

The Holocaust: Marred blot upon the rights of Jews

Abstract

In 1945, as advancing Allied troops began discovering the Nazi camps, they found the results of these policies: hundreds of thousands of starving and sick prisoners locked in with thousands of dead bodies. They came across evidence of gas chambers and high-volume crematoriums, as well as thousands of mass graves, documentation of awful medical experimentation, and much more. The Nazis killed more than 10 million people in this manner, including 6 million Jews.¹ In this paper, the author discusses the accounts of various Jews who lived through the horrors of the Holocaust. From hiding in tight spots to being sent on death marches, the author tries to highlight the fact how Hitler's reign was a marred blot upon the civil rights of the Jews.

Introduction

Considered by many as history's oldest hatred, anti-Semitism refers to a prejudicial attitude towards the Jewish community. During Adolf Hitler's reign, anti-Semitism manifested itself into horrific forms. There were a number of anti-Jewish decrees passed, forbidding Jews from marrying outside their community, denying them the right to vote and waive German citizenship, expelling them from German schools, restricting their right to travel abroad, requiring them to present themselves at assembly points, etc.² Autumn 1941 marked the start of a systematic program of Jewish deportations from Germany and the German-occupied countries to extermination and concentration camps in the east.

Hiding

Hidden in plain sight

In order to avoid persecution and deportation, the Jews went into hiding. During the early days, most Jews attempted to hide in plain sight. This meant having to obtain false papers as quickly as possible, as identity checks were routinely conducted in Nazi Germany. Several Jews also shifted to distant areas, where the threat of being identified by known people was far-fetched. However, this option was available only for Jews who looked 'Aryan' or did not

¹ Haaretz. "Holocaust Facts: Where Does the Figure of 6 Million Victims Come from?" *Haaretz.com*, Haaretz, 7 Apr. 2021, www.haaretz.com/jewish/holocaust-remembrance-day/holocaust-facts-6-million-where-is-the-figure-from-1.5319546.

² "Oppression." *Antisemitic Laws – The Holocaust Explained: Designed for Schools*, www.theholocaustexplained.org/life-in-nazi-occupied-europe/oppression/anti-semitic-laws/.

possess the stereotypical features of a conventional Jew. Anybody suspected of being a Jew was arrested by the Nazis. Jews who did not know the local knowledge, or whose presence with the rescuer families raised questions had to be hidden out of sight. Young boys were at a greater risk, for they could potentially be identified by their Jewish circumcision. However, thousands of Jews survived the Holocaust using false papers.

Hanni Weissenberg

The recent German documentary-drama film 'The Invisibles' is based on the accounts of four Jews who survived the Holocaust. Amongst them is one Hanni Weissenberg, now Hanni Levy, who survived Hitler's regime by hiding in plain sight. However, her journey was far from a peaceful ride. Her parents had died of illness and most of her Jewish friends had been deported. She lived all alone, working as a forced labourer in a factory, sewing parachutes. When Hitler's atrocities against the Jews began to worsen, she did not have a choice but to take refuge in the houses of her parents' non-Jewish friends. She removed the yellow star from her coat, dyed her hair blonde, and resumed her normal life under the name of Hannelore Winkler.

"I had to try to lose myself in the masses and forget that I was scared and that I was someone who once submitted to the Nazi race laws. I had to act like a regular Berliner. And this is what saved me in the end."³

She explains that the reason why she chose to hide in plain sight was because there were hardly any resistance movements in Germany, unlike in the German occupied countries, where Jews were routinely assisted by resistance movements.

Concealed out of sight

Not all Jews could successfully forge documents in order to hide in plain sight. In such instances, they had to conceal themselves in places such as barns, attics, cellars, caves, etc. They often had to stay as quiet as possible, even motionless, for hours together. They also had to rely on their non-Jewish friends for obtaining practical provisions.

Anne Frank

³ Beardsley, Eleanor. "'The Invisibles' Reveals How Some Jews Survived Nazi Germany By Hiding In Plain Sight." *NPR*, NPR, 29 Jan. 2019, www.npr.org/2019/01/29/689272533/the-invisibles-reveals-how-some-jews-survived-nazi-germany-by-hiding-in-plain-si.

Of the 6 million Jewish souls who didn't survive the war, Anne Frank's story is perhaps the most well-known, and tears up readers to this day. Anne may not have lived on to share her story, but her voice is echoed through her journal⁴, a red and white checked notebook which she maintained all through her period of hiding. Her story involved eight people hidden within a small annexe that had approximately 450 square feet of floor space, for as long as 25 months. They could barely take a step out into the open, and their lives revolved around a few assistants, who got them food and updates from the outside world.⁵ They had to keep the secret annex dark because light would attract attention, and it also had to be stayed through in silence because noise would do the same.

