

The History of the Holocaust

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The following text appears inscribed on one of the granite walls of the Oregon Holocaust Memorial in Portland's Washington Park.

Twenty-five million civilians perished in Europe during World War II. Almost six million Jews – and millions of others – fell victim to racial hatred and premeditated murder carried out by Nazi Germany and its collaborators. Such crimes spring from the darkest recesses of the human spirit. They require planning, collusion, and massive public indifference. Long before Polish Jews were herded into ghettos, before Dutch Jews were forced into hiding only to be betrayed by neighbors, before entire Jewish communities in Hungary were transported to death camps, the seeds of the Holocaust had taken root.

It had been almost fifteen years since the end of World War I, years of social, economic, and political chaos in Germany. The National Socialist German Workers' (Nazi) Party, led by Adolf Hitler, promised stability and an end to the country's troubles. Hitler became chancellor of Germany on January 30, 1933, beginning the dictatorship of the Nazi regime.

Defeated in World War I, Germany aimed to undo what it saw as the humiliation of its surrender. But first it turned to internal enemies whom the Nazi state believed menaced its social and biological purity: socialist, communist, and labor leaders; liberals and intellectuals; homosexuals and non-conformists; Roma (Gypsies) and Jehovah's Witnesses. The Nazis waged a brutal campaign of terror—beating, abducting, and often murdering their victims. Those they did not kill they imprisoned. Between 1933 and 1939 the dreaded Order of the Death's Head, the SS, built an internal empire of concentration camps— Buchenwald, Dachau, Flossenbug, Mauthausen, Neuengamme, Ravensbrueck, and Sachsenhausen — as well as a growing number of satellite labor camps.

In Christian Europe, the Jews had rarely been more than a tiny fraction of the population; in 1933, for example, less than one-half of one percent of Germany's population was Jewish. In the past, medieval kings and churchmen in Europe had blamed this tiny minority for the plague and, more recently, Russian czars had periodically lashed out against that country's Jewish peasantry; now Hitler sought to blame the Jews for Germany's every problem.

Germany began anti-Jewish measures almost immediately. On April 1, 1933, Hitler declared a nationwide boycott of Jewish businesses. The following week, Germany's parliament barred Jews from civil service, education, law, and government. In late 1935 Germany enacted the Nuremberg Laws, limiting citizenship to Germans of "pure blood"— without Jewish heritage.

Things got worse. Between 1935 and 1938 additional laws in Germany forbade Jews to attend schools and universities, to practice their professions (including medicine, music, and the theatre), to swim in public facilities, to pursue literary ventures, or to participate in sports of any kind. From 1938

on, the identity papers of Germany's Jews bore a large "J," and each of them had to adopt the middle name of either "Sarah" or "Israel" as additional identification. Jews were restricted to special benches in public parks, and often signs read "No Dogs or Jews Allowed." Many towns proudly proclaimed at their city limits: "This Town is Jew-Free."

In March 1938 Germany annexed Austria. Already on the path toward war, Germany continued to attack its Jews. On the night of November 9-10, 1938, as terrified families watched, Nazi storm troops went on a rampage of burning and looting, destroying most synagogues and Jewish businesses in the newly united Germany and Austria. Known as the "Night of Broken Glass," *Kristallnacht* was followed by the detention of 30,000 Jewish men in concentration camps, held there until Germany's Jewish community raised one billion Reichsmarks to compensate the state for the supposed "damage caused by the Jews during *Reichskristallnacht*."

Germany's neighbors watched as it re-armed and as it persecuted its Jews. But on September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland, drawing Britain and France into war. During the next two and a half years Germany's army was unstoppable, invading Denmark and Norway in April 1940, then defeating Belgium, Holland, and France in May and June of 1940 and driving British troops from the Continent. Victorious in battle, wildly popular at home, Hitler confidently turned on his most helpless victims. From the fall of 1939 to the end of the summer of 1941, in six specially equipped medical institutions throughout Germany, the Nazi state began a euthanasia program to murder those deemed "unworthy of life" — the handicapped, deformed infants, the chronically ill, and people in nursing homes — killing some by lethal injections, the majority by carbon monoxide in gas chambers.

German occupation forces in Poland proved just as lethal. Believing the Poles to be their cultural and racial inferiors, the SS organized special mobile murder squads— *Einsatzgruppen*— to exterminate Poland's leading teachers, priests, mayors, journalists, labor leaders, intellectuals, and prominent citizens—Catholics and Jews alike. Simultaneously, the Germans drove Polish Jews into ghettos in hundreds of cities and towns, including Warsaw, Krakow, Lublin, and Lodz. Jews deported from Germany and Western Europe were also forced into the ghettos. Walled in, with little food or medicine, these people had to fend for themselves in unbearable conditions. Despite their heroic efforts, they died by the tens of thousands of starvation, disease, and exhaustion.

Poland's ghettos aroused little outcry. But in Germany the public objection by Catholic and Protestant leaders to the euthanasia program forced the Nazis to halt it, though by then they had already murdered 275,000 people. The organizational and technological lessons that the Nazi doctors learned in the euthanasia program and the logistical expertise of the *Einsatzgruppen* would prove an especially murderous combination in Germany's pursuit of Hitler's primary goal: the extermination of the Jews of Europe.

