Children of the Holocaust

Learning from the past ~ lessons for today

The Holocaust Memorial Day Committee in association with the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, Dublin City Council, Dublin Maccabi Charitable Trust and the Jewish Representative Council of Ireland
Programme

- **Introductory remarks**, Yanky Fachler
- **Words of welcome**, Lord Mayor of Dublin, Cllr Catherine Byrne
- **The Stockholm Declaration**, read by the Swedish Ambassador to Ireland, HE Mr Nils Daag
- **Children of the Holocaust**, read by Michael McDowell TD, Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform
- **Excerpt from President Katsav’s address in Auschwitz 2005**, read by the Israeli Ambassador to Ireland, HE Mr Daniel Megiddo
- **Keynote address**, Mary Hanafin TD, Minister for Education & Science
- **Choral interlude**
- **Children with disabilities**, read by Fergus Finlay, Chief Executive of Barnardos
- **The plight of black and ethnic children**, read by Clement Esebamen
- **Nicholas Winton**, read by Colm O’Gorman
- **A child of the Holocaust**, by survivor, Geoffrey Phillips
- **Kindertransports and Millisle**, read by Ronnie Appleton QC
- **Terezin**, read by John Bowman
- **A child of the Holocaust**, by survivor, Suzi Diamond
- **A child of the Holocaust**, by survivor, Zoltan Zinn-Collis
- **The Gas Chambers**, read by Ingrid Craigie
- **Musical interlude**
- **Reading** by Senator Mary O’Rourke, Leader of Seanad Éireann
- **Reading** by John Fitzgerald, Dublin City Manager
- **A child of the Holocaust**, by survivor, Tomi Reichental
- **Choral interlude**
- **Anne Frank**, read by Mary Banotti, Holocaust Educational Trust
- **The Jews of Denmark**, read by Ib Jorgensen
- **Simon Wiesenthal**, read by Philip Watt, National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism
- **Liberation**, read by Dorothy Cotter
- **Go Home from this place...** read by Mrs Justice Catherine McGuinness
- **Minute’s silence**
- **Candle-lighting ceremony**
- **El maleh rachamin**, Prayer for the Repose of the Souls of the Departed, Cantor Alwyn Shulman
- **Closing remarks**, Yanky Fachler
Summary of the Declaration of the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust

Issued in January 2000, on the 55th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1945 and endorsed by 44 countries, including Ireland.

We, the governments attending the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust, recognise that the Holocaust was a tragically defining episode of the 20th Century, a crisis for European civilisation and a universal catastrophe for humanity. In declaring that the Holocaust fundamentally challenged the foundations of civilisation, we share a commitment to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust, and to honour those who stood against it. The horrors that engulfed the Jewish people and other victims of the Nazis must forever be seared in our collective memory. With humanity still scarred by genocide, anti-semitism, ethnic cleansing, racism, xenophobia and other expressions of hatred and discrimination, we share a solemn responsibility to fight against these evils. Together with our European partners and the wider international community, we share a commitment to remember all the victims who perished, to respect the survivors still with us, and to reaffirm humanity’s common aspiration for a democratic and tolerant society, free of the evils of prejudice and other forms of bigotry.

Holocaust Memorial Day

Mission Statement

The Holocaust Memorial Day commemoration is designed to cherish the memory of all of the victims of the Nazi Holocaust. A candle-lighting ceremony is an integral part of the commemoration at which six candles are always lit for the six million Jews who perished, as well as candles for all of the other victims. The commemoration serves as a constant reminder of the dangers of racism and intolerance and provides lessons from the past that are relevant today.
Excerpts from the address by the Taoiseach, Mr Bertie Ahern TD, at the Holocaust Memorial Day ceremony, January 2005

This evening, we remember the many thousands of individuals – men, women and children – who perished under a regime that so callously conceived The Final Solution. Holocaust Memorial Day is a reminder both for us and for future generations, of what can happen when prejudice, bigotry and racial supremacy go unchecked and develop into blind hatred.

