

The Holocaust Events

The Holocaust, or the *Shoah* (as it is known in Hebrew), is perhaps the most significant event of modern Jewish history, and one of the most central events of all time. Justifiably, it has been called "The Third Destruction of World Jewry" (Jacob Lestschinsky, *Crisis, Catastrophe and Survival*). Besides the destruction of the first two Temples, the Holocaust may have been the most devastating event in the annals of Jewish history, changing the condition of the Jewish People in every respect.

This Morasha class is devoted to providing insight into the history of the Holocaust. The unspeakable horrors of those years molded the face of modern Jewry, and its history is crucial to understanding the issues that continue to confront the Jewish People. The second Morasha class on the history of the Holocaust will address Jewish resistance, miracles and righteous Gentiles, and a third one will discuss The Holocaust and Jewish Faith.

In this class we will discuss the following:

- ☞ What were the forms of persecution inflicted on the Jews of Germany before the war?
- ☞ What happened to Jews in the countries invaded by the Germans?
- ☞ What happened to Jews after they were taken prisoner by the Nazis?
- ☞ In what way were the events of the Holocaust unprecedented and unnatural?
- ☞ How did the world respond (or not)?

Class Outline

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SECTION I: BASIC EVENTS OF THE HOLOCAUST

Providing an overview of the Holocaust is a tremendous challenge. The events of the Holocaust were so horrific that a discussion of every aspect of the Jewish people's terrible suffering during those years could fill many volumes. It is probably impossible to enumerate the varied forms of torture, and ultimately cold-blooded murder, that the Jews of Europe endured. Consequently, the very brevity of an overview of the Holocaust makes it a poor vehicle to convey the reality and magnitude of what took place during those years. Nevertheless, we can isolate a number of main categories of persecution that occurred during that time, which will give us an inkling of the horrors that the Jewish people suffered at the hands of the Nazis.

1. "About the Holocaust," yadvashem.org – The enormity of the Nazis' crime

The Holocaust was the murder by Nazi Germany of six million Jews. While the Nazi persecution of the Jews began in 1933, the mass murder was committed during World War II. It took the Germans and their accomplices four and a half years to murder six million Jews. They were at their most efficient from April to November 1942 – 250 days in which they murdered some two and a half million Jews. They never showed any restraint, they slowed down only when they began to run out of Jews to kill, and they only stopped when the Allies defeated them.

There was no escape. The murderers were not content with destroying the communities; they also traced each hidden Jew and hunted down each fugitive. The crime of being a Jew was so great, that every single one had to be put to death – the men, the women, the children; the committed, the disinterested, the apostates; the healthy and creative, the sickly and the lazy – all were meant to suffer and die, with no reprieve, no hope, no possible amnesty, nor chance for alleviation.

Most of the Jews of Europe were dead by 1945. A civilization that had flourished for almost 2,000 years was no more. The survivors – one from a town, two from a host – dazed, emaciated, bereaved beyond measure, gathered the remnants of their vitality and the remaining sparks of their humanity, and rebuilt. They never meted out justice to their tormentors – for what justice could ever be achieved after such a crime? Rather, they turned to rebuilding: new families forever under the shadow of those absent; new life stories, forever warped by the wounds; new communities, forever haunted by the loss.

2. Professor Nora Levin, *The Holocaust: The Destruction of European Jewry 1933-1945*, Shoken Books, p. 5 – Experiences of the Jews throughout Europe in the Holocaust

At first victims of Nazi propaganda, the Jews of Europe ultimately became victims of the most appalling murder machine in history. A relentless process of persecution, segregation and deportation to death camps claimed almost six million Jews, a million and a half of whom were children. With them perished a unique religious and intellectual civilization as well as immense contributions to general European life. In Germany, the descent from persecution to death took several years. In the western countries overrun by Germany the process was much swifter. But in eastern Europe, where the largest masses of Jews were concentrated, the process was swiftest of all and was made possible by the stepped-up tempo of war.

PART A. GERMANY BEFORE THE WAR – HARASSMENT AND HUMILIATION

Before the actual violence against the Jews began, they were already heavily persecuted. Hitler's strategy began with a boycott of Jewish-owned businesses and the passing of intensely anti-Semitic laws.

1. **Eric A. Johnson, Nazi Terror, Basic Books, p.90 – The beginning of the end.**

Between the Jewish boycott of April 1933 and the passage of the infamous Nuremberg Laws of September 1935, a large body of anti-Semitic legislation was passed that served to destroy further the Jews' economic chances of survival, to exclude them from the German community as a whole, and to persuade them to leave the country.

2. **Ibid., p. 104 – The Nuremberg Laws**

Enacted on the last day of the annual Nuremberg Party Rally (in 1935) and on the heels of yet another wave of popular outrages and anti-Semitic boycotts . . . the "Nuremberg Laws" provided the police and legal authorities with powerful new weapons to be used in persecuting the Jews. The new laws excluded Jews from citizenship rights, provided a legal definition of a Jew, and proscribed physical relations between Jews and non-Jews.

The Nuremberg Laws reflected the warped philosophy of racial supremacy advocated by Hitler and his cronies.

3. **"The Holocaust: Crash Course in Jewish History," Rabbi Ken Spiro, aish.com – The Nuremberg laws aimed to separate the Jews from the "Aryan race."**

Some three years before he made his strides into Europe, Hitler was already putting into place his program to get rid of the Jews.

It began in 1935 with the Nuremberg Laws. These laws basically canceled all the rights that Jews had won in Germany post-Enlightenment.

For so many years before the Enlightenment, Jews were hated because they were different and refused to assimilate. Post-Enlightenment, in the very country where the Jews assimilated the most easily, they were now hated because they were blending in too well. Hitler's ultimate nightmare was that Jews would intermarry with Germans and poison the gene-pool of the master race.

Hence the following laws were passed to preserve "the purity of German blood":

- "Marriages between Jews and subjects of German or kindred blood are forbidden."
- "Extramarital relationships between Jews and subjects of German or kindred blood are forbidden."
- "A Reich citizen can only be a state member who is a German of German blood and who shows through his conduct and is both desirous and fit to serve in the faith of the German people and Reich. The Reich citizen is the only holder of political rights."
- "A Jew cannot be a citizen of the Reich. He cannot exercise the right to vote. He cannot occupy public office."
- "Jews are forbidden to display the Reich's national flag or to show the national colors."

Systematically, Jews lost their citizenship, their political rights, and their economic rights.

PART B. KRISTALLNACHT AND ORGANIZED PERSECUTION

While the years between 1933 and 1938 were already rife with anti-Semitism in Germany, matters came to a head with the notorious Kristallnacht pogrom in November 1938.

1. **Berel Wein, *Faith and Fate: The Story of the Jewish People in the Twentieth Century*, Artscroll/Mesorah Publications, p. 137 – Kristallnacht marked a turning point, when the anti-Semitic tide in Germany came to a head.**

Anti-Semitic propaganda and increasing violence culminated in a mass pogrom on November 9, 1938 when *Kristallnacht*, the “Night of Broken Glass,” overwhelmed German Jewry. Synagogues were torched; Jews were killed in the hundreds and arrested in the thousands. Many ordinary Germans agreed with these anti-Jewish atrocities. Hitler’s propaganda machine had been broadcasting vastly inflated figures as to the number of Jewish doctors, lawyers, bankers and teachers in Germany, thus fanning German resentment. Anti-Semitism and the belief that Jews somehow “had gone too far” in integrating themselves into German society were deeply ingrained in the minds and hearts of the German citizenry.

The horrors of the pogrom were premeditated and coordinated, carried out by Hitler’s soldiers with the ruthless efficiency that would soon typify the Nazis’ brutal conduct for the rest of the war.

