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# Fragments in Focus: *A History of the Holocaust*

THEME TEXT





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## *A History of the Holocaust*

THEME TEXT

## PRE-WAR JEWISH LIFE IN EUROPE

Over nine million Jews lived in Europe when the Nazis came to power in 1933. Jewish communities had been there for 2,000 years. Jewish life in Europe was vibrant and diverse. In each region, Jewish communities had unique cultural and religious traditions. Always a minority wherever they lived, Jews experienced varying degrees of antisemitism across Europe. Although anti-Jewish hatred rose and fell over the ages, it was a constant undercurrent in European culture before the Second World War.

### RELIGION AND FAITH

Judaism is the religion of the Jewish people. It began more than 3,000 years ago in the area now known as the Middle East. The foundations of Judaism are based on the beliefs and practices of the ancient Israelites, who lived in the region.

Central to Judaism is the belief in a single God. As a people, Jews have a sacred agreement with God, known as a covenant. In exchange for God's help and protection, Jews promise to follow God's laws in every aspect of their lives. These laws are set out in the holy text known as the Torah.

In the first century, the Jewish people were driven out of their homeland by the Romans. They dispersed across the Roman Empire to the far reaches of Europe. In these lands, Jews continued to practice Judaism.

Jews across pre-war Europe applied the beliefs of Judaism to their lives in diverse ways. For many Jews in

Eastern Europe, Jewish identity was tied to religion. It was common to find communities who incorporated Judaism into every aspect of daily life. In these communities, religious observances shaped their days, weeks and years. They observed the Jewish Sabbath, marked the Holy Days, studied the Torah and kept the kosher dietary laws.

However, not all Jews were religious, and even religious Jews did not all believe the same things. There were traditional and modern Jews, orthodox and progressive Jews. And being Jewish was not the only part of their identity. In pre-war Western Europe, national identity (such as being French or German) was very important to many Jews. Jewish identity was often expressed through Jewish culture rather than religious observance. A rich tradition of Jewish literature, arts, cuisine and scholarship defined this cultural identity.

### JEWISH LIFE IN EUROPE BEFORE THE HOLOCAUST

Jewish communities have existed in Europe for 2,000 years. Before the Holocaust, nine million Jews lived throughout Europe, in every country. More lived in Eastern Europe than in Western Europe. Poland, the Soviet Union and Romania had the largest Jewish populations. Although always a minority, Jews played an important role in European society and often felt a deep connection to the countries in which they lived.



Jewish communities in pre-war Europe were diverse. Their religious practices, language and legal rights differed in each country where they lived. Many worked in trade, commerce or skilled crafts because of historic restrictions on the types of jobs they could hold. But Jews did every kind of work. The majority of European Jews were not rich, but their culture was vibrant and strong.

Across pre-war Europe, Jews faced discrimination in varying degrees. In Western Europe, restrictions on Jews began to ease in the 1800s. New laws gave Jewish individuals civil rights and equality. Many became part of non-Jewish society through business, marriage or social association. They generally lived in large towns beside non-Jewish neighbours. A relaxed form of Judaism also became popular in Western Europe.

In Eastern Europe, similar changes began in the 1900s. But there, it was common for Jews to live in towns called shtetls, apart from the non-Jewish population. Life in these towns was traditional and revolved around religious observances. Yiddish was the common language.

## THE LONGEST HATRED

Antisemitism is hatred, discrimination or hostility toward Jews. It has existed for over 2,000 years, taking on various forms over the ages.

In the Middle Ages, antisemitism was based on religious differences. The early Christian Church wrongly blamed Jews for the death of Jesus Christ. The Church claimed Jews worked with the devil to spread diseases, poison wells and cause crop failures. Jews were even accused of using the blood of Christian children in religious rituals. These lies led to violent attacks on Jews and their property.

Later, an economic form of antisemitism arose. In medieval Europe, Jews were generally not allowed to own land. They were forced into jobs that were viewed as immoral, like money lending and trade. This led to stereotypes that Jews were greedy and controlled the economy.

In early modern Europe, antisemitic conspiracy theories emerged. These insisted that Jews secretly controlled governments and world events. They said Jews were behind both capitalism and communism, using these systems to dominate the world.