Nobody really knew, believed or could conceive however of the extent of the horror until they were confronted with the appalling evidence provided by those fortunate enough to survive.

Our purpose this evening is to sustain a mindful vigilance as the horrific experience of Auschwitz-Birkenau fades from living memory. That mindful vigilance must have as its purpose the determination that such madness must never again be unleashed.

The message must go out loud and clear: there can be no place for racism in Ireland. Occasions such as this evening powerfully reinforce that message. They strengthen our resolve to work together to build inclusive communities which embrace diversity.

Message from the Lord Mayor of Dublin

Dublin is proud to be associated with this national annual event and I am particularly honoured to participate in this important occasion.

Holocaust Memorial Day is commemorated in Ireland on the Sunday nearest to 27th January, the date of the liberation of Auschwitz in 1945. The commemoration has been permanently established in the national calendar making it an important date not just for Dublin but for the whole country.

Dublin is proud of its association with Ireland’s Jewish community, which dates back more than 150 years. Although the numbers of the Jewish community may have diminished, we are mindful of the contribution Jews have made to Ireland in the professions, business, the arts, academia and in all walks of life.

It is important that Dublin City Council continues its tradition of hosting the Holocaust Memorial Day commemoration. I would like to commend the committee and everyone who has contributed to this important occasion.

Councillor Catherine Byrne  
Lord Mayor of Dublin

Illicit letter from Aloisie Páclová on a shoe lining, Terezín.
Excerpts of address by the President of the State of Israel, Mr. Moshe Katsav, in Auschwitz, January 2005, to mark the 60th Anniversary of the Liberation

The mind of man refuses to grasp the great horror, which took place inside these fences. Auschwitz-Birkenau is the most horrendous crime scene in the history of humanity. Birkenau is the largest graveyard of the Jewish people. Here we are witness to the remnants of the gas chambers and the crematoria. We see the barracks, the fences, the guard towers, the final station of the railway tracks, which brought the condemned from the far corners of Europe to the burning ovens. It seems as if we can still hear the dead crying out.

Beyond all differences of opinion, we are united in our memory of the horror and we share the moral lesson. Humanity must pass on the awareness, the knowledge, the uniqueness and the lessons of the Holocaust from one generation to another.

Where was the world?
Children of the Ghetto – a cursed generation that played with corpses and
death, that knew no laughter and no joy – children who were born into
darkness and terror and fright; children who saw no sun.

David Wdowinsky

People started to talk about the ghetto. I had no idea what it meant.
I had never even heard the word. After a few weeks it became clear.

Liliana age 13

Dear Diary,

We’re here five days, but word of honour it seems like five years. I don’t
even know where to begin writing, because so many awful things have
happened since I last wrote in you. First, the fence was finished and
nobody can go out or come in…From today on, dear diary, we’re not in a
ghetto but a ghetto camp, and on every house they’ve posted a notice
which tells exactly what we’re allowed to do…Actually, everything is
forbidden, but the most awful thing is that the punishment for everything
is death. It doesn’t actually say that this punishment also applies to
children, but I think it does apply to us too.

Eva age 13

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Eva age 13

Fear

Today the ghetto knows a different fear,
Close in its grip, Death wields an icy scythe.
An evil sickness spreads a terror in its wake,
The victims of its shadow, weep and writhe.

Today a father’s heartbeat tells his fright
And mothers bend their heads into their hands.
Now children choke and die with typhus here,
A bitter tax is taken from their hands.

My heart still beats inside my breast
While friends depart for other worlds.
Perhaps it’s better, – who can say? –
watching this, to die today?

No, no, my God, we want to live!
Not watch our members melt away.
We want to have a better world,
We want to work – we must not die!

Eva Pickova age 12, Nymburk
Dear Diary,

Today an order was issued that from now on Jews have to wear a yellow star-shaped patch. The order tells exactly how big the star patch must be sewn on every outer garment, jacket, or coat... I met some yellow starred people. They were so gloomy, walking with their heads lowered.

Anna (Germany-Holland) age 13

We got sympathetic looks from people on their way to work. You could see by their faces how sorry they were they couldn't offer us a lift: the gaudy yellow star spoke for itself.

