

Learning from the Holocaust

VISITING KRAKOW and AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU



Holocaust Education Trust Ireland

Learning from the past - lessons for today

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The Third Reich

– A brief overview

The Third Reich is the term used to describe the rule of the Nazi Party in Germany from 1933 to 1945.

On coming to power, leading Nazis immediately set about removing all challenges to Hitler's authority throughout Germany. The regime combined the offices of the president and the chancellor, which became united in the person of Adolf Hitler as Führer or undisputed leader. Far from being a well-oiled super-state, guaranteeing to make everything run in place and on time, the Third Reich was a confusion of competing authorities and private empires that strove for the dictator's favour.

The appointment of various personalities contributed to the development and power of the Reich. Reinhard Heydrich, Adolf Eichmann, Heinrich Himmler and others are names that crop up constantly concerning the SS. Himmler had reformed Hitler's Personal Headquarters Guard of 1922/23, and his appointment as Reich SS Leader in January 1929 saw the SS grow from a few hundred to over 209,000 in 1933. The SS revolved around an absolute and unswerving loyalty to Hitler. Its power rested on three main strands: (1) monopoly of the police, which became the main instrument of SS Nazi terror, implementing the Nazi policy of genocide; (2) monopoly of the security service and intelligence gathering; and (3) responsibility for the organisation and running of the concentration camp system.

As the Nazis swept across Europe their power appeared unchallengeable. The world powers had turned a blind eye in 1938 to both the Nazi annexation of Austria (the Anschluss) and their take-over of the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia. Communists, other political dissidents, teachers and priests were targets of the SS. Jews and opponents of the Nazis were arrested and murdered. The international policy of appeasement gave the Nazis the sense that they could act with impunity. They believed they had the right to invade and seize land for the expansion of the Reich and creation of Lebensraum (living space). The result was the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939 and the beginning of the World War II. Across Europe, millions of people's lives were destroyed. In Poland, approximately two million Poles were 'removed' as they were in the way of Nazi expansion plans, as well as the usual victims: Jews, communists, trade unionists, priests, teachers and others.

The influence of the Third Reich penetrated all areas of people's lives in Germany: the rich, the poor, the middle class, farmers, labourers, scientists, women and youth groups – all were encouraged to subscribe to the policies of the Nazi Party, and most did, willingly.

The SS utilised the personal possessions of the prisoners and victims to finance the concentration camp system. Human hair was woven into rough fabric and sold along with shoes, clothing and household items in German markets for low prices. Jewellery and art were hoarded. Gold teeth were melted down to be stored as ingots and used as currency.

Letter to Mirele

Dear Mirele,

I can't believe I have one night to stuff a lifetime of love into this letter.

Tomorrow morning – if 4am can be called morning, I am giving you up. I am taking you, Mirele, to the back entrance of dear, brave Hermann's grocery and the child rescuers will be waiting there for you and the thirty-two other children under the age of three. They'll inject you with a sedative so you won't cry and then they'll slip off in the predawn with you – my life, my love, out of this barbaric country to safety.

We put it off, Mirele. We didn't want to believe we would have to give up our child, probably to never see her again. But this is the last child rescue. After this there will be none left to rescue, because tomorrow, our informers tell us, is the last big round-up. Tomorrow they come for men, women and children. And I have been convinced by these words, spoken by our trusted informer, Hermann, the brave gentile doctor. "Any child they have taken away either dies immediately or dies on the way to the death camp."

The word death three times in one sentence! We were the last ones to be convinced to give up our child. He said finally, with the deepest sadness in every exhausted wrinkle in his face. "I cannot force you. But if you keep her with you, she will be dead in a month. They have no use for babies, she cannot work for them. If you want to give her to us, bring her to the back entrance of my grocery at 4am. No belongings, whatever food you have. Goodbye."

Mirele, do you see why I have to give you up? He said no belongings, but I will beg, I plead that this letter will be allowed to go, sewn into your undershirt. And then, I will pray to G-d that the letter stays with you until you are old enough to read it. You must know that we love you. You must know why you are alone, without parents. Not because they didn't love you... but because they did!

It's eerie to think that by the time you read this I will probably be dead. That's what Hermann says is going on. People either die immediately or on the way or after a week or two of forced labour and no food. But I won't have lived in vain, Mirele, if I know that I brought you into the world and you will live and survive and grow big and strong and you will be happy. You can be happy, Mirele, because we loved you.

What makes the difference in the lives of adults, it seems, is if they had secure childhoods. Secure with lots of love and acceptance and needs fulfilled and predictable routine and the like. You've had that up to this minute. You'll have it up till 4am. But then you won't. Who knows who will end up taking care of you? Some family who will take you in for the money Hermann will pay them? They will surely be kinder to their own than to you.

Here is where pain mixes with rage! I rage at the animals who are making it possible for you to cry and I won't be there to comfort you.

But you will have this letter, and this letter will make you feel secure, if G-d answers my prayers. You have us, Mirele, even though you don't see us, we are with you. We're watching you and praying for you. Every time you have troubles we are pounding on the door to G-d's very throne-room, insisting on an audience and demanding mercy for our Mirele down on earth, alone without her parents. And G-d will listen to us. We won't leave Him alone until He agrees that you deserve health, love and happiness.

Mirele, you'll wonder what your first two years were like. You'll wish you could remember. Let me remember for you right now, tenderly, on this piece of paper.

You like hot cereal in the morning, with lots of milk and sugar. Except that there is no milk and sugar now, none in the whole city. But I make your cereal anyway and you eat it with big smiles between every bite. Then you come ready for your nap, so I rock you, after putting the rocker where the sunlight will fall on it. I rock you until you fall asleep and then I put you in to my bed. You sleep well there, you like my smell. What will you smell tomorrow night? Surely nobody will rock you tomorrow, not even in the shade? Oh G-d, I cannot do it! I will do it. For you, Mirele, so you will have at least a hope for life.

Mirele, do me a favour, after you've grown, after this dirty nightmarish war is over...I know there will be those who underplay the tragedies going on here every day. They will say, "A war is a war. It was just a war." Mirele, tell them about this agony! Tell them how you were secure in my arms rocking you to sleep in the sunlight. Tell them how your father ran, one night, a year ago, to ease your pain, Mirele. And now the three of us are being torn apart. "Just a war" ...?! Tell them, Mirele, that all wars in the world don't add up to the agony in my heart right now as I write this.

G-d it's 2 am already! Only two more hours with my love, my baby, my life, my Mirele. I'm going to hold you now, Mirele for two hours. Your father and I are going to wake you, feed you and tell you over and over how much we love you. You're barely two years old, but maybe, if G-d is good, maybe, you'll remember it and maybe you'll keep this letter until you're old enough to read it.

There will be bad times for you, Mirele, I know. But just think about me holding you, rocking you to sleep in the sunlight. Keep that sunlight in your heart always.

I love you. Your father loves you. May G-d help us all.

Mama