By the nineteenth century, new ideas about biology and genetics led to racial antisemitism. Jews were now labelled as a separate race with inherited traits. This is not true. But as nationalism spread across Europe, so did the idea of Jews as racial outsiders.

With the rise of Nazism, racial antisemitism was taken to new extremes. The Nazis portrayed Jews as an inferior but powerful race, threatening the survival of the "Aryan race." Jews were blamed for causing Germany's defeat in the First World War. They became scapegoats for inflation, unemployment and the Great Depression. The Nazis revived centuries of antisemitic attitudes in the first step toward the genocide of the Jews.



# THE HOLOCAUST

The Holocaust was the systematic mass murder of six million European Jews by Nazi Germany and its partners. It was not inevitable. The policies that led to this mass murder developed over time. The Holocaust happened because of choices made by leaders, officials and ordinary people under changing conditions between 1933 and 1945.

The Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933 and formed a dictatorship under Adolf Hitler. They claimed Jews were the enemy of the "Aryan race." The Nazis passed hundreds of laws to isolate and persecute Jewish people. These early laws focused on exclusion, discrimination and forcing Jews to leave Germany.

During the Second World War, the Nazis' goal shifted to the complete physical destruction of all Jewish people across Europe. About two-thirds of Europe's Jewish population died in the Holocaust. They were killed in ghettos, mass shootings, concentration camps and specially built death camps.

The Roma were also victims of genocide during this time. The Nazis and their collaborators killed over 250,000 Roma. Other groups were persecuted and murdered by the Nazis, too. This included people with disabilities, political opponents, gay men, Black Germans and Jehovah's Witnesses. Polish civilians, Soviet prisoners of war, and people the Nazis labelled "asocials" were also targeted. The violence against these groups varied in scale and purpose. By 1945, many millions of people from these communities had been killed.



## THE RISE OF NAZISM

The Nazi Party was founded in the 1920s as a far-right political group in Germany, led by Adolf Hitler. At first, people saw the Nazis as an extremist party. But life in Germany became difficult and unstable in the years after the First World War. Food shortages, unemployment and inflation affected millions. Germans felt outraged by the harsh terms of the Treaty of Versailles imposed at the end of the war. The Nazis promised to create jobs, reclaim territory and rearm. They also vowed to get rid of those they said were responsible for Germany's troubles, especially the Jews.

Many Germans came to see Hitler as a strong leader who could solve Germany's problems. In the 1932 elections, the Nazis won more seats in the German parliament than any other party. Although his party did not have a majority, Hitler was appointed chancellor of Germany in January 1933. Conservative politicians believed they could control him. But in March 1933, the *Enabling Act* was passed, giving Hitler sole power to make laws. This ended democracy in Germany. Hitler soon banned all other political parties and secured his position as dictator.

For Jews, Nazi dictatorship meant increasing persecution. The Nazis passed hundreds of laws excluding Jews from public life. They barred Jews from jobs, schools, public spaces and economic activity. In 1935, the Nuremberg Laws removed the citizenship and civil rights of Jews and banned marriage to non-Jews. The new laws were written by legal experts and Nazi government ministries. They were put into practice by officials and ordinary institutions in German society. Police and courts enforced them. Professional organizations also applied Nazi racial policies in their own work. In this way, Nazi ideology became part of everyday life. Responsibility for the harm to others was spread across many individuals and institutions. This made it easy for people to feel that they were just doing their job. Most Germans adapted to these changes in their society, even as the policies became more radical.

The Nazi authoritarian state created a society in which the persecution of Jews was normalized through law and routine bureaucracy. This paved the way for more extreme persecution and violence in the years to come.

## MANIPULATING THE MASSES

Propaganda played a key role in the Nazis' rise to power. The party used it to shape public opinion and behaviour. Nazi propaganda offered simple solutions to Germany's complex problems. This gave many Germans hope for the future and united them behind the Nazis.

Once Hitler became dictator, he created the Ministry of Propaganda. Its job was to indoctrinate citizens in Nazi ideology. To do this, the Ministry took control of all media. It spread Nazi ideas through newspapers, posters, schoolbooks and the arts. Nazi propaganda saturated every aspect of public life. At the same time, opposing views were silenced through censorship and intimidation.

