust experience, Salem College, Winston-Salem, NC, 1994 (YouTube) www.youtube.com/watch?v=hGx3i_GiT6w (first of several parts on YouTube)
- Jeremy Berlin, "How two sisters' love helped them survive Auschwitz," interview with author Heather Dune Macadam, *National Geographic*, April 15, 2015 news.nationalgeographic.com/2015/04/150415-ngbooktalk-nazis-auschwitz-holocaust-survivors/

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