In her journal, apart from the day-to-day discomforts, Anne describes a number of traumatic episodes she went through during her time in the secret annexe. On April 11, 1944, she penned down a harrowing instance when the residents of the annexe had no choice but to spend a night of anguish behind the bookcase.⁶ On April 27, 1943, she described a frantic day in the annexe on account of a few Germans staying up late in the private office of the building.⁷ Such instances, as recalled by survivors and abundant in Anne's writings, acted as a reminder that they still were Jews in hiding, and had to keep up with varied instances of discomfort in order to make it out alive.

Rose Mary-Kahn

Rose Mary-Kahn was another young Jewess whose life was turned topsy-turvy during the Holocaust. Although there were similar conditions imposed upon Rose, her time in hiding was not as traumatic as many others such as Anne Frank's. Rose and her mother used to often sneak out into the farm, whereas Anne's family had been forbidden to even open windows, particularly during night time. Rose's family did face their share of scares and false alarms, and one particular incident shook them to the core. The resistance had warned the residents of the farmhouse that the Germans were going from farm to farm, searching for British airmen who had been gunned down. What followed was a nerve-wracking encounter, with the occupants all huddled up in the attic while the Germans walked through the house. Recalling this particular incident, Rose described herself as 'scared to death'. Rose sums up her

⁴ Frank, Anne. *The Diary of a Young Girl: The Definitive Edition*. Delhi Open Books, 2020.

⁵ "Miep Gies." *Anne Frank Website*, 21 Dec. 2020, www.annefrank.org/en/anne-frank/main-characters/miep-gies/.

⁶ Frank, Anne. *The Diary of a Young Girl: The Definitive Edition*. Delhi Open Books, 2020, p. 322.

⁷ Id.

traumatic period of hiding in the following words, “It was the worst time of my life. Nothing that has happened since has done anything to change that.”⁸

Escaping trains

There were several instances when Jews jumped off trains to escape deportation. There were several factors which influenced such escapes, such as the moral pressure of other prisoners, the type of train, the geographical location of the transit camps, knowledge of successful escapes, knowledge of the purpose of deportations, etc.⁹

Leo Bretholz and Manfred Silberwasser were two people known to have escaped from aboard a train to Auschwitz.¹⁰ Being well aware of the fact that deportation to Auschwitz meant sure shot death, they chose to attempt to jump off the moving train. Upon hearing their plan, while other people on board helped the two in pursuing their plan of action, a few others tried persuading them to stay back (this could be either due to their own fear of being punished upon the discovery of the missing men, or their genuine concern for Bretholz and Silberwasser). The two men were successful, and they were among the only 4 people onboard that train, to have survived the Holocaust.

Nazi camps

While extermination camps were built solely for the purposes of gassing Jews, concentration camps were built with a greater aim of subjecting them to forced labour. Within concentration camps, Jews were compelled to work tirelessly for hours, with several succumbing to exhaustion. The people who weren't considered to be of much utility to the Third Reich, like children, old or ailing people, were murdered. The Schutzstaffel (one of the most feared organizations in all of Nazi Germany) and police forces in German-occupied Soviet-Union and the German-occupied Poland shot thousands of children at the edge of mass graves along with their parents.¹¹

There were additionally a number of transit camps set up in the German occupied territories, where Jews were kept for a while, before being deported to concentration camps. In the

⁸ “Hirsch.” *Rose-Mary Kahn - Hirsch*, hiddenlikeannefrank.com/kahn.html.

⁹ “Resistance.” *Hiding – The Holocaust Explained: Designed for Schools*, www.theholocaustexplained.org/resistance-responses-collaboration/resistance/hiding/.

¹⁰ Services, Tbt News. “Newsmaker: The Man Who Escaped the Train to Auschwitz (w/Video).” *Tampa Bay Times*, Tampa Bay Times, 26 Aug. 2019, www.tampabay.com/news/humaninterest/newsmaker-the-man-who-escaped-the-train-to-auschwitz/2169685/.

¹¹ *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/children-during-the-holocaust.