2. **The Holocaust, Nora Levin, Shocken Books, p. 81 – American witness, describing the night of Kristallnacht in Leipzig, Germany.**

Jewish dwellings were smashed into and the contents demolished or looted. In one of the Jewish sections, an eighteen-year-old boy was hurled from a three-story window to land with both legs broken on a street littered with burning beds and other household furniture ... Jewish shop windows by the hundreds were systematically and wantonly smashed throughout the city at a loss estimated at several millions of marks ... The main streets of the city were a positive litter of shattered plate glass ... The debacle was executed by SS men and Storm Troopers, not in uniform, each group having been provided with hammers, axes, crowbars, and incendiary bombs.

PART C. UPON INVASION: GHETTOS AND KILLING SQUADS

Over the ensuing years, persecution of the Jews, both in Germany and the many countries conquered by the Nazis, took many forms. Everywhere the Germans invaded (a total of twenty-one countries), their arrival heralded disaster for the Jews of that country – either instant death or a prolonged period of torment that ended, more often than not, in death as well.

1. **Cecil Roth, *A History of the Jews*, Shocken Books p. 395 – Nazis instituted comprehensive, oppressive anti-Semitic laws, established ghettos and killed large numbers of Jews.**

On September 1st, 1939, the German forces invaded Poland, and the second World War in a generation began. Within a few weeks, the country had been overrun, save for the zone occupied by the Russians, in which (as shortly after in the Baltic States of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia) the Soviet order was introduced. The German-occupied area contained upwards of 2,000,000 Jews – in the main poverty-stricken but imbued with unbounded vitality and deep loyalty to Jewish tradition and values. They were exposed forthwith to a systematic campaign of oppression. It was simple in a country under martial law to impose crushing fines, to carry out wholesale executions, to institute compulsory labor service, or to demand a supply of Jewish girls for the military brothels. But all this was incidental. There was hardly a town or village throughout the country in which Jews were not butchered at this period by the German soldiery, sometimes in fantastic numbers. The food ration allotted to Jews later on was barely sufficient to maintain life, being only one-half of what was allowed to Polish Christians and a quarter of that enjoyed by Teutons. Shortly after the conquest of the country, the wearing of a Badge of Shame to distinguish Jew from non-Jew was instituted (November, 1939), as prescribed in the Middle Ages but never enforced in Europe since the period of the French Revolution. In the following year, the Ghetto, too, was reintroduced as a formal institution legally enforced. The largest,

holding even at the outset upwards of 350,000 souls, was that of Warsaw, inaugurated in the autumn of 1940. This was surrounded by an eight-foot wall of concrete with several massive gates – a gloomy city within the city; there was a similar walled enclosure at Lodz, while in a dozen other cities there were segregated areas, cut off by electrically-charged wire fences. In the Middle Ages, egress from the Jewish quarter was allowed except at night; now, it was entirely forbidden without special permission, under pain of death for a second offense. The institution was, however, only a temporary expedient.

2. [Yadvashem.org – Nazi brutality upon occupying Poland.](#)

As they marched into the towns of Poland, Germans preyed on the Jews they encountered, subjecting them to humiliation and beatings, shearing the beards of the Orthodox and organizing public hangings to terrorize the population. The perpetrators were members of special SS units who accompanied the regular military units. They torched synagogues and Jewish homes, and abducted Jews on the street for forced labor to repair the damage from the battles. After receiving enormous monetary fines for having “caused” the World War and its attendant devastation, Jewish leaders were inundated by decrees, such as the registration of a Jewish labor force and the imposition of compulsory labor. The Jews were steadily dispossessed of their possessions and deprived of their sources of livelihood. Throughout the occupied areas, the Germans restored the medieval practice of requiring Jews to wear a badge of shame – armbands with the Star of David or yellow Stars of David on their lapels – in order to identify them as Jews.

A special division of the German army called the Einsatzgruppen (killing squads) was designated to enter each town, weed out its Jewish residents, and murder them en masse.

3. [Lucy S. Dawidowicz, The War Against the Jews 1933-1945, Penguin Books 1975, pp. 165-168 – Two million Jews were murdered by the Einsatzgruppen.](#)

The unit assigned to killing the Jews of a given place would enter a village or city and order the prominent Jewish citizens to call together all Jews for the purpose of resettlement. They were requested to hand over their valuables to the leaders of the unit, and shortly before the execution to surrender their outer clothing. The men, women and children were led to a place of execution which in most cases was located next to a more deeply excavated anti-tank ditch. Then they were shot, kneeling or standing, and the corpses thrown into the ditch ...

At Nuremberg the International Military Tribunal concluded that of the approximately six million Jews murdered, two million were killed by the Einsatzgruppen and other units of the security police.

In many places, Jews were herded into ghettos – tiny, fenced-in areas large enough to hold no more than a fraction of the number of people the Germans confined there. In these ghettos, living conditions were abysmal.

4. [“Daily Life in the Ghettos,” Yadvashem.org – The horrid conditions of the ghettos where Jewish victims of German persecution lived.](#)

The Jews were only permitted to take a few personal items with them to the ghetto, in the process being stripped of the homes and property that they had left behind. The ghettos were extremely crowded and often lacked basic electrical and sanitary infrastructure. The food rations were insufficient for supporting the ghettos’ inhabitants, and the Germans employed brutal measures against the smugglers, including both public and private executions. Starvation increased and worsened in the ghettos and many of the inhabitants became ill or perished.

PART D. THE DEATH CAMPS

The brutal persecution of the Jews continued as many were shipped off either to “death camps,” where most were ruthlessly murdered, or to “labor camps,” which meant backbreaking slave labor. Often, this labor ultimately ended in death, as well.

1. [Rabbi Berel Wein, Faith and Fate, Shaar Press, p. 170 – Overview of the concentration camps.](#)

The first large killing camps were Treblinka, Belzec, Sobibor, Chmelno, Majdanek, and Maly Trostenets. This latter camp was just outside of Minsk in White Russia. It was the only large killing camp not on Polish soil. It boasted a record of no known survivors. But these camps, murderous as they were (over two million people – mostly Jews – died in them), were minor league in comparison to the enormous killing camp built at Auschwitz-Birkenau in southern Poland. From 1941 until its closing in 1944 when the Red Army stood at its gates, more than 2,500,000 people were killed at the camp. It was also a work camp where the thousands who were not killed immediately were nevertheless worked to death slowly and painfully. Fritz Saukel, the head of the German slave-labor apparatus, described his goals succinctly: “All the inmates must be fed, sheltered and treated in such a way as to exploit them to the fullest possible extent, at the lowest conceivable degree of expenditure.” It is no wonder that in 1943, in Auschwitz alone, 25,000 workers died of “natural causes.” Ironically, the slave-labor factories remained uniformly unsuccessful economically. The Germans set up concentration camps in France, Holland, Czechoslovakia, Germany and the Baltic States. Although some of these camps were not officially killing camps, innocent people died in vast numbers in all of them.

The brutal treatment of the Jews began even before they were interred in the death camps, when they were initially rounded up to be dispatched there.

2. [“The Implementation of the Final Solution,” Yadvashem.org – Deportation to the death camps.](#)

In many cases, the deportation orders were given to the Judenrat suddenly, often around the Jewish holidays when awareness was reduced. Local police were charged with carrying out the *Aktion* (round-up of Jews) and the Jewish police was also tasked with participating in the round-up. The Jews were ordered to gather in a specific location, usually close to a train station, and to bring with them only a few possessions. During the *Aktion* anyone that did not follow the order to gather, or could not keep pace with the others, was shot. At the train station the Jews were loaded into crowded cattle cars without proper ventilation. The cars were sealed from the outside and the Jews were kept in the cars for days without water or food until they reached their destination. Many perished as a result of the conditions on the train.

Upon the establishment of the monstrous death camps, the Nazis poured their energy into transporting the Jews from the areas they had conquered to these killing centers, in order to murder the largest number of people, in the most “efficient” way possible.