The Nazis used new media like film, radio and loudspeakers to great effect. Huge Nazi Party rallies presented Hitler as a saviour. Music, flags and salutes aroused feelings of national pride and belonging.

The Nazis believed Germany could only become strong and successful if its citizens were "racially pure." Nazi propaganda promoted the myth of a superior "Aryan race." It envisioned a harmonious "national community" of pure Aryan people united by shared heritage and values.

Nazi propaganda identified certain groups as enemies of this "national community." These groups were said to be "inferior," "subhuman" and "unworthy of life." The goal was to build public support for excluding them from society by creating an "us versus them" mentality. Jews were the primary target of this dehumanization. Roma, Slavic and Black people were also portrayed as "inferior races." And people with disabilities, gay men and "asocials" were said to threaten the genetic superiority of the "Aryan race." But according to Nazi propaganda, no group was more dangerous to the nation than the Jews.

## EFFORTS TO LEAVE

By the mid-1930s, Jews in the Nazi regime faced increasing hostility. After centuries of Jewish life in Europe, it appeared there would be no future there for Jews. Yet those who tried to escape found their options limited.

The Nazis imposed heavy taxes and regulations on Jews leaving the Third Reich. Jewish emigrants were forced to give up the bulk of their belongings and assets to the Nazis. This left them with little money to start new lives in other countries.

At the same time, most nations had restrictive immigration policies or quotas limiting how many people they would let in. These were often based on race or ethnicity. Usually, they classified Jews as undesirable immigrants. This included Canada's immigration policy. At the time, antisemitism and anti-immigrant feelings were common among the voting public. Governments feared that admitting Jewish refugees would increase job competition and cause unrest.

In 1938, 32 nations met at the Evian Conference to discuss the Jewish refugee crisis. Every country refused to change its policies to help the Jews, except the Dominican Republic. Some Jews found refuge in the UK, Palestine, China or the Americas. Many fled to nearby countries in Western Europe, only to come under Nazi control once the war began.



Deciding to leave was not easy. Some Jewish families were unwilling to leave elderly relatives behind. Others hoped the Nazi threat would disappear over time. Many Jewish war veterans believed their honourable military service in the First World War might protect them from persecution. In the end, Jews who had not escaped the Third Reich by October 1941 were trapped. The Nazis banned all Jewish emigration, sealing the fate of the remaining Jews of Europe.

## LIFE IN HIDING

When the arrests and roundups of the Jews began in Nazi-controlled Europe, the only means of escape was to hide. This was dangerous and often unsuccessful.

Jews in hiding were at constant risk of discovery, arrest and death. They stayed in cramped hiding spaces, like attics, haystacks or holes dug below ground. Others adopted false identities in attempt to blend in as Christians. In rural regions, such as in Eastern Europe, some Jews fled to forests and survived as part of resistance groups.

Occasionally, families managed to hide together, but this was risky. In most cases, families had to split up and hide separately. Parents were faced with the difficult decision of entrusting their children to non-Jews. In most cases, these strangers were paid to hide a Jewish child in their home. In some instances, however, helpers hid Jews out of a sense of kindness or moral obligation.

Jews in hiding had to change their locations frequently to avoid being discovered. It was dangerous for family members to remain in touch with each other while hiding. The emotional distress of separation from family was immense. As well, the threat of being caught or reported by neighbours was ever-present. Boredom, abuse and hunger were also common challenges experienced by Jews in hiding.

## HELP AND RESCUE

The responses of non-Jews during the Holocaust varied widely. The majority did nothing while Jews were rounded up and deported to camps and ghettos. Many were scared to put their lives and families at risk by helping. Others did not care what happened to the Jews. And some might have remained silent because they benefitted from jobs, possessions and homes left by deported Jews.

Yet a small minority of people chose to help Jews, at great personal risk. Helpers provided hiding places, food, medicine and forged identity cards. Some helpers acted alone but most rescue efforts were carried out by groups of people working together. In a couple of countries, Denmark and Albania, the rescue of Jews was a nationwide undertaking.