Netherlands itself, nearly 100,000 Jews were deported from the Westerbork transit camp. About 60,000 Jews were deported to the Auschwitz concentration camp, over 34,000 to the Sobibor extermination camp, almost 5,000 to the Theresienstadt ghetto, and nearly 4,000 to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.¹² The conditions in these camps were a great deal similar to those in the concentration camps: unsanitary and awful, with poor facilities and overcrowding.¹³

Edith Friedman Grosman

Born in the small village of Hummene, Skovakia, Edith Friedman's woes began on account of Slovakia joining the Axis powers in 1940. Within the span of a few days, Jewish girls were being swept from all the surrounding villages. Not long after that, Friedman and her sister were being carried off on the first official transport of Jews to Auschwitz. While there was an active rumour going around that the girls' job in concentration camps was to make shoes, it didn't turn out to be true. Friedman, along with the other girls was brutally forced to build dozens of new barracks, empty trash out of frozen lakes and demolish old buildings with their bare hands. For clothing, they were handed over the blood-stained uniforms of deceased Soviet soldiers, and a few striped dresses with no undergarments. Their entire bodies were shaven.

Most of the girls died in the first year, out of suicide, medical experiments, beatings, disease or starvation. Friedman's sister was sent to the gas chambers after she contracted typhus. Recalling her sister in that deplorable state, Friedman said:

"I saw her there almost dead, and the rats were visiting her.....She was a beautiful girl. And nothing is left over of her"¹⁴

With the number of Jewish prisoners increasing rapidly, the survivors of the first transport were promoted to lighter jobs, such as typing in SS offices, sorting through the piles of luggage, jewellery and clothing taken from the dead and moving corpses from the gas chambers to the crematoria. Even after being liberated by the British troops on January 27,

¹² *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/deportations.

¹³ "Bergen-Belsen." *Conditions inside Bergen-Belsen – The Holocaust Explained: Designed for Schools*, www.theholocaustexplained.org/the-camps/bergen-belsen/conditions-inside-bergen-belsen/.

¹⁴ Brockell, Gillian. "The First Transport of Jews to Auschwitz Was 997 Teenage Girls. Few Survived." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 27 Jan. 2020, www.washingtonpost.com/history/2020/01/27/first-transport-jews-auschwitz-was-997-teenage-girls-few-survived/.

1945, their woes were far from over. Friedman recalls being sent on death marches¹⁵ through feet of snow, and other concentration camps in central Germany. She was sent to the overcrowded camp of Ravensbrück¹⁶, where she was involved in frequent raids of the kitchen for food.

Henry Kichka

Henry Kichka is one of the few souls to have survived the horrors of the Auschwitz concentration camp. Kichka's family had settled in Belgium to escape Hitler's anti-Semitic policies. However, when Germany invaded Belgium on May 10, 1940, they had no place left to hide. The dread of being captured and deported was so great that many people, according to Kichka, killed themselves by jumping out of their windows, in order to avoid deportation.

Kichka and his father were taken to the small town of Kosel, in order to work mercilessly as forced labourers. They were destined to be sent to the gas chambers upon becoming incapable of providing service to the Third Reich. The woman of his family: his mother, his sisters and his aunt were sent to Auschwitz, and were gassed and cremated as soon as they arrived. Kichka also recalls being sent on a death march to a camp in Germany, in an utterly deplorable and emaciated condition.

"I was 90% dead. I was a skeleton. I was in a sanatorium for months and in hospital."¹⁷

Irene Fogel Weiss

Born in Botragy, Czechoslovakia, Irene Fogel Weiss was another fortunate Jewess to have survived Auschwitz. Czechoslovakia became a part of Hungary when Irene was 8 years old, With Hungary being allied with the Nazis, life became deplorable for the Hungarian Jews, who lost their civil rights in the timespan of a few days. With no laws to protect their rights, it was common practice by the Nazis to torture and annihilate the Jews.

Upon arrival at Auschwitz, Irene recalls her family being torn apart by the prison guards. She and her elder sister were separated from their parents, who were sent off to different sides of the camp. Irene and her sister were made to work as forced labourers in the Birkenau section of the Auschwitz camp. She recalls being threatened with separation on numerous occasions,

¹⁵ *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/death-marches.

¹⁶ "Ravensbrück Concentration Camp: History & Overview." *History & Overview of Ravensbrück*, www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/history-and-overview-of-ravensbr-uuml-ck.

