

## A SUMMARY OF THE HOLOCAUST

### Introduction

The word *holocaust* comes from the Greek and originally meant a sacrifice totally burned by fire. Today people sometimes use the word to describe the slaughter of human beings on a large scale. Specifically, the Holocaust refers to the persecution of the Jewish people of Europe which resulted in the deaths of 6 million Jewish men, women, and children and the virtual end of two thousand years of Jewish settlement and culture there. The Holocaust started when the Nazis rose to power in Germany in 1933 and ended with Germany's defeat at the end of World War II in 1945.

Before the Holocaust, half of the Jews in the world lived in Europe. After the Holocaust, 2/3 of them (1/3 of all the Jews in the world) had been murdered. Thus, the Holocaust was one of the most devastating events in Jewish history and may be the worst manifestation of prejudice in the history of the world.

### The Jewish People

The Jewish people originated in the land of Canaan (present-day Israel and parts of Jordan, Syria, and Egypt) around 2000 BC. They were a religious group whose beliefs were based on monotheism (the belief in one God).

Because the land in which they lived was located at the crossroads of three continents, Europe, Asia, and Africa, it was conquered and reconquered numerous times. The longest period of non-Jewish rule over the land was between 70 AD and 1948 AD. During this period, Jews migrated to places all over the world. They tried to maintain their identity while living among other cultures by continuing their religious practices and customs. Over the course of time, new racial ethnic elements became part of the Jewish people because of intermarriage and conversion. Therefore, there are Jews of all races and ethnic backgrounds who speak a variety of languages and come from diverse communities.

Over the years, Jews often experienced discrimination, but by the 1800s most Jews living in western Europe were completely comfortable in their environment and were fervently patriotic to the nations in which they lived. Yet, at this same period popular authors were viciously attacking the Jews. They expressed their views of anti-Semitism (negative attitudes about Jews).

### Adolf Hitler

The anti-Semitic writers were particularly active in Austria, the birthplace of Adolf Hitler. Hitler was born into a lower middle class family, and his life afforded little opportunity for achievement. As a young man he moved from his small hometown to cosmopolitan Vienna. There he worked at odd jobs and read the popular anti-Semitic authors.

He moved to Munich, Germany in 1913 and, when World War I broke out in 1914, joined the German army. Upon his return to Munich after the war, he decided to enter politics in order to fight the Jews. Following the war, Germany's imperial system of government was replaced with a democracy, known as the Weimar Republic. The weakness of this new form of government allowed for the rise of radical political parties such as the National Socialist German Workers' Party (the Nazis) which was founded in January, 1919. Its organizers were a small right-wing

group that was very anti-Semitic. Hitler joined the party in September 1919 and became its leader in 1921. In 1923 the Nazis attempted a putsch (overthrow of the government) but were blocked, and Hitler was jailed. During this period of imprisonment, Hitler outlined his designs for Germany in his autobiography *Mein Kampf* (*My Struggle*).

### **The Nazis**

Following his release from prison, Hitler gained increasing numbers of followers by playing upon the desperate economic conditions in Germany. The Treaty of Versailles, written after World War I, stipulated that Germany was required to pay enormous reparations to the victors of the war. Inflation became rampant in the early 1920s, and a disastrous depression hit the world in the 1930s. At one point, German currency had so little value that it took two and a half trillion German marks to equal one U.S. dollar. Jews had played an important role in the Weimar government. Therefore, when conditions became bad, traditional anti-Semitism reared its head, and the Jews were blamed.

During this period Jews made up a mere 2% of Germany's population and were contributing greatly to its economic and cultural life. There had been an unprecedented integration of the Jews into every sphere of the society. Jews were making important achievements in all areas. Among the most significant Jewish figures were composer Arnold Schonberg, philosopher Herman Cohen, and scientist Albert Einstein.

Through the use of propaganda, Hitler and his men rapidly gained seats in the Reichstag, Germany's legislature. Thus, Hitler and the Nazi party rose to power democratically. In 1933 the elderly President von Hindenburg appointed Hitler Chancellor of Germany, the chief minister of state. Hitler then made himself absolute ruler after dissolving the Reichstag. Many Germans believed they had found a savior for their nation. His political philosophy, called fascism, stressed order, intense nationalism, and discipline. It preached total submission to a single dictator, and individuals were required to sacrifice their liberty for the greater good of order and Germany's glory.

Once in power, the Nazis began a massive campaign to teach their theories of racial superiority to all levels of the community. They taught that Germans (or "Aryans") were the "master race" destined to rule the world, while all other racial groups were progressively inferior, with the Jews being at the bottom.

### **Life for Jews Under the Nazis**

Once in power, Hitler began a succession of stages in oppression of the Jews. First came legislation including the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, which denied Jews basic civil rights. Progressive series of statutes forbade them from working for the government or practicing medicine and law. Jewish children were expelled from public schools, boycotts of businesses owned by Jews became common, and the government sponsored public book burnings of any materials that criticized the Nazis and all books by Jewish authors.