3. [Lucy S. Davidowitz, The War Against the Jews, p. 180 – The establishment of the death camps was followed by a stream of deceptively camouflaged deportations, which generally led to the deportees’ deaths.](#)

Its technical problems having been mastered and its administrative matters arranged, the Final Solution entered its second operative stage – mass murder by gassing. Though the Einsatzgruppen were to continue to perform their “special tasks” in the East, most SS energies were now directed to bringing the Jews from all over Europe to the killing camps. Everywhere, the deportations were

accomplished by stratagem, terror and force. “Resettlement for work in the East” was the fundamental lie used to deceive the Jews concerning their fate. To bolster the deception, the Germans usually permitted the Jews to take personal belongings with them. In the ghettos of Poland, where hunger ravaged its inmates, offers of bread and marmalade induced thousands of Jews to turn up voluntarily for “resettlement.” “Resettlement” became the euphemism for the process of transporting Jews to the gas chambers.

The schedule prepared in the RSHA’s IV-B-4 was put in motion in March 1942, when the first party of Slovakian Jews arrived at Auschwitz and when Jews from the ghetto of Lublin began to be deported to Belzec ... On 19 July Himmler ordered that the “resettlement” of all the Jews of the General government be completed by the end of the year ... Three days later, deportations began from the Warsaw ghetto to Treblinka, whose gas chambers had just been completed. In August the Jews from the ghetto of Lvov were sent to Belzec. During the summer, the Einsatzgruppen renewed their activity in White Russia, while Jews from France, Belgium and Holland began to be deported to Auschwitz. In late summer the Jews from Croatia arrived in Auschwitz, followed by Dutch Jews. In November Norwegian Jews arrived in Auschwitz ...

[An extensive list of further deportations from other countries to the death camps follows.]

Arrival at the camps was a nightmarish scene.

4. **Ibid., p. 190 – The horrific mass executions of Jews arriving at the death camps.**

Arriving at Auschwitz, Belzec, Chelmno, Majdanek, Sobibor and Treblinka, the Jews encountered a standard procedure. At camps maintaining labor installations, like Auschwitz, ten percent of the arrival – those who looked fittest – were selected for work. The remainder were consigned to the gas chambers. They were instructed to undress; the women and girls had their hair cut. They were then marched between files of auxiliary police (Ukrainians usually) who hurried them along with whips, sticks or guns to the gas chambers. As in Operation T-4, these were identified as shower rooms. The Jews were rammed in, one person per square foot. The gassing lasted from ten to thirty minutes, depending on the facilities and techniques used. In Belzec, according to an eyewitness, it took thirty-two minutes and “finally, all were dead,” he wrote, “like pillars of basalt, still erect, not having any space to fall.” To make room for the next load, the bodies were right away tossed out ... Later the bodies were burned, either in the open air or in crematoria.

For those who were not immediately dispatched to their deaths, life in the concentration camp was a constant struggle for survival under unspeakable conditions. Many more Jews perished in the camps at a later date.

5. **Yadvashem.org, *ibid.* – Life in labor or “concentration” camps.**

The *appel*, the daily lineup that took place every morning after wakeup and each evening after returning from labor, was one of the horrific aspects of the prisoners’ lives in the camps. They were forced to stand completely still, often for hours at a time, exposed to the elements in the cold, rain, or snow and to the terror of sudden violence by SS men, guards or kapos. The camp routine was composed of a long list of orders and instructions, usually given to all but sometimes aimed at individual prisoners, the majority of which were familiar yet some came unexpected. All of one’s strength had to be enlisted to overcome the daily routine: an early wakeup, arranging the bed’s straw, the lineup, marching to labor, forced labor, the waiting period for the meager daily meal, usually consisting of a watery vegetable soup and half a piece of bread which was insufficient for people working at hard labor, the return to the camp, and another lineup, before retiring to the barracks.

In addition to the unspeakably cruel conditions under which the prisoners in concentration camps lived, the Nazis used any excuse to heap abuse, intimidation, and further acts of brutality and bloodshed upon them. The following is a case in point.

6. **The Final Solution Is Life, by Laura Deckelman, as told by Rebbetzin Chana Rubin, Artscroll/Mesorah Publications, p. 158 – Hanging a Jew in public to instill fear.**

Late one afternoon, we heard an announcement over the loudspeaker, ordering us to assemble for an “extraordinary” lineup. We quickly lined up, exchanging frightened glances ...

A German approached the microphone and in enraged tones informed us that one of the male inmates had tried to escape, had been caught, and was now to be hanged for his efforts. This hanging was to be an “object lesson” for the rest of us, should anyone be harboring intentions of flight. Whoever would be caught not watching the hanging, the Nazi concluded, would be blinded.

The unfortunate victim was brought out by a guard and forced up a few steps to the gallows. Many thousands of us watched as a noose was placed around his neck and the platform was quickly removed from beneath his feet. He struggled for a few seconds, then hung limp and lifeless.

Another aspect of the concentration camps that bears mentioning is the heinous “medical experimentation” that was carried out, most notably by the notorious Dr. Josef Mengele.

7. **Rabbi Eliahu Ellis and Rabbi Shmuel Silinsky, “The Hospitals,” Holocaust Studies, aish.com – The Nazi “medical experiments.”**

God forbid, if someone ever became sick, he would end up in the “hospital” – and be subjected to the famous “experiments.”

Those same 123 monsters who supervised the selection on the platforms, who had sworn to “help humanity,” were conducting “medical research.”

They would do things such as placing Jews in ice baths and monitor them continually until they died. Why? Because some German flyers might end up in the water when fighting the Allies, and they were trying to figure out how to fight hypothermia, to better help the war effort.

Sometimes the “research” had no relevance at all to the war. Mengele, known as the Angel of Death, “specialized” in bizarre experimentation on twins and dwarfs, ostensibly to better direct Aryan genetics. Victims were injected with diseases, then killed with a chloroform injection to the heart, dissected and compared. Some had chemicals dripped into their eyes to change eye color. Children were surgically sewn together to create Siamese twins.

PART E. DEATH MARCHES AND WAR'S END

The Nazis’ single-minded obsession with murdering Jews continued even after it had become clear that they had lost the war. As the Allied armies closed in on them, the Nazis did everything in their power to continue to take as many lives as possible.

1. **Rabbi Berel Wein, Faith and Fate, Shaar Press, pp. 176-177 – The Nazis made last-ditch efforts to murder as many Jews as possible.**

The Western Allies invaded France in June 1944, and successfully established a beachhead on its shores.

By August, Paris had fallen and the British and Americans were approaching the Rhine. On the Eastern front, the Germans never recovered from their defeat at Stalingrad. The German army was being mauled by the overwhelming numbers and firepower of the Soviet Union. Yet all the while, the German killing apparatus which was obliterating the Jews of Europe never abated in its will or work. As late as April of 1945, as the Russian army was battering the gates of Berlin, the surviving Jewish inmates of concentration camps, including Bergen-Belsen and Buchenwald, were forced to undertake inhuman marches by their captors, lest they be liberated by the advancing Allied troops. Thousands died on these marches, even to the last day of the war.

The term “death march” is all too apt for the murderous treatment it entailed.

2. **The Final Solution Is Life, by Laura Deckelman, as told by Rebbetzin Chana Rubin, Artscroll/Mesorah Publications, p. 225 – The cruel “death marches.”**

In the middle of the night, my husband and the others were awakened by the SS loudly ordering everyone out of the barracks to the frozen *zeilappel* field. After the usual head count, the men were ordered to march out of the camp. SS guards prodded them roughly with their rifle butts, and vicious dogs barked and snapped at their feet. For the last time, my husband and the other men passed the gate bearing the infamous German inscription, “*Arbeit Macht Frei*,” [Work Makes Free].

