

Ghettos & Camps - Overview

Overview

On September 1, 1939, the German army invaded Poland, which marked the beginning of World War II. Hitler's goal was to secure more land for the German people and to carry out Nazi racial policies. The Nazis swiftly conquered country after country in Europe.

The Nazis and their collaborators forced Jews to move into crowded, often enclosed, areas called ghettos. Ghettos isolated Jews by separating them from the general population. Over 1,000 ghettos were set up throughout Nazi-occupied territories. In the Warsaw ghetto in Poland, more than 400,000 Jews were packed into an area of 1.3 square miles, with an average of over 7 people per room. With insufficient food and medicine, tens of thousands starved to death or died of disease in the ghettos.

In June 1941, Germany invaded the Soviet Union, breaking their alliance in their co-occupation of Poland. Soon after the invasion, mobile killing units (Einsatzgruppen), special groups of Nazi SS and police following the German military, commenced the mass murder of Soviet Jews. With support from local civilians and police, the Einsatzgruppen went from town to town massacring Jews. In all, they killed at least 1.5 million Jews in a "Holocaust by bullets," as well as tens of thousands of political opponents, partisans, Roma (Gypsies) and disabled persons.

In January 1942, at the Wannsee Conference, high-ranking Nazi Party and German officials met to discuss "The Final Solution to the Jewish Question" – the Nazi plan to get rid of Jews through systematic mass murder west of the Soviet Union. Ghetto occupants were shot and killed, or deported, usually by train, to forced labor camps where treatment was brutal, or to death camps.

The largest of these "death camps" was Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland, which by spring 1943 had four poison gas chambers disguised as showers. Up to 6,000 Jews were gassed there each day. An estimated 1.1 million people were murdered at Auschwitz between 1940 and 1945, including more than a million Jews and tens of thousands of Roma, Poles and Soviet prisoners of war.

In addition to six death camps (Auschwitz-Birkenau, Majdanek, Sobibor, Treblinka, Chelmno, and Belzec), there were thousands of concentration camps, forced labor camps, and transit camps where treatment was brutal. Over 6 million Jews and millions of others were murdered in 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.

GHETTOS

Ann Birulin (Poland) - https://youtu.be/fZwkA_jHa88

What it was that there was no place where to move around. If you have ten people in the room, you can only sit down on your bed, and you have two to a bed. So, there really wasn't anything else, and we knew that something is going to happen. We had this feeling and my mother always, what she did is she sewed in some Polish money into my slip. And then I always wore two dresses, and she put on some very good boots on me. So, we were always prepared that, and she told me one thing. My mother said to me this, "*Chanshu*, if something happens to me, you and Chayimek"—Chayim was his name, but we called him Chayimek—"Chayimek must go on. You save your life. If—if you will live, through you I will live."

Edward Haven (Poland) - <https://youtu.be/yBeZ40RikGg>

When the Uprising started, I became a scout for the Underground. At that time, I was 11. And they armed us with—the boys, and girls, too—as they sent certain ones, they armed us with hand grenades, and they sent us out to look for where the Germans were, or where maybe other Underground units were. And, it was during one of those times—and this, of course, sticks in my memory—that this other boy and I, we became friends, were out doing that and we ran into a German machine gun nest. And all I can tell you is, I threw the hand grenade and I ran like hell. I have no idea whether I got anybody, but I

got shot in the leg. It was a kind of a grazing blow. So, I was down and this boy helped me up and I was able to continue to back to where the Underground units, one of the units, was. So, that was quite an experience and that lasted about—now I know—that lasted about 60 days or so, two months.

Fred Kahn (Germany) - <https://youtu.be/pQ55AEGKlxY>

There were two SS men standing, one on each side, and they had boxes right next to them. They said, “The suitcases you have to leave at the train station.” You could carry nothing, and anything we had on us—watches, rings, money, jewelry, whatever it was—we had to drop in the boxes. And they told us right away, “If we find anything on anybody, they’re going to be shot.” So, we disposed of everything we had, and we went on the march, and it was very cold this day in December, in Riga. And finally we arrived in the ghetto. The ghetto was a whole bunch of houses which was about, city blocks, I would say about 15-20 city blocks with barbed wire surrounded, and guards standing all on the outside. We walked in through the main gate and then we noticed some people laying on the side, dead people, but we didn’t pay much attention to it. So they said, “You go to any house you want. Wherever you can. Each family gets a room.” But by the time we were all in this ghetto, there wasn’t enough room for everybody. Then two, three families, four families went into one room.