Freedom of speech and press was withdrawn. All mechanisms of public expression such as newspapers and radio stations were taken over and operated by the government.

Organized violence against Jews began the night of November 9, 1938 when a riot broke out throughout Germany. The riot, planned and organized by the Nazis, involved the burning of several hundred synagogues (the religious and cultural centers of Jewish life), the indiscriminate

arrest of Jewish men by the Gestapo, and the demolishing and looting of businesses owned by Jews. Because of the broken plate glass windows that fell on the sidewalks, the night became known as Kristallnacht (crystal night) or the Night of Broken Glass.

### **Responses of the Jewish People**

During the 1930s many German Jews misinterpreted the growing hostility as a passing phenomenon soon to be replaced by saner behavior. After all, they figured, Germany was known as one of the most cultured civilizations in the world. However, other Jews either correctly predicting that the early violence would lead to further terror or simply deciding to no longer put up with the increasing anti-Semitism, sought relief through emigration.

Although the Nazis were allowing Jews to leave Germany at this time (they later prohibited it), most German Jews were unsuccessful in obtaining immigrant visas from other countries. Although the world clearly knew of the increasing persecution of Jews in Germany, it did nothing to aid the victims.

A conference of about 30 nations was convened in Evian, France, in 1938 to discuss the matter, but resulted in only one small country, the Dominican Republic, expressing a willingness to absorb a small number of Jewish refugees. Influenced by anti-Semitism and fearful that Jewish refugees would compete for jobs and drain the economy with welfare needs, even the United States, Britain, and Canada refused to respond to the urgent need for refuge for Jews. This denial of aid provided an implicit signal to Hitler to proceed with his plans to eliminate Jews from the world.

### **Jewish Persecution**

As Germany occupied more and more of Europe, millions of Jews came under German dominion. As each country was overrun, its Jews were subjected to the same regulations as those in Germany. Of the 6 million Jews ultimately killed, only about 250,000 were German.

Persecution of the Jews progressed in carefully designed steps beginning with identification. Early on Jews were required to register with the authorities and to wear identification badges, often a yellow star of David.

Depending on where they lived, the next stage of the persecution was deportation to either a ghetto, transit camp, labor camp, or death camp. The usual form of transportation for Jews was railroad boxcar. People were crowded into these cars and confined without food, water, or bathroom facilities for the two to seven day duration of their journey. Often, passengers did not survive the trip.

Jews who lived in cities were often forced to move into ghettos, small sectors of the cities that were designated as the only areas where Jews could live. Tens of thousands of Jews were forced to move into areas just a few square blocks in size. The ghettos became so overcrowded that people were living 20 to a room. Rations of food allowed into the ghettos were meager; water pipes hadn't been built to accommodate so large a population. Conditions became pitiful, and disease and starvation took many lives.

Some Jews were moved into transit camps, which were enclosed plots which had been built as holding areas. Like the ghettos, the transit camps were merely way stations before the prisoners could be moved into labor and death camps.

Ultimately, all Jews were moved to these labor and death camps where they were either used as slaves or immediately killed. Labor and death camps, along with the transit camps, were called concentration camps. They were developed into a system of approximately 30,000 installations throughout Europe.

Labor camps included any prison camp in which Jews were used as slaves. Most residents of the labor camps died within a few months of their imprisonment of starvation, disease, overwork, or murder by other means. Death camps were labor camps that had been expanded to include equipment built specifically for mass murder.

When Jews arrived at the death camps, the SS Guards divided them into two lines, one for immediate death, the other to be kept alive as slave laborers. Only the young, strong, and healthy were kept alive. Children, the elderly, the weak, the ill, the handicapped, and pregnant women were immediately slain.

Some slave laborers were put to work at unproductive tasks such as hauling rocks from one location to another. These backbreaking activities served to humiliate and torture the victims and to induce death from overwork and exposure. Others worked at producing goods and services for the Nazis such as in manufacturing and mining. However, despite the usefulness of the slaves as indentured servants, they were systematically removed from their positions to be executed as soon as the killing apparatus could accommodate them. The vast size of the murder operation prevented the immediate killing of all newly arrived inmates.

The Jews who were used as slaves in the labor and death camps were subjected to startlingly inhuman conditions. Daily life consisted of hard labor from sunrise to sunset, two sparse meals of a small ration of bread and soup, and a few hours of sleep crowded tightly together on wooden platforms with no bedding. They were issued one striped prison uniform when they arrived, their body hair was shaved, and they were given a number to go by rather than their names. Sometimes that number was tattooed on their arms. Prisoners were given no medical attention, and sanitary facilities were scanty or nonexistent. Humiliation and torture were constant. In addition, medical experiments and other atrocities were inflicted on the captives. All suffered from malnutrition and illness. The typical life span in these camps was six weeks to three months. Those who did not die of the conditions in the camps were methodically murdered.