The SS led the innocent captives deep into the woods, and anyone unable to keep up with the rest of the group was shot and tossed into the ditches alongside the road. As the men marched on, their wooden clogs did little to shield their frozen, swollen feet from the icy and slippery pathways – and sometimes they got stuck in the snow. If one of the men held up the line by struggling to pull his foot out, he was shot. It meant nothing to the SS barbarians to snuff out more innocent lives, and soon corpses were strewn on both sides of the roadways.

During the following interminable, bitterly cold days, the men continued to march; and during the equally long and freezing nights, they were locked by the Germans into barns along the road, where they slept on straw. Much as the men hoped and prayed for liberation, it did not happen. Instead there was marching, marching, endless marching, a desperate marathon in which the freezing, starving, sick men had to maintain the merciless pace set by the warmly dressed Germans, mostly *Wehrmacht* soldiers under the command of the SS.

Heavy snow continued to fall, and by opening their mouths and letting the moist snowflakes fall onto their parched tongues, the men were able to avoid dehydration. My husband lost all sensation in his feet as he marched through the frigid landscape, but the constant motion saved what little circulation he had left.

Men were collapsing on all sides and being trampled underfoot by those still struggling to keep on moving. Bodies were shoved aside like stones, but by that time, nothing the depraved and evil Germans did could surprise the prisoners.

Even after the end of the war, the scars left by the Holocaust on the Jewish people, both individually and collectively, were great. More Jews continued to die after the war as a result of the deprivation they had just experienced. And those who survived were left broken and bereaved, to carry the burden of their horrific experiences with them for the rest of their lives. Survivors were often left bereft of their families, alone in the world, sickened, impoverished, and struggling to survive when everything they had ever known was gone. The psychological and emotional impact of the war, even on those who survived it, is inestimable. And the trauma carried onto the following generations, as well.

3. “Generation Without Grandparents,” Chani Afergut Kurtz, Innernet.org.il – The trauma of the Holocaust lives on in the next generation.

As the daughter of a man who went through six years in concentration camps, I view the Holocaust from a survivor’s perspective. And I am not alone. The effects of the Holocaust on “the generation after” are subtle and long-lasting. They shape our thoughts, our fears, our dreams, our lives. Jewish tradition has always depended not only on the written word, but on the transmission of memories – on the wealth of customs, stories and experiences passed down from generation to generation. For survivors and their children, this process was interrupted.

Ours was a generation without grandparents. Some of us considered ourselves particularly fortunate in having one grandfather or grandmother who had survived. Many of my friends had neither. Among the children I grew up with, all of us children of survivors, I can remember no one who had the normal complement of four grandparents to share her life. Instead we had photographs – if our parents were lucky.

Photographs cannot tell stories. Nor can they serve as a buffer between the generations, providing you with insight into your parents’ personalities and a sense of perspective on yourself. They cannot sit you on their knees when you are in trouble and tell you about the time your mother was in bigger trouble. They cannot show you how they made wicks for Chanukah by hand. And they cannot tell you about Passover in their grandparents’ house, drawing you into that unbroken chain, anchoring your roots in the past.

Having lost that source of memories, we depended on our parents’ stories for continuity. The degree to which survivors shared their experiences differed widely. Some survivors were stifled by their inability or unwillingness to share their stories, and at times, by their children’s inability to listen. Many were incapable of talking at all, finding that the only way to avoid being engulfed by depression was to seal off this part of their lives altogether. To acknowledge dead relatives, to mention their names or describe them was too traumatic. The depth of past suffering was conveyed by the melancholy atmosphere of a *yartzeit* [anniversary of death of a loved one], or by the tears that would flow, unbidden, at a family *simcha* [joyous occasion]. Tears that would never be explained in words.

The above details are only a tiny drop in the vast ocean of information that exists about the Nazis’ vicious brutality and the unimaginable suffering that the Jews experienced during this time. The Nazis devised many more brutal forms of torment and murder which they imposed mercilessly upon their Jewish victims. Furthermore, these words can barely do justice to the magnitude of the horrors that the Jews experienced. One can only begin to grasp the horrors of the Holocaust by reading detailed personal accounts from survivors who describe their experiences in ghettos, concentration camps, death marches, and so many more horrible circumstances. For a detailed timeline of the events of the Holocaust, please see the separate Appendix document.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION I:

- ≈ The events of the Holocaust form a tale of unspeakable hatred, brutality, and mass murder. The Jews who experienced those dreadful years lived through terrible nightmares. Six million Jews lost their lives, and many more were brutalized and permanently scarred. The following is a brief summary of the events:
- ≈ Beginning in the year 1933, with Hitler’s rise to power, waves of anti-Semitic legislation and harassment began to appear in Germany.

- ⌘ Matters came to a head with the Kristallnacht pogrom in November 1938, when synagogues throughout Germany and Austria were destroyed and many Jews were beaten, arrested, and deported to concentration camps.
- ⌘ The war began in September 1939 with the Nazi invasion of Poland, and continued with the takeovers of many other countries. At first, the Jews in each country were either herded into ghettos, where they lived under subhuman conditions, subjected to starvation, forced labor, and terrible overcrowding, or they were rounded up en masse and shot to death. Often, the entire Jewish populace of a town would be shot and their bodies cast into a mass grave.
- ⌘ The epitome of the German “Final Solution” was the concentration camp. After suffering through a brutal deportation by cattle car, millions would be crammed into gas chambers, where they endured a painful death by asphyxiation.
- ⌘ The remainder were sent to a life of unspeakable torture, forced to subsist on meager food rations while engaging in backbreaking slave labor.
- ⌘ Even when the defeat of the German army was certain, the Nazis took the Jewish prisoners on “death marches” with the aim of killing as many of them as possible before the Allied forces could stop them.
- ⌘ Even for those who survived, the traumatic events of the Holocaust would go on to haunt them physically and emotionally, and often had emotional impact on their children, as well.

SECTION II: THE UNPRECEDENTED SCOPE OF THE HOLOCAUST

Jewish history is replete with other examples of horrific persecutions which include incidents of mass murder on a horrifying scale. But the tragic effects of the Holocaust were so far-reaching, the death toll so great, and the number of communities targeted (and destroyed) so vast, that the Holocaust may be a tragedy of unprecedented scope. (In truth, the destructions of the first two Temples probably were the most devastating events ever to occur to the Jewish people. In addition to the horrific suffering during those two destructions, they also resulted in the removal of the *Shechinah*, the Divine Presence, from our people. But it is distinctly possible that the bloodshed that took place during the Holocaust exceeded even the barbaric acts of murder that accompanied those horrendous events.)

Much of the shock felt over the utter devastation of the Holocaust stems from its appalling intensity, having transcended any form of hatred and persecution that the world had ever seen. The Nazi hatred of the Jews was absolute, a consuming obsession, and the barbarity with which they pursued their evil goals was astonishing. Furthermore, the rest of the world also seemed to turn a blind eye to Jewish suffering during this period. In this section, we will explore some of the abnormal – and perhaps unnatural – dimensions of the events of the Holocaust. In a later Morasha class (“Faith and the Holocaust”) we will examine some of the theological approaches that help us grasp this horrific chapter in history, but we must keep in mind that the question of *why* the Holocaust happened is one that we may never answer.

PART A: HITLER'S OBSESSION WITH THE JEWS

To gain some understanding of the history of the Holocaust, it is worthwhile to take a look at its primary architect, Adolf Hitler *yimach shemo* (the name of the wicked should be blotted out). Hitler's long-term obsession with the Jews is astounding. It seems that he was prepared to do everything – even start a world war and lose it – for the sake of killing the Jews.

1. **Adolf Hitler, Reichstag speech of January, 1939 – If there will be a world war, then the Jews will be destroyed.**

In my life I have often been a prophet and ... today I will once more be a prophet. If the international Jewish financiers in and outside Europe should succeed in plunging the nations once more into a world war, then the result will be not the Bolshevization of the world and thus the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation” of the Jewish race in Europe..