Between 1939 and 1942 military successes allowed Germany to ignore criticism from abroad and clerical conscience at home, as well as individual resistance to the nation's war against the Jews. Despite German hopes that the captive Jews in Poland's ghettos would all die of hunger and disease, the tenacity and resourcefulness of the Jewish communities frustrated their tormentors.

Germany invaded Russia on June 22, 1941. Millions of Jews lived in the path of the invading German forces. Thus began a new, more organized, and even more lethal stage of the Holocaust: "The Final Solution of the Jewish Question." Immediately behind the army came four *Einsatzgruppen* – mobile killing squads – sweeping the countryside for Jewish targets. Some of those captured found themselves in new ghettos in the Baltic States and Western Russia. But the vast majority were brutally rounded up by the Germans—often with the help of local police and anti-Semites— and delivered to the *Einsatzgruppen* and shot. From June 1941 to December 1942, the killing squads and auxiliary police units murdered over 1,250,000 Jews in Poland, Russia, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. In a single two-day action on the outskirts of Kiev in the Ukraine in late September 1941, almost 34,000 of Kiev's 60,000 Jewish men, women, and children were shot in the ravine of Babi Yar.

The killing squads and their local helpers were ruthlessly effective; yet shooting Europe's Jews was not efficient enough for Hitler and his lieutenants. During the fall of 1941, as the *Einsatzgruppen* slaughtered their way ever deeper into Russia, SS officials in Poland and Upper Silesia experimented with industrial methods of murder. At Chelmno, west of Lodz, the Germans killed their victims with the exhaust from special mobile gas vans. By early 1942, in three camps in Eastern Poland – at Treblinka, east of Warsaw; at Sobibor, east of Lublin; and at Belzec, north of Lvov – the SS installed the carbon-monoxide killing technology they had perfected in the euthanasia program. Finally, at Auschwitz, west of Krakow in Upper Silesia, and ultimately also in Majdanek, on the outskirts of Lublin, the SS used Zyklon B, a commercial cyanide-based pesticide, to exterminate the Jews.

Chelmno gassed its first victims in December 1941; Treblinka, Sobibor, and Belzec by mid-1942. These camps quickly proved to be exceptionally deadly. The trains arrived within several hours of their departure from the ghettos of Warsaw, Lodz, Lublin, or Lvov; two hours later, their passengers were dead. Of the 1,990,000 Jews transported to these camps, only 109 people survived. Auschwitz in turn gassed its first Jewish victims in late winter 1942; anticipating half a million prisoners, the camp was expanded to include Birkenau. In Auschwitz-Birkenau, SS architects and engineers forced prisoners to construct four gas chamber and crematorium buildings for the extermination of Jews, Gypsies, political prisoners, and prisoners of war. So successful were the installations at Auschwitz-Birkenau and Majdanek that by late 1943 the SS closed Chelmno, Treblinka, Sobibor, and Belzec.

From 1941 on, in more than a hundred ghettos and camps, Jewish resistance fighters confronted their oppressors. Even as German military conquests reached their zenith in 1942, resistance continued, erupting in the spring of 1943 in the Warsaw ghetto; by autumn revolts in Treblinka and Sobibor hastened their closure. Nevertheless, the trains of doomed Jews continued to roll: from France, Holland, and Belgium in the west; and from Italy, Yugoslavia, Greece, and the Aegean Islands to the southeast as far as the island of Rhodes. As many as half of those aboard, especially the very young and the very old, died during the trip to Auschwitz in freight cars without food, water, or sanitation. For those who survived and ended up at Auschwitz, the next ordeal was the selection. The SS chose only the fittest for slave labor. Within hours the remaining Jews— children and their mothers, the elderly, and the ill — were murdered in one of Birkenau's four gas chambers and burned, their ashes scattered in the surrounding woods.

By 1943 the four gas chambers and crematoria at Birkenau were capable of murdering more than 10,000 individuals per day. The tide of war, however, had unmistakably turned against Germany. Despite their desperate military situation during the spring and summer of 1944, the Germans

continued to give priority to the transport of Jews from Hungary – Europe's largest remaining Jewish community – killing 12,000 Hungarian Jews a day as they arrived by the trainload.

Russian troops liberated Majdanek in July 1944. In January 1945 they reached Auschwitz, finding prisoners who were so weak they had been left to die. Just ahead of the Russian advance, the Germans forced those who could walk to march westward through the dead of winter. Tens of thousands died. When freedom finally came for those who survived the marches, their liberators – British, Canadian, American, and French troops – found them scattered in camps in Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia.

For every Holocaust survivor, there were scores, often hundreds, of family members who did not survive. Families, villages, and towns – indeed, an entire culture – fell victim to Nazi genocide. Soil and ash gathered from the six killing-center camps of the Holocaust – Chelmno, Treblinka, Sobibor, Belzec, Majdanek, and Auschwitz-Birkenau – are buried at the Oregon Holocaust Memorial in Portland's Washington Park, bringing us closer, however symbolically, to those innocent victims of History's darkest chapter. From that soil calls a voice – a written fragment from a nine-year old girl at Sachsenhausen in 1943, one among millions who were silenced by the Holocaust:

Once upon a time there was Elzunia
Dying all alone
Because her daddy is in Majdanek
And in Auschwitz her mommy.