I am a Jew

I am a Jew and will be a Jew forever.
Even if I should die from hunger, never will I submit.
I will always fight for my people, on my honour.
I will never be ashamed of them, I give my word.

I am proud of my people, how dignified they are.
Even though I am suppressed, I will always come back to life.

Franta Bass
The Holocaust did not start with the gas chambers and the crematoria. It started with whispers and taunts, with daubings and abuse...


The girl for whom permission was sought to take refuge in Ireland, perished in the Holocaust after the Nazis invaded Russia in 1941. She was murdered along with her three sisters, young brother, their widowed mother and grandmother.
The Kindertransports

The Kindertransport scheme was a unique operation that enabled 10,000 unaccompanied children from Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia to escape the Nazi horror in the months before the outbreak of the war. The British Government approved the operation following the atrocities of Kristallnacht on 9 November 1938 when Jewish homes, synagogues, businesses and shops all over Germany were smashed, looted and burned. Children, aged from a few months to 17, were permitted entry to Britain on special block visas. Funds were raised, guarantors were found. The whole operation was handled by a small and dedicated team of volunteers who worked together – Jews, Christians and especially, Quakers.

The Kindertransport children arriving in Britain were fostered by Jewish, and some non-Jewish families. Others were taken in by boarding schools, farms, castles, holiday camps – anywhere they were accepted. Most of the Kindertransport children never saw their parents or families again.

Millisle Farm in County Down, Northern Ireland

The small Jewish community of Belfast responded generously to the needs of the young refugees who ended up in Northern Ireland. A Refugee Aid Committee raised funds from Jewish communities in Belfast, Dublin and Britain, and a Joint Christian Churches Committee was set up. In May 1939, the committee leased a derelict 70-acre farm in County Down, belonging to Lawrence Gorman. The lease was signed by Barney Hurwitz, president of the Belfast Hebrew Congregation, over a drink at Mooney’s bar in Belfast’s Cornmarket.

The Refugee Settlement Farm, or ‘the Farm’, as it was called, was situated close to the village of Millisle, County Down, on the beautiful Ards Peninsula, about 20 miles from Belfast. Up to 80 people, including the children, lived and worked on the Farm at any one time. From the first arrivals in May/June 1938, to its closure in 1948, over 300 adults and children passed through Millisle. The refugee children under the age of fourteen attended the local school, learned the language, and worked on the farm. Many continued on to secondary schools, and some joined the British Army.

Several local people were employed to help the refugee adults and children who were mostly from an urban background. Many of the young refugees were alone, most were emotionally scarred, and all were displaced. The support and assistance of the adult refugees and the locals were crucial to welding this disparate group of young people into a thriving, working farming community where many remained until it closed three years after the end of the war.

Home

I look, I look
Into the wide world,
Into the wide, distant world.
I look to the southeast
I look. I look toward my home.
I look toward my home
The city where I was born.
City, my city,
I will gladly return to you.

Franz B
Nicholas Winton

30-year-old London stockbroker, Nicholas Winton, was due to take a skiing holiday in Switzerland in late 1938, but travelled instead to visit a friend who worked in the British Embassy in Prague. Months earlier, Hitler had marched into the Sudetenland, and Prague was filled with Jewish and other refugees. Winton met some British people working in newly erected refugee camps, and volunteered to lend a hand.

Alarmed that nobody was doing anything for the children, Winton decided to arrange for some of them to seek sanctuary in England. Rumours of his activities spread, and desperate parents flocked to his improvised office in the dining room of his Prague hotel. After establishing the Czech Kindertransport programme, Winton returned to London in early 1939 to complete arrangements at the British end.

Working from home, Winton created the “British Committee for Refugees, Czechoslovakia, Children’s Section”. The committee consisted of Winton and his secretary. After negotiating with the Home Office, Winton found a foster parent and a £50 guarantee for each child. He also found funds to pay for the transports when some parents could not afford them.