It would appear that Hitler's abrasive rhetoric was not merely a matter of political maneuvering – far from it. Made both publicly and privately, Hitler's constant reiterations imply his actual belief that the Jews were the central focus of the war.

2. **Private conversation of January 25, 1942, Himmler and Lammers; in Adolf Hitler, Monologue im Fuehrer-Hauptquartier 1941-1944, ed. Werner Jochmann and Heinrich Heim, Munich, 2000, pp. 228-229; cited by Saul Friedlander, The Years of Extermination (Harper Collins, NY 2006), p. 332 – Jews are the cause of the war and should be banished from Europe.**

“It must be done quickly. The Jew must be ousted from Europe. If not, we shall get no European cooperation. He incites everywhere. In the end I don't know: I am so immensely humane ... I only say: He must go. If he is destroyed in the process, I can't help it. I only see one thing: total extermination, if they do not leave voluntarily. Why should I look at a Jew any differently from a Russian prisoner? In the prisoners' camps many die, because we have been pushed into this situation by the Jews. But what can I do? Why did the Jews start this war?”

The words "I am so immensely humane," and "Why did the Jews start this war," sound ridiculous. Yet it seems that Hitler truly believed them. For Hitler, the Jews were evil incarnate, and their destruction was the greatest service to humanity that the German race could offer. On January 30, 1942, Hitler articulated his beliefs in full force:

3. **Adolf Hitler, Yearly address to the Reichstag, January 30, 1942 – The war is a battle against the Jews.**

We should be in no doubt that this war can only end either with the extermination of the Aryan people or with the disappearance of Jewry from Europe ... And the hour will strike when the most evil world enemy of all times will have ended his role at least for a thousand years.

Later in the war, Hitler refined his definition of the struggle for world dominion that was taking place in the great world war. The war was not with Britain, Russia, or the U.S. There were only two real combatants: Germany and the Jews. For Hitler, the focus of World War II was the Jews; even as he lost on the battlefield, Hitler diverted essential resources for the purpose of killing as many Jews as possible. Everything else, it appears, was periphery.

4. **Joseph Goebbels, Die Tagebuecher von Joseph Goebbels, Santiche Ftagmented, ed. Elke Frohlich (Munich, 1996), Part 2, Vol. 3, pp. 320-321 – The Jews deserve their extermination in Europe.**

Together with Bolshevism, Jewry will undoubtedly experience its great catastrophe. The Fuhrer declares once again that he has decided to do away ruthlessly with the Jews in Europe. In this matter one should not have any sentimental impulses. The Jews have deserved the catastrophe that they are now experiencing. We must accelerate this process with cold determination, as in so doing we render a priceless service to humanity, which for millennia was tortured by Jewry. This clear-cut anti-Jewish position must also be impressed upon one's own people against all willfully opposed groups. The Fuhrer repeated this explicitly, somewhat later, to a gathering of officers.

5. **Adolf Hitler, speaking at the last ever meeting of the “Great German Reichstag,” April 26, 1942 – Despite fighting a world war against three major powers, Hitler mentioned no enemy but the Jews.**

[This war ... is not an ordinary war, in which nations fight each other ... This is a fundamental confrontation,] the like of which shakes the world once in a thousand years and ushers in a new millennium ... We know the theoretical principles and the horrible reality of the aims of this world plague. It is called the dictatorship of the proletariat, but it is the dictatorship of Jewry! ... If Bolshevism Russia is the visible product of this Jewish infection, one should not forget that democratic capitalism creates the preconditions for it ... What remains after all of this is the beast in humanity and a Jewish layer that reached leadership but that in the end, as the parasite, destroys the ground which nurtured it. It is against this process, which Mommsen called the decomposition of states by the Jews, that the awakening new Europe has declared war.”

In death, Hitler was clearest of all. Here there was no mention of Bolshevism, or any other national enemy. Hitler clung to the bare essentials.

6. **Klaus Scholder, A Requiem for Hitler: And Other New Perspectives on the German Church Struggle (London 1989), p. 166 – Adolf Hitler's instructions given in his bunker before committing suicide.**

Most of all, I commit the leadership of the nation and its followers to the strictest keeping of race laws and the merciless struggle against the universal poisoner of all people, international Jewry.

PART B: THE NAZI PARTY AND GERMAN PEOPLE

One man, of course, cannot single-handedly kill millions. Hitler was backed by his followers in the Nazi Party, who had the general support of the German people. Although by 1942 the killing of the Jews had become well-known, there was virtually no protest on the part of the German citizens, and many “ordinary Germans” continued to be actively involved in the murder of the Jews. The following quotes illustrate the single-minded hatred which was displayed by many other German officials at the time.

1. **Heinrich Himmler speech October 4th, 1943 – Duty to exterminate the Jewish people.**

We have the moral right, we had the duty to our people to do it, to kill this people who would kill us ... It is one of those things that is easily said. “The Jewish people is being exterminated,” every Party member will tell you, “perfectly clear, it's part of our plans, we're eliminating the Jews, exterminating them, a small matter.”

2. **Hans Frank, Diary of Hans Frank, Governor-general of Poland, quoted in Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression, Vol. II, p. 634.**

One way or another - I will tell you quite openly - we must finish off the Jews.

3. **Joseph Goebbels, Diary entry of December 13, 1942, in Louis Lochner, The Goebbels Diaries, 1948, p. 241.**

At bottom, however, I believe both the English and the Americans are happy that we are exterminating the Jewish riff-raff.

4. **SS Unterscharführer Franz Suchomel, interviewed for the film Shoah, Claude Lanzmann, 1985, transcript p. 62.**

Treblinka was a primitive but efficient production line of death. Understand? Primitive, yes. But it worked well.

It is important to note that all agencies of the German government, comprising hundreds of thousands of Germans, were involved to varying degrees in the murder of Jews. The Civil Service wrote the decrees and regulations by which a Jew was to be defined; the Foreign Office negotiated the deportation of Jews from occupied territories; the German railways took care of the transport; and the police took an active part in the killings, as did the army, which participated in SS units, not only in the roundup of Jews, but even in their mass murder (this is known from diaries of German soldiers). In the words of historian Peter Fritzsche, the collaboration of the Wehrmacht with SS shooting parties was “routine,” implicating millions of Germans in the Nazi crime (Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich*, p. 159).

5. **Eric A. Johnson, Nazi Terror: The Gestapo, Jews, and Ordinary Germans (Basic Books, NY 1999) – Nobody made a protest.**

One wonders how so many people could find the courage to dance to forbidden swing music ... and communicate their discontent with their government and society in myriad ways, but could not summon the courage and compassion to register abhorrence and thereby break the silence about the systematic murder of millions of defenseless and innocent men, women and children.

6. **Letter of Lise Meitner (world-renowned Jewish Austrian chemist) to Otto Hahn, former friend who had continued to work for the Reich during the war, quoted in Ute Deichmann, Biologen unter Hitler: Portrat einer Wissenschaft im NS-Staat, p. 372 – Collaboration of intellectuals.**

All of you have worked for Nazi Germany and never tried even some passive resistance. Certainly, to assuage your conscience, here and there you helped some person in need of assistance but you allowed the murder of millions of innocent people, and no protest was ever heard.

Ordinary civilians were not merely apathetic; they were accomplices, on many levels.

PART C: COLLABORATION AND PASSIVITY IN EUROPE

Germans were not the only ones to take an active role in the killing of the Jews. The astonishing scope of destruction could only have been accomplished by the collaboration of the European countries occupied by the Nazis. With several significant, yet minor, exceptions, European nations quickly became accustomed to the Nazi policy of Jewish dehumanization; even after the destination of deported Jews was known, there was

little protest from the leadership of these countries and from their populations, and even less concrete action to stop the deadly transportations.

In Poland, the Ukraine, Latvia, Lithuania, and Croatia – in almost all of occupied Eastern Europe – the locals were often active participants in murder, looting, and, at the very least, informing on the Jewish population. In Western Europe, the population was less barbaric, yet collaboration was common, and apathy widespread. The following quotes illustrate the anti-Jewish sentiment that the Polish populace shared with their German conquerors.