The chances of survival for Jews were very different across Europe. In places where local officials cooperated with Nazi orders, more Jews were deported to death camps. In places where officials delayed or refused to cooperate, more Jews were able to hide, escape and survive. Diplomats and church officials were in a unique position to provide aid. They could issue visas and shelter Jews in their embassies, convents and orphanages.

Helpers came from all religions, nationalities, social class and backgrounds.

They were motivated by moral, religious or political beliefs to help both friends and strangers in need. Despite the danger, helpers were active in every European country. This was true even in occupied Eastern Europe, where the punishment for assisting Jews was death.



In most cases, helpers had a history of aiding people in need. They acted according to their own beliefs and did not care what other people thought. Most did not plan to engage in rescue but did so when presented with the opportunity.

## IDENTITY AND BELONGING

Jews who escaped the Nazis had to leave behind their homes, synagogues, friends and loved ones. Separation from community made it hard to hold onto pre-war identities. This was especially true for children. For example, Jewish children sent to safety in Britain on the Kindertransport rescue had to leave their parents behind. Many never saw them again. These children spent the war in Britain, away from home and family. It was hard for the children to remember their lives and families before the war. They struggled to find a sense of belonging.

Most Jewish children who survived in Nazi-occupied Europe did so by hiding. They hid with Christian families, in homes, orphanages or convents, using false identities. Some Jewish children were baptized to make their new Christian identities more believable. They took on new names and families, learned new prayers and languages. They had to move often to avoid being discovered. While these measures were necessary to protect the lives of hidden children, they created complex questions of identity.

For hidden children, the trauma did not end with the war. Reunions with their parents were happy but also painful and confusing. Many children were too young to remember their parents. It was difficult for them to regain a sense of comfort with their families. They had formed close bonds with their foster parents and the Christian religion in some cases. Some associated their pre-war Jewish identity with fear and danger. Years after the Holocaust, many child survivors still grapple with issues of identity and belonging.

## IMPRISONED IN GHETTOS

In September 1939, Nazi Germany invaded Poland, starting the Second World War. As Germany conquered more territory, millions of Jews fell under Nazi control. The Nazis extended their anti-Jewish laws to these new territories. But their ultimate goal was to make these lands *Judenfrei*, or free of Jews.

A key step in this process was the creation of Jewish ghettos. Ghettos were segregated areas set up in the worst parts of town. The ghettos were usually enclosed by walls or barbed wire to isolate Jews from the rest of society. The Nazis established over 1,000 ghettos, mostly in Eastern Europe. Jews from across eastern Europe were rounded up from their homes and forced into ghettos. The Nazis saw this as a temporary solution to what they called “the Jewish problem.”

Ghettos were extremely overcrowded. There was little food, water, sanitation or medicine. As a result, starvation and disease caused the deaths of about 500,000 Jews in ghettos. Factories were set up in some ghettos to exploit Jewish labour before deporting them to death camps.

The Nazis forced Jewish elders to run the ghettos and implement Nazi orders. The councils of Jewish elders tried to provide services for ghetto residents, but they could do little without access to food and medicine. The councils were also faced with impossible moral choices, like deciding who in the ghettos should be deported to the death camps.

Despite the terrible conditions in the ghettos, Jews maintained their dignity. They organized hospitals, orphanages, secret schools and religious services. In hidden archives, Jews preserved evidence of life under Nazi rule. In some ghettos, Jews even fought back in armed revolts. The most famous of these was the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943.



## THE HOLOCAUST BY BULLETS

In June 1941, the Nazis invaded parts of Eastern Europe that had been controlled by the Soviet Union. Millions more Jews fell under Nazi control in these territories, and Nazi policy became more extreme. War created conditions that made large-scale violence easier and more routine. This allowed Nazi leaders to move from persecution to systematic mass murder.

As the Nazis advanced, they brought special mobile killing units made up of SS men. These killing units were called the *Einsatzgruppen*. They also brought German police forces called the Order Police.