In the months before the outbreak of war, Winton arranged for eight Kindertransport trains to bring 669 children to safety in England. Winton met each transport at Liverpool Street station, making sure that each tagged child was collected by a foster parent. Tragically, a ninth train carrying 250 children never left Prague station. It was due to leave on 3 September 1939, the day the Second World War began. Not a single child on board was ever seen again.

Winton quietly folded up his organisation, and joined the RAF. After the war, he joined the International Refugee Organisation which was part of the United Nations. Later, he turned his energies to charity work with the elderly. For 50 years, no one – including Winton’s wife Grete, knew about his pre-war exploits. It was only when she came across an old leather briefcase full of lists of the children and letters from their parents, that the story began to unfold.

Since then, Winton has been reunited with hundreds of the “Winton children”. In 1983, he was awarded an MBE for his charitable work, in 1998 he was awarded the Freedom of the City of Prague, and in 2002, he received a knighthood from Queen Elizabeth II.

We can understand Winton’s motives from a letter he wrote in 1939: “There is a difference between passive goodness and active goodness. The latter is, in my opinion, the giving of one’s time and energy in the alleviation of pain and suffering. It entails going out, finding and helping those who are suffering and in danger and not merely in leading an exemplary life, in a purely passive way of doing no wrong.”
Children of the Holocaust in Ireland

Geoffrey Phillips

Geoffrey Phillips (originally Gunther Philipps) was born in Wanne-eckel, Germany in 1925. In December 1938, along with thousands of other German children, he was sent away to Britain on the kindertransports. He didn’t know where he was going. He had a small suitcase as well as another small bag with provisions, and a ticket to a foreign land. He was thirteen years old.

We heard that our synagogue had been set on fire by squads of Hitler youth and that the same thing was happening all over the country. Before we had recovered from the shock of this terrible news, there was a knock on the door. Two plain-clothes policemen asked for my father, told him to pack a change of clothes, and took him away. We heard afterwards that my father had been taken into a concentration camp. A cousin of my father’s was the welfare officer of the Jewish community in a neighbouring town. From her we discovered that Britain was prepared to take in a limited number of young Jewish children. Our cousin urged my mother to register me for the transport.

I am here today, I never saw my parents again.

Zoltan Zinn Collis

Thinks he was born 1st August 1940 though not certain, in Kazmarok in Slovakia but maybe that is where the birth was registered. Found with his sister Edith in Bergen-Belsen by Dr. Bob Collis who brought them to Ireland and later adopted them. Zoltan married and settled in Ireland.

I was never a child. Normal children have fun, they run around, get into trouble, fall down, get picked up, get kissed better, then run around some more. But I was never a child. For when I was a child in years, my home was Belsen. The games I played, I played around 20,000 rotting corpses waiting to be buried, but with no one to bury them.

Oh yes, I was a child in years. I slept in one of the flea and lice infested trestle beds which was also part of my home.

When Belsen was liberated, I did not know what liberated was, other than that it was good. But you could not eat it, or drink it, it did not make a new coat. It did not stop the fleas from itching. But it was a good thing.

On the very day of liberation, the 15th of April 1945, my mother died. I wonder what her name was. She had black hair. Can you grieve for someone you do not know? She was my mother, but I did not know her. Her hair was black.

A few years ago, I went back to Belsen with Suzi. For her mother had died there too. It was a bit odd. Neither of us had ever been back. I think that we were both thinking we would have to mind the other. We went to one of the mass graves, which is about all that is left of Belsen. We placed a pebble on the grave, and tried to light a candle. Then we looked at each other. What do you say? “How are you, Ma?”

What was her name my mother with the black hair? In another of those pits lies my brother, maybe my baby sister. Perhaps they are in the same pit. The pits are very big, there would be plenty of room for the two little ones. What were their names?

Now, however, in front of every theatre is posted: “By order of the Germans, entrance to Jews in forbidden” Even so I went to see the film “Jew Suss”. What I saw there made my blood boil. I was red in the face when I came out. I realised there, the wicked objectives of these evil people – how they want to inject the poison of anti-Semitism into the blood of gentiles.