1. **Narod, the newspaper of the Christian Democratic Party of the Polish government-in-exile coalition, quoted in Antony Polonsky, “Beyond Condemnation, Apologetics and Apologies: On the Complexity of Polish Behavior toward the Jews during the Second World War,” in *Holocaust: Critical Concepts in Historical Studies*, Vol. 5, p. 46, ed. David Cesarani (New York, 2004) – Attitude towards the Jews.**

The Jewish question is now a burning issue. We insist that the Jews cannot regain their political rights and the property they have lost. Moreover, in the future, they must entirely leave the territories of our country ... This means that we will have to cleanse all of Central and Southern Europe of the Jewish element, which amounts to removing some 8 to 9 million Jews.

2. **Szaniec, popular organ of pre-war Polish fascists, quoted in Polonsky, *op. cit.***

Jews were, are and will be against us, always and everywhere ... And now the question arises, how are the Poles to treat the Jews? ... We, and certainly 90 percent of Poles, have only one answer to this question: like enemies.

It was only with the aid of the local population that the killing of Polish Jewry met with such great success. Out of a pre-war population of 3.3 million Jews, only a miniscule 40,000 remained on Polish territory at the end of the war. Another 250,000 survived through escape from Poland, predominantly to the Soviet occupation area. The remainder – three million Jews – were gassed, shot, or beaten to death; or they died of hunger, exhaustion, or epidemic (see Jacob Lestchinsky, in *Crisis, Catastrophe and Survival*, p. 60).

The following quotes illustrate the cooperation that invading German forces received from the local population in Poland. In fact, Polish citizens who were neighbors and even friends of the Jews turned upon them when the Germans invaded.

3. **Summary of Jan T. Gross's *Neighbors*, Princeton University Press, 2001 – Active Polish collaboration in the killing of Jews.**

One summer day in 1941, half of the Polish town of Jedwabne murdered the other half, 1,600 men, women, and children, all but seven of the town's Jews. *Neighbors* tells their story.

This is a shocking, brutal story that has never before been told. It is the most important study of Polish-Jewish relations to be published in decades and should become a classic of Holocaust literature. Jan Gross pieces together eyewitness accounts and other evidence into an engulfing reconstruction of the horrific July day remembered well by locals but forgotten by history. His investigation reads like a detective story, and its unfolding yields wider truths about Jewish-Polish relations, the Holocaust, and human responses to occupation and totalitarianism. It is a story of surprises: The newly occupying German army did not compel the massacre, and Jedwabne's Jews and Christians had previously enjoyed cordial relations. After the war, the nearby family who saved Jedwabne's surviving Jews was derided and driven from the area. The single Jew offered mercy by the town declined it.

Most arresting is the sinking realization that Jedwabne's Jews were clubbed, drowned, gutted, and burned not by faceless Nazis, but by people whose features and names they knew well: their former schoolmates and those who sold them food, bought their milk, and chatted with them in the street.

4. [Veet Vivarto, reviewing Jan T. Gross's Neighbors \(Amazon.com\) – Post-war attitude of Poles.](#)

Having spent my childhood in Poland I attest from personal experience that the *great majority* of Poland's population is from moderately to intensely anti-Semitic. Because of my Jewish descent, already as a 6-year-old child, I have been beaten by the older Polish kids, for the crime of "having murdered Jesus Christ." In my childhood in the 1960s I have frequently heard Poles say that "Hitler was a monster, but he did one good thing: He cleaned Poland from Jews," and that "It's a shame that the war ended too soon, not allowing Hitler to finish up the job of killing ALL the Jews."

With the exceptions (to varying degrees) of the Axis allies – Hungary, Bulgaria, and parts of Romania – where the political leaders stood fast against German demands for Jewish deportations, the remainder of Eastern Europe collaborated with the Germans.

In Western Europe, Jews were more integrated into society, and their treatment of Jews was less overtly brutal. Nonetheless, Germans did meet with relative success in rounding up and deporting the Jews of several countries of Western Europe. These successes were due largely to the collaboration of certain elements of the population, such as the Dutch police force, and to the passivity of others, as was the general attitude displayed by the French. One major factor in the passivity towards sanctions against the Jews was the example of the Pope.

5. [Shira Shoenberg, Pope Pius XII and the Holocaust, Published on-line on Jewish Virtual Library – Papal inaction during the Holocaust.](#)

In the spring of 1940, the Chief Rabbi of Palestine, Isaac Herzog, asked the papal Secretary of State, Cardinal Luigi Maglione to intercede to keep Jews in Spain from being deported to Germany. He later made a similar request for Jews in Lithuania. The papacy did nothing.

Within the Pope's own church, Cardinal Theodor Innitzer of Vienna told Pius XII about Jewish deportations in 1941. In 1942, the Slovakian charge d'affaires, a position under the supervision of the Pope, reported to Rome that Slovakian Jews were being systematically deported and sent to death camps.

In October 1941, the Assistant Chief of the U.S. delegation to the Vatican, Harold Tittman, asked the Pope to condemn the atrocities. The response came that the Holy See wanted to remain "neutral," and that condemning the atrocities would have a negative influence on Catholics in German-held lands.

In late August 1942, after more than 200,000 Ukrainian Jews had been killed, Ukrainian Metropolitan Andrej Septyckyj wrote a long letter to the Pope, referring to the German government as a regime of terror and corruption, more diabolical than that of the Bolsheviks. The Pope replied by quoting verses from Psalms and advising Septyckyj to "bear adversity with serene patience."

On September 18, 1942, Monsignor Giovanni Battista Montini, the future Pope Paul VI, wrote, "The massacres of the Jews reach frightening proportions and forms." Yet, that same month when Myron Taylor, U.S. representative to the Vatican, warned the Pope that his silence was endangering his moral prestige, the Secretary of State responded on the Pope's behalf that it was impossible to verify rumors about crimes committed against the Jews.

Wladislaw Raczkwicz, president of the Polish government-in-exile, appealed to the Pope in January 1943 to publicly denounce Nazi violence. Bishop Preysing of Berlin did the same, at least twice. Pius XII refused.

Not only did the Pope's silence mean that the Vatican itself took no steps to halt the extermination; it also tied the hands of other Catholic officials.

6. **Cardinal Justinian Serédy, head of Hungary's Catholic Church, quoted in Michael Phayer, *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust, 1930-1965* (Bloomington, 2000), p. 109 – Influence of Papal silence.**

If His Holiness the Pope does nothing against Hitler, what can I do in my narrower jurisdiction? Damn it.

The Pope's silence cannot be attributed to a lack of information about Nazi atrocities. The Pope and his officials were fully aware of the nature of the Germans' activities. By their silence, these officials supported Hitler's goals.

7. **Archbishop Karol Kmetko, responding to Rabbi Shmuel Dovid Ungar's request to intervene with President Jozef Tiso, quoted in Rabbi Michael Weissmandl, *Min Ha-Metzar* [Hebrew], pp. 25-26.**

This is not merely a deportation of the Jews. There you will not die of hunger and pestilence; there you will be killed, young and old, women and children, and that will be your punishment for your killing of our Savior.

PART D: ABANDONED BY THE FREE WORLD

In addition to the part played by Germany and occupied Europe in abetting the execution of Hitler's plans, the scope of rescue operations – or rather the lack thereof – on the part of a well-informed (by 1942) free world, is quite astonishing. Throughout the years of Nazi murder, not a single joint declaration was made on the part of the Allies condemning the inhuman massacre of the Jews. The Moscow declaration of 1943 made mention of many war crimes perpetrated by the Germans, but devoted not even a single word to the terrible plight of the Jews.