The *Einsatzgruppen* and Order Police conducted mass shootings of the Jewish population of Eastern Europe. This operation is known today as the Holocaust by Bullets. It took place in Eastern European countries and parts of the Soviet Union between 1941 and 1944. Local police and government authorities in these countries helped the *Einsatzgruppen* and Order Police. Together they killed entire Jewish communities in face-to-face shootings. They gathered Jewish men, women and children in the town squares and marched them to pre-dug pits in nearby fields or forests. At these sites, they shot each victim directly into the pits. The victims were often abused and tortured before their deaths. The killings took place over many hours or even days. About 1.5 million Jews were shot this way, near the places they lived.

Killing people at close range was reported to be hard on the men who carried out the mass shootings. Some members of the killing units chose not to take part. The men who refused to participate were usually given other duties. Their chances for promotion were sometimes affected, but they were not seriously punished.

Eventually, the Nazis decided that shooting people one by one was inefficient. It took a long time and required a lot of ammunition. By 1942, the Nazis turned to gas chambers in centralized death camps as the primary method of killing Jews.

## NAZI CAMPS

Between 1933 and 1945, the Nazis set up over 44,000 concentration camps, death camps and slave labour camps across Nazi-occupied Europe.

Initially, the Nazis created concentration camps to hold their political enemies, like communists. Later, they began imprisoning people who did not fit Nazi ideals, such as gay men, Jehovah's Witnesses, Roma and others they called "asocial." Most prisoners in the early camps were not Jews, and murder was rare.

In 1938, during Kristallnacht, large numbers of Jews were sent to concentration camps for the first time. In these camps, inmates faced brutality, starvation, forced labour, exhaustion, disease and death. The camps were not hidden from the public. This created fear and discouraged opposition to the Nazis.



During the Second World War, the Nazis' goal shifted from persecuting Jews to systematically killing every Jew in Europe. They called this plan the "Final Solution" and discussed it at the Wannsee Conference in 1942. At this meeting, leaders planned how to transport Jews from different parts of Europe to centralized killing sites. Between 1941 and 1942 the Nazis built six major death camps for the sole purpose of killing Jews.

The deportation of Jews to the death camps was coordinated by government ministries. Officials made deportation lists.

Police arrested those on the lists. Railway workers transported them across borders. Train schedules were carefully coordinated to move large numbers of Jews to death camps. Through this bureaucracy, genocide became routine work. Responsibility for the murder of Jews was spread across many people and organizations. Each person carried out a small task within a vast system.

The death camps were located in Nazi-occupied Poland, close to railways. Jews from all over Europe were deported to death camps by train. They were packed into sealed train cars meant for cargo, not people. Thousands died in the trains from lack of air, food and water. On arrival at the death camps, most Jews were killed in gas chambers. Some were killed in medical experiments. Others died in slave labour subcamps that were attached to the death camps.

About three million Jews were killed in the Nazi death camps. This is half of the total number of Jews murdered over the course of the Holocaust. Another three million were killed in mass shootings or in other camps and ghettos.

## MESSAGES TO LOVED ONES

During the Holocaust, Jews wrote thousands of letters to their loved ones. They sent letters from homes, ghettos and sometimes from the camps. Mail was an important way for families to share information and stay in contact when separated.

Letters to loved ones contained pleas for help, declarations of love and messages of encouragement. They also described harsh conditions, hunger, despair and fear. Some letters were written on the eve of deportation and served as final messages of farewell and love. They reveal how Jews perceived what was happening to them. Many Jews were aware of the growing danger and wrote with a sense of resignation, knowing they might not survive.

In the camps, there was little chance to send messages to the outside world. Early on, concentration camp prisoners were permitted to send a limited number of postcards each month. These were heavily censored by the Nazis. But in camps like Auschwitz, Jewish prisoners were not allowed to write to their families at all. In other camps, Nazi guards forced Jews to write postcards declaring that all was well with their “resettlement.” This was an attempt by the Nazis to hide the true nature of the camps. By the time families received these false messages, the writers had often been murdered in the gas chambers.

## IN DEFIANCE

Standing up to the Nazis was difficult and dangerous for the Jews. The Nazis were disciplined and heavily armed. Jews had little strength, few resources and hardly any opportunities to fight back. As well, Jews were harshly punished for defying Nazi orders. The Nazis killed not only the Jews who resisted but also their families and communities. Still, thousands of Jews took part in resistance activities across Europe.

