

Pre-War - Overview

Overview

Europe had a rich and diverse set of Jewish cultures that had existed for generations, in some areas for over a thousand years.

In 1933, approximately 9.5 million Jews lived in Europe, less than 2% of the total European population. The Jews of Eastern Europe lived predominantly in Jewish villages called shtetls. They wore traditional clothes, spoke Yiddish, and often kept to themselves.

In Germany and Western Europe, Jews tended to assimilate. They lived in the cities, went to the same schools, and dressed and spoke like their non-Jewish neighbors. The roughly 500,000 Jews who lived in Germany made up less than 1% of the German population. More than 100,000 Jews had served in the German army during World War I, and some were decorated war heroes.

Jews in Europe could be found in all walks of life: farmers, tailors, factory hands, accountants, doctors, teachers, artists, and business owners to name a few. Some families were wealthy; many more were poor. More than 60% of the world's Jewish population lived in Europe at the time, and in little more than a decade, two out of every three of them would be dead, killed during the Holocaust.

Holocaust Survivors - Video Clips

The survivors featured below live or have lived in Washington State. The country listed in parentheses is the country in which they were living during the Holocaust. These survivors, with their history and stories, have shaped our community, contributing to its richness and diversity. They challenge us to understand history through personal narrative - to see complex human beings behind the facts.

Magda Schaloum (Hungary) - <https://youtu.be/wqE2hPt9WI4>

We were not very rich, but in our home we had a lot of love, and a lot of pride to be a Jew.

Growing up in my town, Hungary was always known to be a very antisemitic country. And of course, in a smaller town like where I was raised, everybody knew that I was Jewish. And, even though we lived

between non-Jewish people, but still, it wasn't unusual that when I was walking down the street they would throw rocks at me and they would yell, "Stinking Jew!" And, of course, my father always told me – told us kids, "Don't answer, just walk by, and hurry home." And that's what I did, but ... it was a very, very hard life to be a Jew.

The Jewish girls my age – they were not living in *my* neighborhood. And, when I was in high school then I got more acquainted with them. But, not in a friendship base. Because, in Hungary there was a big "class" difference. And they were the so-called "rich ones." But, I'd gotten along with the non-Jewish friends. And, of course, when I – later on, when I was in Budapest, then I had a lot of Jewish friends....

Frieda Soury (Czechoslovakia) - <https://youtu.be/I0liFTImDal>

I was a tomboy and wild, playing with the boys – soccer – and wasn't scared of too many things. Did lots of crazy things, wasn't scared of too many things. A regular tomboy ... climbing trees....

(Were you more interested in that – were you studious?)

No, I wasn't studious. I was more interested in sports. I was very good in athletics. I always was teaching the classes also. The teacher didn't show, I was going – I was very athletic, very sporty.

(How did you get along with your brother?)

Very well.... We beat each other up, between us, where nobody else could get in the middle. (laughs)
And we were getting very well along.

(Were you competitive in sports?)

Oh ya. Played soccer with a ball, and basketball, volleyball, and all kinds of things. Ya.

My father was strict. My mother wasn't. With her you could laugh, joke. And my father was studious. (If) you didn't learn the music and you didn't learn the lesson – he was mad! Really mad! (laughs)

(So you had music lessons?)

Uh-huh. Learned piano three years. Before the war, and then continued....

Noemi Ban (Hungary) - <https://youtu.be/ESyeLh7qy6k>

I had the most wonderful, secure, happy childhood. Whatever part I remember, I have to smile.

(Can you describe the relationship between your mother and father?)

Absolutely loving. Supporting each other, and thorough happiness. And I guess that's why it's carried over to me. Later on, at school – for elementary school I was at my father's school. As I told you, he was my principal and teacher in 4th grade and he was so strict, I tell you. But, I learned a lot!

My father was a teacher, so every single summer we went on vacation, where we met all his colleagues and we met their children. And it was a joyful, wonderful way of being together in the summer. We took hikes, I learned how to swim. I learned how to paddle ... in the boat – ship – or ... canoe. Ya, excuse me. But, many, many little bitty things. Which was very valuable, very precious.

But I still remember that even then when we were on vacation, I had to practice the piano. Which, is a good memory now – then it was not so good (laughs)! My father took his violin and accompanied me while I was playing the piano. Later, when we get there in my story, I will refer to that.

Laureen Nussbaum (German refugee in the Netherlands) -

<https://youtu.be/siz0rqMnx5w>

Amsterdam was really wonderful for us. Of course, we had bicycles. We could go everywhere. There were no signs of “Jews not permitted” or “Jews not wanted.” I mean it was – we were just part of society and our big aim was to pick up Dutch – Dutch history, Dutch geography, and just blend in – which we succeeded in pretty well as young children. Particularly my younger sister, who only started school in September of 1936. So, she had *all* her schooling in Dutch, and I learned it also very fast.

One of the things that I always like to tell when I talk to younger people is that our family was very quickly democratized because we knew how to say things in Dutch. Our parents didn't know, so we told our parents didn't know, so we told our parents, “Eh-eh, you can't say that!” My mother picked up Dutch from the cleaning woman, which was not the Dutch that we learned in school. So we taught her what she can say and what she cannot say – which was very amusing and very empowering and I really liked that very much.

Every Wednesday afternoon in the Netherlands, there was no public school Wednesday afternoons. That was when we had our “Sunday School.” Well, it wasn't on Sunday. So, we went to the liberal Jewish religious education on bicycle, and Margot Frank, Anne's older sister, came along. And we often bicycled, the three of us. Margot, who was one grade ahead of me, hence in the same grade as my older sister – so, my older sister Susie, Margot, and I would bicycle together to religious education.

Questions

- 1) What challenges do minorities often face in societies? How might challenges and pressures change during periods of great stress for a nation?
- 2) Can minorities protect themselves and preserve community life in these environments?
- 3) How can knowledge of the events in Germany and Europe before the Nazis came to power help citizens today respond to threats of genocide and mass atrocity in the world?
- 4) Consider the place(s) in the world from which you/your family came to live in this country. To “assimilate” means to blend in, become fully part of, or integrated into a group or nation. How “assimilated” do you believe you/your family are into American life? Why, or why not? What are some challenges that immigrants and/or refugees might face when entering a new country? Are there reasons why some groups of people might, or do choose *not* to assimilate? Why, or why not?
- 5) What is the author’s most likely purpose for including the following quote: “More than 100,000 Jews had served in the German army during World War I, and some were decorated war heroes.”
- 6) Consider the video testimony of survivors Magda, Frieda, Noemi and Loreen. With which survivor, or part of their testimony, do you most closely connect? Elaborate on what you believe you most have in common with that survivor.