Zahava Sweet (Poland) - <https://youtu.be/4KYs5Lpl-Ts>

And then one day, I woke up, I heard there was a large commotion in the hospital. And people were coming and going and parents were coming and taking their children. I went to the window and I looked outside. Across the street was a hospital for grownups, and the Germans were taking out the sick people and they were laying them on a truck one on top of the other. People who couldn’t walk, people who were very sick. And I noticed one boy jumped into the arms of his father, from the children’s hospital, from the third floor. And I was standing there, and a little girl that was with me, she was taken too. And I saw that nobody will take me and I will probably end up just being taken away by the Germans and I will be killed. And I almost gave up, really, for anyone to save me. And in that moment, my aunt appeared. My aunt Fela. And she was wearing a long, gray coat. And she took off the coat, and put the coat on my hospital gown, and she said, “Now let’s go, quickly.”

CAMPS

Ann Kaye (Poland) - <https://youtu.be/jNBjRI259g>

When they brought us in into Auschwitz, the first thing they have done was taken off our clothes completely and we had to go through a shower, and then after they shaved our heads, we were let in in groups into a room where four or five girls were sitting by a table. And we had to go, each one of us had to go to the table and forcibly took our arm...and they...and they tattooed each number. It was painful, of course...but we couldn't express our fear, or otherwise we were slapped over the face. And, this is how it happened.

Mel Wolf (Poland) - <https://youtu.be/M2dBpryKjgw>

My first impression in Auschwitz? I—I...scared. Very much scared, even though I already had some experience behind my back. Several years, for that matter. But, and also my impression was, I could smell something which, I smell it every minute of my life. I smelled something, I smelled what I don't like it. I smelled like a, like burned meat. Or something—obviously, I absolutely did not know what the smell is. And that probably was my very first [impression]. Very scary...and that smell, which stays with me all the time. But I did not experience, momentarily, anything, nothing, 'til they put us on trucks and they took us farther down. INTERVIEWER: What was that smell? MEL: The smell? It was, obviously, from the crematoriums. The human body smell. There was nothing else there. There was no industry around in Birkenau and Auschwitz. It just simply was a factory where they were gassing—in Birkenau in particular—it just was a factory where they were gassing people which came from all over Europe, and burned them. And this was the smell. The smell from the crematoriums. That's an impossible smell when you burn thousands of people.

Sam Farkas - https://youtu.be/030Q7DgK_c8

They put me in a small group. There was only 24 of us. We built swimming pools for the officers. I don't know if they were meant to be swimming pools—they told, I mean, we were digging in the ground and it looked like a swimming pool. And it was 24 in the command, and we had four guards who took us to work every day and who watched us. And the guards, they didn't have anything to amuse themselves during the day. So, they used to bring empty beer bottles, what they drink nights before, and their

friends drink. And they used to tie the beer bottles with rubber bands to our heads. And while we were digging in the ground, and shoveling, they'd shoot off the bottles. And there were many, many times that they hit your head and killed you. So the next day, you were replaced with someone, because it had to be 24 people. And I experienced that many times. And the feeling what you have when you hear something pop, especially when you already experienced many of them killed, for the first—for the few split seconds—you are like frozen. You actually don't know if you are alive or dead. And that was a very terrifying time.

Questions

- 1) Both before, and particularly after *Kristallnacht* in November 1938, German Jews knew they were not welcome, and many who were able to do so, including the family of Anne Frank, fled to neighboring countries outside of Germany. How does the reading in this section impact your understanding of the plight of such German Jewish refugees?
- 2) A) What resources and personnel do you think were needed to isolate, transport and murder millions of humans? Make a list of all of the people you think were involved.
B) Alternatively, and/or in conjunction with the question above, assess and define the responsibility of people and institutions included [here](#).
- 3) How much assistance did the SS and its helpers receive from non-Germans? From the German military? From local populations?
- 4) Given the prevalence today of the internet, television, social media and other technology that did not exist in the 1940s, do you think something like the Holocaust could happen today? Give a short description of why or why not.
- 5) In Fred Kahn's video clip testimony, he describes seeing, without reaction, dead bodies lying outside on the streets on his march through the Riga ghetto. How is it possible for a young boy to see dead bodies on streets without significantly reacting?
- 6) Why do you think Ann Birulin's mother's words to her, "If you will live, through you I will live" meant so much to her?
- 7) Why do you think Ann Kaye becomes so emotional describing her experience around being tattooed at one of the camps? Do you, or a family member, have memories that are too painful to discuss with others? Why do you think survivors like Ann Kaye are willing to share such painful memories with strangers? As witnesses/listeners/recipients of this testimony, what is our responsibility to Ann and to others?