In every country occupied by the Nazis, there were uprisings by Jews in ghettos and camps. This included the ghettos of Warsaw and Bialystok and the death camps of Treblinka, Sobibor and Auschwitz-Birkenau. In these uprisings, Jewish fighters seized or smuggled weapons. They killed guards, destroyed buildings, started fires and even blew up a crematorium. Some Jews escaped during these revolts. However, most were later caught and killed.



Outside the camps, Jewish partisan groups sabotaged Nazi operations. From bases in the forests, they blew up train tracks, roads and bridges. These actions aimed to slow the progress of the Nazis and their allies.

Jews also resisted Nazi oppression through non-violent acts and symbolic gestures. The Jews were not treated like humans. So, any small effort to keep their dignity and humanity was a form of spiritual resistance. Jews created art and music, wrote poems and diaries, said prayers and tried to carry on normal life while imprisoned in ghettos. They recorded history in hidden archives and took photos of Nazi crimes. Even attempts to stay healthy and appear strong in the unspeakable conditions of the camps were a powerful form of defiance.

## **“ENEMY ALIENS”**

About 80,000 Jewish refugees escaped the Nazi regime by fleeing to Britain in the 1930s. Britain classified them as “refugees from Nazi oppression.” But when Britain declared war on Germany in 1939, it feared these refugees might be spies for the Nazis. It classified them as “enemy aliens” and considered them a potential danger.

In 1940, the British government arrested and interned 30,000 of these “enemy aliens.” Most were Jewish men and boys, genuine refugees from Nazi persecution. More than 2,000 of these refugees were sent by ship to Canada. It was dangerous to cross the Atlantic Ocean in wartime.

On arrival in Canada, the Jewish refugees were issued uniforms and put in internment camps. The camps were surrounded by barbed wire. Canadian camp guards strictly controlled the movement and activities of the internees. Antisemitism was common among the guards. At first, the Jewish refugees were held in the same camps as Nazi prisoners of war. This was unsafe and degrading for the boys and men who had fled Nazi persecution.

Britain soon realized it had made a mistake. It recommended releasing the Jewish refugees. But the Canadian government refused to do this since its policy was to restrict Jewish immigration into Canada. As a result, the refugees had to remain in Canadian internment camps for up to three years.

The Jewish camp internees included teachers, scientists, artists, musicians and students. To fight boredom and be productive during internment, they set up their own programs. They conducted lectures, established newspapers, created art and held religious services. Yet the primary focus for most internees was to find some way to be released from the camps.



# AFTERMATH

With the end of the Second World War and the liberation of the camps, Holocaust survivors were confronted with unspeakable loss. Their families were murdered and their homes and communities taken from them. Survival was often marked by loneliness and despair. Most survivors were desperate to leave Europe. They sought to rebuild their lives in new countries, including Canada.

## LOSS AND LIBERATION

The first Nazi camp to be liberated was the Majdanek death camp in July 1944. Over the following months, Allied forces liberated more camps across Europe, shocked at what they found. Liberation meant a chance at survival, but for many it came too late. Thousands of liberated Jews continued to die from the effects of starvation, disease and exhaustion.

The effects of persecution did not end upon liberation from the camps. Survivors felt relief, and even joy, but also confusion and loneliness. Liberation was the start of a difficult and uncertain path. Desperate searches for their families revealed that most were the sole survivors. After years of abuse and degradation, they had to face the loss of everything they had ever known. For many, it was impossible to return to normal life.

There were few places for survivors to go after liberation. Their homes had been taken by others or destroyed in the war. Those who did return home often found nothing left—no family, community or belongings. In some places, such as Poland, returning survivors were violently attacked and killed by locals. Because of this hostility and the losses they had suffered, most survivors hoped to leave Europe, if they could.

The Allies quickly set up displaced persons (DP) camps, often on the sites of former concentration camps. About 250,000 Jewish survivors lived in DP camps between 1945 and 1952, waiting for visas to emigrate. The DP camps became vibrant places of activity as survivors tried to rebuild their lives. They got married, had children and trained for jobs. They celebrated religious holidays, revived their culture and all the while searched for lost family.

