

106 THE HOLOCAUST



This is the concentration camp at Auschwitz, Poland, where millions of European Jews were sent to their deaths during World War II. Auschwitz remains a bitter reminder of Hitler's campaign of hate.

In 1940, a 12-year-old Jewish boy in Hungary, Elie Wiesel (EHL-ee wee-ZEHL), became friends with a village character called Moishe (MOY-shuh) the Beadle. Moishe, a popular usher in the Jewish temple, lived on the villagers' charity and spent his days discussing religious philosophy.

Moishe's life was violently interrupted in 1944. Hungary was allied with Nazi Germany. The police had been ordered to

expel all foreign Jews from the country. Moishe, who was not Hungarian, was crammed into the cattle car of a train, and Wiesel never expected to see him again.

Several months later, Moishe reappeared to tell the villagers what had happened. The Jews had been taken to Poland where the Gestapo, the German secret police, loaded them into trucks. The prisoners were driven to a forest, where they were forced to get out and dig huge graves.

The Gestapo then murdered the Jews and shoved them into the fresh graves. Somehow, Moishe had managed to survive.

Wiesel's village did not believe Moishe's story. The villagers thought he wanted pity or had lost his mind. Perhaps the truth was too terrible for them to believe.

Later in 1944, Wiesel and his family were rounded up with their neighbors and sent by cattle car to a **concentration camp** (a prison camp for those the Nazis considered enemies). Only then did Wiesel and his family and neighbors begin to sense the terrible reality of what came to be called the **Holocaust**, the slaughter of Jews and other peoples by Nazis during World War II.

The Final Solution

During Hitler's rise to power, one crucial plank in his political platform had been **anti-semitism** (violent prejudice against Jews). He and his advisors plotted what they called the **Final Solution**. First they planned to destroy the entire Jewish population of Germany, and then, of all Europe. As Hitler gained more power, he put his brutal ideas into action.

The Final Solution was only part of Hitler's dream of a "new order." Documents confiscated after the war show that he envisioned a Nazi-ruled Europe. A vast slave labor force would serve the Germans, whom he thought of as the "master race." People who were "undesirable" or "subhumans" would be



Part of Hitler's Final Solution called for the murder of millions of innocent men, women, and children. These rings were among the personal items stolen by the Nazis from the Jews they killed.

"eliminated." This category included Poles, Soviets, gypsies, the handicapped, and homosexuals, as well as Jews.

Auschwitz

Wiesel and his family were sent to Auschwitz, Poland, site of one of the most infamous death camps in history. Four huge gas chambers killed thousands of people each day. Experts estimate that two and one-half million people died in gas chambers there. At least 500,000 people there died of starvation, abuse, and disease during the war.

When Wiesel and his family arrived in Auschwitz, men were ordered to the left, women to the right. It was the last time Wiesel ever saw his mother and sisters. The male prisoners then filed past the notorious Dr. Joseph Mengele who used human beings as guinea pigs in hideous medical experiments. With the point of a finger, Mengele indicated which men would labor in the camp work force, and which would die.

"Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp which has turned my life into one long night. . . ." Elie Wiesel wrote in his autobiography *Night*. "Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky."

Under the Third Reich, **genocide** (deliberate murder of entire groups of people) became a massive industry. Germany's largest corporations competed to design and build efficient death camps. For example, the chemical company I.G. Farben developed Zyklon B, a crystal that could kill hundreds of people in a gas chamber within minutes. Prisoners direct-

ed to these chambers often mistakenly thought they were being led to showers.

Desperate Courage

When Wiesel was chosen to be a worker, a veteran prisoner told him, "You've already escaped the greatest danger—selection [death]. So now muster your strength and don't lose heart. . . . Have faith in life." During the war, Wiesel and other Jews drew on tremendous courage for day-to-day survival.

Such courage had been shown in the Warsaw ghetto uprising. In 1940, some 400,000 Polish Jews were sealed off within Warsaw's Jewish section. If they tried to leave, they were told they would be killed. Many died from hunger and disease. When some in the ghetto fought back, German tanks and artillery moved into the area. These brave Jews used what little ammunition they had to defend themselves. They hid in cellars and sewers and fought off the Nazis for four weeks. About 60,000 Jews lost their lives during this uprising.

In 1942 alone, the Nazis sent more than 300,000 Jews to concentration camps to be killed. In 1943, the remaining survivors of the Warsaw ghetto were slaughtered.

Crimes Against Humanity

The campaign to exterminate the Jews continued until the war ended in 1945. When Allied troops entered the concentration camps, they found piles of skeletons, and inmates nearly starved to death. People around the world reeled in horror.

After the war, some Nazis were brought to trial in Nuremberg, Germany, for their "crimes against humanity." There it was estimated that the Nazis had exterminated at least 5,700,000 Jews—one half of all

Jews in Europe—and six million other people.

Survivors such as Elie Wiesel have devoted their lives to educating others about this horrifying chapter of history. Wiesel has recorded his memories of how the Holocaust shaped the rest of his life: "One day I was able to get up, after gathering all my strength. I wanted to see myself in the mirror hanging on the opposite wall. I had not seen myself since the ghetto. From the depths of the mirror, a corpse gazed back at me. The look in his eyes, as they stared into mine never left me."

Hitler's defeat saved millions of people from certain death. When the war ended, American troops freed these rejoicing survivors of Dachau, a concentration camp in Germany.



CHAPTER CHECK

WORD MATCH

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| 1. concentration camp | a. violent hatred and prejudice towards Jews |
| 2. Holocaust | b. where Nazis held as prisoners those considered enemies |
| 3. genocide | c. the slaughter of the Jews by Nazis during WWII |
| 4. Final Solution | d. deliberate murder of entire nation or ethnic group |
| 5. anti-semitism | e. Hitler's plan to destroy entire Jewish population of Europe |

QUICK QUIZ

1. Describe the extent of Hitler's Final Solution.
2. What happened to the Jews of Warsaw's ghetto in 1940? How did they react?

THINK ABOUT IT

1. Why do you think the people of Elie Wiesel's village refused to believe Moishe the Beadle? Do you think people today would believe such a story? Why or why not?
2. After the war, some Nazis were put on trial for "crimes against humanity." Why do you think the crimes they were accused of were called that? Do you think it was important to put some Nazis on trial? Why or why not?