¹⁷ Connolly, Kevin. "I Was 90% Dead': Henri's Story of Surviving Auschwitz." *BBC News*, BBC, 27 Jan. 2020, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-51204090.

but she and her sister managed to stick together. In January 1945, the two sisters were sent on a long march to the Ravensbrück concentration camp in central Germany. Their condition was pitiful, with no proper clothes and accessories to make it through the snowy terrains. In the event of anybody sitting down out of exhaustion, he was shot on sight. Irene and her sister were the only children out of the 100 deported people of her town, to have survived Auschwitz. She recalls the way she felt during her time in Auschwitz:

“This is not actually on earth..... No one knows about it. It’s the forest, surrounded by multiple layers of fence, it’s not actually real”¹⁸

Anne Frank (Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen)

There is little known of Anne Frank’s life in the Auschwitz and Bergen Belsen concentration camps. Within a few days of being deported to the Westerbork transit camp, Anne and her family were put on transport to the Auschwitz concentration camp. Upon arrival, approximately 350 people on board were taken to the gas chambers. Anne, along with her mother and sister was sent to the labour camp for women. Although she is known to have remained relatively healthy during her early days at Auschwitz, her condition began to deteriorate rapidly after she contracted scabies.

In November 1944, Anne and her sister were deported to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. The conditions of the camp were horrid: there was a lack of food, it was cold, wet and contagious diseases were spreading like wildfire.¹⁹ Nanette Konig, a childhood friend of Anne, claims that Anne had turned a skeleton within a few days of her time in Bergen-Belsen.²⁰ Jannie Brandes, a Jewess who had accompanied Anne Frank in the train to Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, recalls witnessing Anne during her final few days:

“During the final days, I saw Anne standing there, wrapped in a blanket, with no tears left to cry. Well, we hadn’t had tears for some time. And then, a few days later I went to look for the

¹⁸ “Tales from Auschwitz: Survivor Stories.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 26 Jan. 2015, www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/26/tales-from-auschwitz-survivor-stories.

¹⁹ “A Brief History of the Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp, Where Anne Frank Died.” *HistoryExtra*, 26 Nov. 2020, www.historyextra.com/period/second-world-war/bergen-belsen-concentration-camp-holocaust-ww2-history-facts-anne-frank-died-liberated-conditions/.

²⁰ “Anne Frank’s Childhood Friend Tells of Their Traumatic Final Meeting at Bergen-Belsen.” *The Independent*, Independent Digital News and Media, 10 Mar. 2015, www.independent.co.uk/news/people/anne-frank-s-childhood-friend-tells-their-traumatic-final-meeting-bergen-belsen-and-says-teenager-always-wanted-be-heard-10098632.html.

Frank girls and learned that Margot had fallen from her bunk. Just like that, onto the stone floor, dead. The next day, Anne died as well”²¹

Susan Pollack

At a tender age of 14 years, Susan Pollock was separated from her parents, who were sent to the Auschwitz gas chambers. She was incarcerated and made to work as a forced labourer at the concentration camp. She recalls being sent on a death march, with barely any strength or motivation to even walk.

“I was trembling and virtually lifeless, lying near the barracks, the stench of corpses everywhere, and unable to walk or lift myself up..... We couldn’t eat and I remember fainting when I tried to get out of bed”²²

Conclusion: How has the Holocaust impacted international law?

The horrors of the mass murders and other atrocities committed by the Nazis shocked the conscience of all decent people. After World War II the nations of the world were determined to prevent such grave crimes from recurring or, at the very least, to ensure that they would in future be severely punished. New international treaties on human rights, the humane treatment of civilians in time of war, sanctuary for refugees and the elimination of racial discrimination came into effect, recognising the inherent dignity and equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family as the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.

In 1945, the International Military Tribunal held at Nuremberg, Germany, charged senior Nazis with, “crimes against humanity”, which were defined to include “murder, cruel treatment and persecution of a group based on its race or ethnicity in order to destroy the group”. The word “genocide” was not included in the indictments of the major Nazi war criminals as it was not included in the international agreement that established the Tribunal. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide was finally approved by the United Nations. Moreover, by virtue of customary international law, the prohibition of genocide is binding on all states.

²¹ “The Final Days of Anne Frank : Fellow Auschwitz Internees Pick Up the Tale Where Her Diary Ends.” *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 23 Oct. 1988, www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1988-10-23-ca-196-story.html#:~:text=%E2%80%9CDuring%20the%20final%20days%2C%20I,onto%20the%20stone%20floor%2C%20dead.

²² “Tales from Auschwitz: Survivor Stories.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 26 Jan. 2015, [www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/26/tales-from-auschwitz-survivor-stories.](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/26/tales-from-auschwitz-survivor-stories)