## WAR ORPHANS

Nearly 1.5 million Jewish children were killed during the Holocaust. Those who survived were often the only members of their family left. Tens of thousands of children lost their parents in the Holocaust. They lived in orphanages and displaced persons (DP) camps for years after the Second World War. In 1947, the Canadian Jewish Congress convinced the Canadian government to open its doors to some Jewish orphans. The program was called the War Orphans Project.

Canadian representatives went to Europe to look for Jewish orphans under the age of 15. When the representatives arrived, they found greater devastation than they expected. Very few young children had survived the Holocaust. Because of this, the age limit for the War Orphans Project had to be raised from 15 to 18 years old.

The health of each orphan was tested before being accepted to the program. The children also had to demonstrate they could adjust to life in Canada. In the end, 1,128 orphans were chosen to travel by boat and train to new homes in Canada. The children were placed with Jewish foster families or in group homes in 38 cities across the country.

Most of the orphans were teenagers used to taking care of themselves. They found it hard to follow the rules set by their new foster parents. Life in small-town



Canada was also challenging for them. Foster parents struggled to understand the horrible experiences the children had gone through. As a result, the orphans developed close bonds with each other. These ties were critical during their early years in Canada. In time, the orphans integrated into Canadian society with great success. Many of these children became pillars of their new communities.

## **JOURNEY TO CANADA**

At the end of the Second World War, about 250,000 Jewish survivors had no homes or communities to return to. They stayed in displaced persons (DP) camps for up to seven years, waiting for countries to let them in. Few countries accepted Jewish survivors in the post-war years. This was the case even though the public had learned of the horrors of the Holocaust and the refugee crisis it created.

Between 1933 and 1947, Canada accepted only 5,000 Jewish refugees. At the time, Canada's immigration laws discriminated against Jews. These laws stayed in place for two years after the war. Asked how many Jewish refugees should be allowed into Canada, one government official said, "none is too many." This reflected public opinion at that time.

Finally, in 1947, Jewish refugees with family members in Canada were allowed to immigrate. Canada also accepted Jewish refugees with skills in certain industries. This included clothing manufacturing, mining and forestry. Canada needed workers to fill post-war labour shortages in these sectors.

The experience of survivors in Canada varied. They came from many different countries. They had diverse cultural and educational backgrounds but faced the same challenges. They first had to find housing and jobs. Child survivors had years of schooling to make up for. They had to learn a new language and adapt to Canadian society. Lingering antisemitism in Canada was also a factor to contend with.

In the face of such challenges, Jewish organizations, like the Canadian Jewish Congress, provided support to help survivors adjust. Over time, Holocaust survivors made important contributions to all aspects of life in Canada. They have strengthened and enriched the diverse fabric of Canadian society.

## **BEARING WITNESS**

Since 1951, Israel and Jewish communities worldwide have observed Yom HaShoah. It is a day to remember the six million Jews murdered in the Holocaust. It also honours the heroism of the Jewish resistance. Yom HaShoah takes place on the 27th day of the Jewish month of Nisan, which is usually in April.

In 2005, the United Nations declared January 27 International Holocaust Remembrance Day (IHRD). This day honours all victims of the Nazi regime, both Jewish and non-Jewish. IHRD also promotes efforts to combat antisemitism, racism and intolerance.

Yad Vashem is the World Holocaust Remembrance Centre in Israel. It is an archive, museum and research centre. It has compiled the Book of Names to record the names of every Jewish victim of the Holocaust. So far, the Book of Names has over 4.8 million names, but many are still missing because of incomplete records. Yad Vashem also recognizes those who rescued Jews during the Holocaust. They are known as the Righteous Among the Nations.

In the decades following the Holocaust, survivors began to share their stories. Many spoke in memory of those who had perished. They spoke so the Holocaust would not be forgotten. Through the survivors' efforts, thousands of eyewitness testimonies were recorded. These testimonies provide important lessons for future generations.

In 1994, survivors in Vancouver founded the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre. Their vision was a world free from antisemitism, racism and genocide. It is part of a global effort to educate about the Holocaust and its important lessons.



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