In 1902, the U.S. had deemed it necessary to issue a declaration, in the form of a communication from Secretary of State John Hay to the U.S. Minister to Romania, condemning mistreatment of the Jews and stating that the U.S. government "cannot be a tacit party to such an international wrong." In contrast, although the Jews in 1942 faced a far graver fate than Romanian Jewry did in 1902, the American Senate could not bring itself to pass a 1942 bill allowing the entry of twenty thousand Jewish children from Germany. The Jewish children, as in so many other instances, were abandoned to their death. Moral standards of the West, it would appear, had taken a fateful turn for the worse.

One of the most notorious episodes of American indifference to the Jewish cause was when the *St. Louis* was turned away. The ship's Jewish refugee passengers were not permitted to disembark on American soil. Even worse was *The Struma*, whose nearly 800 passengers were refused entry to Palestine by Britain; the vast majority perished when the ship was torpedoed by a Soviet submarine off the coast of Turkey.

International indifference to the Jewish plight had already surfaced in 1938, when the Evian Conference was convened in France to discuss the plight of Jewish refugees, who had left their homelands to flee from Nazi persecution and were stymied by strict immigration quotas in the countries to which they had hoped to escape. Representatives from thirty-two nations were in attendance, but none of them – except the

Dominican Republic – agreed to accept additional immigrants. Australia, for its part, refused entry to Jews on the grounds that it had no racial problem, and it “did not wish to import one.” Thus, the Jews were barred from entering any lands where they may have found a safe haven from the Nazis.

1. **Rabbi Michael Weissmandl, *Min Ha-Metzar* – The failure of Allies to interrupt death transports.**

Germans would joke with Hungarian and Slovakian auxiliaries that the way to ensure the safety of munitions trains was to load a few Jews onto the train, and label the carriages with the words: “Transport of Jews to extermination camps.”

The reluctance of the Allies to interfere with the systematic execution of the Final Solution, despite full awareness of the inhuman crimes that were being committed, was a major contributing factor to its smooth accomplishment. Additionally, despite having the means required to bomb the relevant sites, or at least to aid the resistance efforts of willing Jews in Europe and Palestine, no help was offered. The consequences were especially grave in the case of Hungarian Jewry, of whom some 400,000 were deported to Poland in a matter of weeks between May and July 1944.

2. **Conclusion of Rabbi Weissmandl's impassioned and agonized plea for help, which was sent together with intricate details of deportations and of the extermination facilities, quoted in Lucy S. Dawidowicz, ed., *A Holocaust Reader*, p. 321 (New York, 1976).**

Now we ask: How can you eat, sleep, live? How guilty will you feel in your hearts if you fail to move heaven and earth to help us in the only ways that are available to our own people and as quickly as possible? ... For God's sake, do something now and quickly.

In 1944, while the gas chambers of Auschwitz were murdering between 70,000-80,000 Hungarian Jews a week, the bombings would certainly have slowed the Nazi killings. Yet, after some debate in London and Washington, nothing was done.

3. **U.S. Senator George McGovern, former pilot of B-24 Liberator in December 1944; quoted in *Washington Post*, January 30, 2005 – Missed Opportunity.**

There is no question we should have attempted ... to go after Auschwitz. There was a pretty good chance we could have blasted those rail lines off the face of the Earth, which would have interrupted the flow of people to those death chambers, and we had a pretty good chance of knocking out those gas ovens.

There were individuals during this era, both Jewish and non-Jewish, who did attempt to save Jews from the Nazi killing machine. Some of these individuals will be discussed in the second Morasha class on the Holocaust. But it is important to note that the reaction of almost all global powers during this era was one of indifference to the plight of European Jewry.

PART E: THE HORROR OF THE HOLOCAUST

The scale of the devastation that took place during the Holocaust is unprecedented in history. Its barbarity seems to us impossible, its cruelty totally inhuman. The ideology of Nazi extermination was clear: the Jews, quite simply, were no longer considered human beings. They were portrayed – at times visually, as in the propaganda film *Der Ewige Jude*, or in various posters that were displayed across occupied Europe – as vermin, disease-carrying rodents that must be exterminated for the general good of humanity. The treatment of Jews by the Nazi occupiers, particularly in the later phases of the war, entirely corresponded to this

definition. Even in their internal communiques, the Nazis referred to their Jewish victims with terminology that utterly dehumanized them, essentially denying their status as human beings.

1. **Letter sent by Willy Just to Walter Rauff on June 5, 1942, describing the “special vans” of Chelmno; published in Eugen Kogon, Hermann Langbein, and Adalbert Rückerl, *Nazi Mass Murder, and translated from the German by Mary Scott and Caroline Lloyd-Morris, Yale University (1993), Appendix 2, pp. 228-235 – “Processing the load.”***

Greater protection is needed for the lighting system. The grille should cover the lamps high enough up to make it impossible to break the bulb. It seems that these lamps are hardly ever turned on, so the users have suggested that they could be done away with. Experience shows, however, that when the back door is closed and it gets dark inside, the load pushes hard against the door. The reason for this is that when it becomes dark inside, the load rushes toward what little light remains. This hampers the locking of the door. It has also been noticed that the noise provoked by the locking of the door is linked to the fear aroused by the darkness. It is therefore expedient to keep the lights on before the operation and during the first few minutes of its duration. Lighting is also useful for night work and for the cleaning of the interior of the van.

The report mentions that since December 1941, 97,000 “pieces” had been processed.

The inhuman treatment of the Jews was prominent in the roundups of Eastern Europe. The horrendous scenes replayed themselves in countless towns. Jewish men, women and children would be rounded up en masse and shipped off to unknown destinations – never to be heard from again. Searches would be conducted to locate any who were trying to evade capture. Through it all, the Germans’ brutality was plainly evident.

2. **Mordechai Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, *Diary entry of February 13, 1943, in Dapim Min Hadleka (Pages from the Conflagration) (Tel Aviv, 1947), p. 24 – Typical scene of roundup of European Jews by the Nazis.***

The Germans have finished the roundup. Only now can we see it in its entire horror. Scores of people who have lost their minds are running about the streets calling their dear ones – they run, then they drop to the pavements. From various hiding places dead babies are brought out. They had begun to cry while the Germans were staging the round-up, and were smothered in order to silence them. There is the sound of weeping from all sides. The police are making the rounds of cellars and attics and removing the dead bodies. The dwellings of those who have been taken away for extermination are being sealed by the police. Large heaps of corpses lie on the cemetery grounds. They are being buried in mass graves.

Germans, some of them high-ranking officials who were invited to view the killings, were often deeply shocked at the spectacle.

3. **Diary of SS Dr. Johann Paul Kremer, 1942 , September 2, 1942.**

I attended a special *Aktion* for the first time, outdoors, at three o’clock in the morning. In comparison, Dante’s Inferno seems almost a comedy to me. It is not for nothing that Auschwitz is known as an annihilation camp!

Other testimonies can be too hard to even imagine.

4. **Raul Hilberg, Documents of Destruction (Chicago: 1973), pp. 50-51 – Testimony of S. Szmaglewska, a Polish guard at Auschwitz during the summer of 1944, at the Nuremberg Trials.**

When the extermination of the Jews in the gas chambers was at its height, orders were issued that children were to be thrown straight into the crematorium furnaces, or into a pit near the crematorium, without being gassed first ... They threw them in alive. Their screams could be heard at the camp.

The relentlessness with which the Nazis pursued their Final Solution to the Jewish problem was astounding. It far surpassed any previously known concepts of crusades, pogroms and other mass attacks against the Jews.

5. **Albert Speer (the only Nazi in Nuremberg to admit and express regret for his crimes), quoted in Hans Knight, “Conversation with Albert Speer,” The Sunday Bulletin/Discoverer, July 21, 1977, p. 9 – Unprecedented in history.**

Killing a people simply because you don't like the people is something you can't compare with anything in history. I don't have any example of it.