### **Mass Murder**

The Nazis had experimented with the eradication of undesirable elements of society beginning with a euthanasia program for mentally retarded and other handicapped Germans. Although this program was ultimately halted because of dissent among the German populace, the concept of elimination of undesirables was firmly planted. The "Final Solution" to the "Jewish question," as the mass murder of Jews was euphemistically known, was officially laid down at a conference of leading Nazis held in Wannsee, a suburb of Berlin, in early 1942. Here the plans to annihilate the Jewish population were officially set into motion.

The Nazis had experimented with the mass murder of Jews by machine gunning lines of naked people into vast pits, thus eliminating entire villages in the course of a day or two. However, they deemed this method too inefficient because it required too many bullets and the pits were unstable and would often cave in. Another method, tried in Poland, was the use of gas vans. Jews were driven around in vehicles that had been modified to direct the poisonous carbon monoxide exhaust into the compartment where the victims rode. This, too, proved inefficient

because only a limited number of people could fit into the van, and it took at least twenty minutes for the gas to do its work.

So German scientists were put to work to formulate a means of murdering large numbers of humans quickly and effectively. The method they devised was exposure to a chemical called Zyklon B. It had been derived from a substance used by exterminators and had the power to kill hundreds of people in a matter of minutes. The chemical came in pellet form, and when exposed to the air, let off an extremely toxic gas.

To implement murder by this means, gas chambers were constructed at several concentration camps. A few hundred people at a time would be herded into these rooms, which had been designed to look like shower rooms. After sealing the doors, the Nazi operatives dropped pellets of Zyklon B into openings in the ceiling, and within minutes all inside were dead.

Bodies were being produced faster than they could be buried, so cremation ovens were built to dispose of the remains. These crematoria were often kept in operation 24 hours a day.

The strategy for eliminating the Jewish people from the world involved a vast network of operations ranging from confiscation of Jewish property to transportation of the Jewish population to the death camps. From top bureaucrats to lowly railroad workers, every member of the Nazi organization was set to perform his role in this vicious enterprise.

The actual guilt or innocence of each person involved can never really be determined. However, if the citizens of both Germany and the other countries of Europe had not cooperated with the Nazis, it is unlikely that the Holocaust could have been carried out. Many went out of their way to help round up Jews and carry out the persecution. Numerous others just stood by and offered no resistance to the atrocious deeds of the Nazis.

### **The Righteous Gentiles**

A few Christians tried to follow their hearts and help the innocent Jewish victims. There was always a way to help, from smuggling food into the ghettos to hiding Jewish people in their homes or on their farms. Those helping Jews were always at risk; for if they were caught, they were subject to imprisonment in the camps or other severe forms of punishment. These brave souls have become known as the Righteous Among the Nations, or the Righteous Gentiles.

One nation, Denmark, saved most of its Jews in a nighttime rescue operation in 1943 in which Jews were ferried in fishing boats to safety in neutral Sweden.

### **Other Groups Targeted by the Nazis**

Although the Jews were the only minority group blamed for Germany's problems and were the first target in its plan to eradicate inferior peoples, other groups were also persecuted. Gypsies, an ethnic minority who lived in various countries in Europe, were also considered racially inferior and were the only minority group other than Jews to be gassed.

Certain other segments of the population were subjected to persecution, not on the basis of race but for other reasons. These included Jehovah's Witnesses, a religious group who wouldn't fight in the German army; Christians who tried to help Jews; and homosexuals. These people were rounded up and imprisoned in concentration camps, but not systematically murdered. Jews in the

camps were always treated worse than other prisoners and were the only group to sustain an actual genocide, the attempted murder of an entire group of people.

### **The Aftermath of the Holocaust**

For the survivors who were liberated by the Allies at the end of the war, life was never the same. They had lost their civil rights, their jobs, their homes, their citizenship, their priority, their loved ones, and their physical and emotional health.

For the Jewish people at large, what had once been their most flourishing community outside of Israel was now an abyss of horror and destruction. The Jews, less than one per cent of the world's population, had lost one third of their people; and, tragically, two thousand years of Jewish life in Europe had come to a resounding end.

### **The Significance of the Holocaust Today**

The Holocaust was a unique event in the history of the world. Its aim was not just the persecution, enslavement, or expulsion of a segment of the society but its total elimination. It was legal, carried out by the government, and, with sadly few exceptions, accepted by the populace. Unlike in other instances of genocide, the Jews were not a political, physical, or moral threat to their persecutors. On the contrary, they were positive, loyal, contributing members of their communities.

With the Holocaust, not only was a tremendous injustice committed against the Jewish people, but the universal conscience of human civilization was called into question. Could one group of people use stated goals of purity and superiority to take it upon themselves to destroy another? Could the law of a nation violate the precepts of every major world religion? Would humanity ever be the same? And has the world learned from this experience?