PART F. THE HOLOCAUST IN THE CONTEXT OF JEWISH HISTORY

We have seen that the extent of persecution during the Holocaust may have been unparalleled in Jewish history, and that the degree of hatred and/or apathy demonstrated by the Nazis, the other European nations, and the entire world was beyond the natural. Nevertheless, it is important not to totally separate the Holocaust from our understanding of the rest of Jewish history. While the Holocaust was a particularly horrific chapter of Jewish history, it is also part of a long series of persecutions and evil decrees that have befallen the Jews throughout the generations. So, while we must understand the extraordinary nature of the Holocaust on the one hand, we must also understand its place in the annals of history.

1. **“Weep for what Amalek Has Done Unto You: Lamentation and Memory of the Holocaust in our Generation” by Rabbi Moshe Lichtenstein, translated by Kaeren Fish – The Holocaust was not a one-time event; rather, it was part of the history of generations of Jewish suffering.**

To the extent that this is indeed the case, there is another conclusion that must be drawn: the Holocaust should not be regarded as a one-time event that deviates from the usual boundaries of Jewish history. Rather, it should be placed within the continuum of Jewish history, with all the suffering that has accumulated throughout the generations. Indeed, it is said of Rav Yitzhak Hutner ז”ל [of blessed memory], that he refused to use the term “the Holocaust (*Shoah*),” insisting instead on referring to “the decrees (*gezeirot*) of 5699-5705,” since he did not regard the Holocaust as an aberration that lay outside the framework of Jewish history, but rather saw it as a link in the chain of Jewish history and suffering.

In the summer of 1977, newly elected Prime Minister Menachem Begin paid a visit to the United States and visited my grandfather and teacher, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. In the course of their conversation, the Rav proposed to the Prime Minister that Yom ha-Shoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day) in Israel be annulled as a separate day of mourning and be included, instead, within the framework of Tisha B'Av, as is our custom concerning the martyrs of the Crusaders' attacks upon the Jewish communities of the Rhineland. In support of his suggestion, he quoted from one of the *Kinot* (dirges said on Tisha B'Av) that we recite for the victims of the Crusades (*Mi Yiten Rosh Mayim*): “No other time of brokenness and burning should be added [in addition to Tisha B'Av]; rather, all matters of communal mourning should be included in a single day of mourning.”

KEY THEMES OF SECTION II:

- ⌘ Only a bizarre combination of many factors made the Holocaust possible, on such a horrific scale and magnitude. The first of these is the totally irrational hatred of the Jews by Hitler and the Nazi party, such that they were even prepared to divert essential supplies and manpower to ensure the destruction of the Jews, at the expense of the war effort. Yet, the Final Solution of Nazi Germany to the “Jewish Problem” could not have met with such success without the addition of several additional factors: the collaboration of governments and citizens of Europe, the passivity of the Church and of the free world, the lack of organized Jewish resistance, and so on.
- ⌘ In addition, the actual circumstances of the Holocaust defy human imagination. The total annihilation of a people, in cold blood, on such an incredible scale, is totally unheard of in human history. What took place goes beyond the boundaries of the normal and the natural.

POSTSCRIPT. THE DIFFICULTY OF COMING TO TERMS

An elderly couple was sitting here in Jerusalem at a café table, having coffee and cake. A cat jumped up from the floor and began nibbling at the cake. The woman, taken by surprise, quickly pushed the cat off the table. From the next table a woman tourist who had observed all this leaned over and – speaking English in a very Germanic accent – smilingly said to this woman: “Pardon me for intruding, but one should have a little pity for a cat.”

*The Israeli woman, a survivor of the Holocaust, replied in perfect German: “Here in this country, we have pity for human beings ...” (Rabbi Emanuel Feldman, *Tales Out of Jerusalem*, Feldheim Publishers.)*

CLASS SUMMARY:

WHAT WERE THE FORMS OF PERSECUTION INFLICTED ON THE JEWS OF GERMANY BEFORE THE WAR?

The climate in prewar Germany was one of steadily escalating anti-Semitism and harassment. Numerous anti-Semitic laws were passed in the German legislature, including statutes that barred Jews from various professions and public positions, as well as laws that prohibited relationships between Jews and non-Jews. Jews were regularly harassed and their businesses boycotted.

WHAT HAPPENED TO JEWS IN THE COUNTRIES INVADED BY THE GERMANS?

As the Nazis marched through Europe, their tactics changed, but their aim remained a constant throughout the war: to annihilate the entire Jewish people. In many of the places they occupied, the Jews were imprisoned in ghettos, tiny confined areas where they suffered from severe overcrowding and unsanitary conditions, poor nourishment, and forced labor. In many other places, the Nazis dispatched killing squads that marched into town after town, rounded up the entire Jewish populace, and massacred them en masse.

WHAT HAPPENED TO JEWS AFTER THEY WERE TAKEN PRISONER BY THE NAZIS?

In order to kill as many victims as possible and to exploit them for forced labor, the Nazis established concentration camps where millions of victims were gassed to death and their bodies cremated. The Jews from ghettos or from occupied camps were deceived into thinking they were merely being resettled; they were transported to these camps on cattle cars crammed with passengers. Their possessions were confiscated, and they were either sent immediately to their deaths or else sent to perform slave labor. Many more Jews perished as a result of the sadistic, brutal treatment they underwent in these camps. Even as the war drew to an end and the Nazi defeat was imminent, they made a concerted effort to kill as many Jews as possible, taking their prisoners on brutal “death marches,” where many of them perished. Holocaust survivors were often left bereft of their families, alone in the world, sickened and impoverished, and struggling to survive when everything they had every known was gone.

IN WHAT WAY WERE THE EVENTS OF THE HOLOCAUST UNPRECEDENTED AND UNNATURAL?

The scope and brutality of the Nazis’ persecution of the Jews were beyond anything in the world’s frame of reference. The death toll of six million Jews speaks for itself, and the countless forms of unimaginable

torment that the Nazis imposed upon their Jewish victims bespeak a terrible, inhuman level of barbarity that showed mercy for no man, woman, or child.

Furthermore, the obsessive nature of the Nazis' hatred is astonishing. Historical records indicate that Hitler viewed the world war as primarily a struggle to rid the world of the Jews. He considered the Jews, not the Allies, to be his true enemies, and even on his deathbed, he enjoined his compatriots to continue the struggle against them. In his ruthless persecution, he enjoyed the support (whether active or tacit) of his fellow Germans, of the countries that he conquered, and even of his enemies, who failed to do much to put an end to the mass torture and murder which was taking place.

HOW DID THE WORLD RESPOND (OR NOT)?

The German people, for the most part, were apathetic bystanders at best, or outright accomplices. The world, in the main, was silent about the killing of millions of Jews. The Allies had the knowledge and ability to bomb the train tracks leading to Auschwitz and the crematoria, but did not do so. With the exception of Bulgaria and Denmark, the European countries handed over their Jewish citizens to the Germans, for no financial or political gain.

There were many righteous gentiles who risked their lives to save Jews, a subject that we discuss in the second Morasha shiur on the Holocaust History. These righteous people were not concerned about what the Nazis would do to them if they were to be discovered. They simply knew intuitively that what was being done to the Jews was wrong. Many of these righteous gentiles have been honored posthumously, and have been memorialized in film, books, street names, and schools. There are still many more righteous gentiles whose identity and courage will never be known.

See Appendix: Timeline of the Holocaust (in separate document)

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDED READING & SOURCES

The following is a very brief list of recommended books and movies on the Holocaust.

Raul Hilberg, *Documents of Destruction* (Chicago, 1973)

Saul Friedlander, *The Years of Extermination* (Harper Collins, NY, 2006)

Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors* (Princeton, 2001)

Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (Vintage, 1997)

Yaffa Eliach, *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust* (Vintage, 1988)

Esther Farbstein, *Hidden in Thunder* (Feldheim, 2007)

Movies:

The Pianist

Shoah

Schindler's List