Moshe age 15
Tomi Reichental

Born 1935 in Piestany, Slovakia. Captured and sent to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in 1944 when he was nine years old. Tomi survived along with his mother, aunt and brother. Thirty five members of his family perished. He has lived in Ireland since 1960.

I could not play like a normal child, we didn’t laugh and we didn’t cry. If you stepped out of line at all, you could be beaten up and even beaten to death. I saw it with my own eyes.

Suzi & Terry Samuels

Born in Debrecin, Hungary, Suzi and her brother Tibor Molnar (Suzi and Terry Samuels) survived Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. The rest of their family perished. They were brought to Ireland by Dr Bob Collis in 1946 and adopted by an Irish Jewish family. Suzi has two adult children and lives in Dublin. Terry now lives in London.

I remember the long, oblong-shaped carriage. My mother went over to one of the corners; there were no seats, only wooden floors, and the three of us huddled together. An old lady sat diagonally opposite us with a shawl and she was coughing and coughing, driving everyone mad. All the others were moaning and groaning and she was coughing. Eventually she stopped and I thought great, she’s stopped coughing at last. When it was time to get off the train, I asked my mother why the old lady who had been coughing wasn’t getting off. I didn’t realise she was dead.

I’d like to go alone

I’d like to away alone
Where there are other, nicer people,
Somewhere into the far unknown,
There, where no one kills another.

Maybe more of us,
A thousand strong,
Will reach this goal
Before too long.

Alena Synkova

Fall

Fall is here.
The leaves turn yellow on the trees,
The campfire dies out.
My thoughts are far from here,
somewhere far,
where integrity lives.

It lives in my friend.
Now I think of her.
Memories gather round me
Like falling leaves.

A. Lintova
Europe – The number of Jews annihilated by the Nazis in each European country

The white figures on black relate to the approximate number of Jews that perished in each European country between September 1939 and May 1945. The total of just over 5,750,000 does not include thousands of infants murdered by the Nazis in late 1941, before their births could be recorded. Thousands of people from the remoter villages in Poland were added to the deportation trains which left larger localities, without any record of their existence or of their fate.
The Nazi Holocaust –
A systematic programme to exterminate the Jews of Europe

- The first concentration camp, Dachau, is established to hold the prisoners arrested after the arson attack on the Reichstag parliament building in February 1933.
- May 1933 – Nazi students and militiamen light huge public bonfires in which they burn books by Jews, communists and other ‘disruptive’ influences.
- 1933 onwards – Jews are expelled from the army, the civil service, professional associations, sports and social clubs.
- 1935 – The Nuremberg Laws strip Jews of citizenship and define them by racial criteria.
- 35,000 Jewish war veterans who had won medals for bravery during WWI lose their privileges.
- 9 November 1938 – Kristallnacht (Night of Broken Glass).
- 275,000 men, women and children with disabilities die in Nazi euthanasia programmes.
- 100,000 Jews die in labour camps between 1939 and 1940.
- Following the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, SS mobile murder squads known as Einsatzgruppen murder over 2,000,000 civilians, most of them Jews.
- Some 500,000 Jews die in ghettos from starvation and disease.
- 30,000 Jewish partisans fight the Nazis in Eastern Europe.
- More than 7,000 Jews are killed in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising between 19 April and 16 May, 1943.
- 1,000,000 Jews, 70,000 Christian Poles, 23,000 Gypsies, 15,000 Soviet prisoners and thousands of others die at Auschwitz.
- Of the 300,000 Jews who go into hiding, pretend to be Aryans or acquire false identity papers, 100,000 die after capture or betrayal.
- Only one third of the nine million Jews living in Europe before 1939 survived the Holocaust.

One and a half million Jewish children were murdered by the Nazis and thousands of other children whom they considered unfit to live. Some of them were children with physical and mental disabilities; black, mixed-race and other ethnic children; Polish, Slav and Gypsy children. Children of Jehovah’s Witnesses and other Christian denominations who resisted the Nazis were destroyed along with children of political opponents. The Nazis particularly targeted the children in an attempt to destroy the future of all of these groups of people.
On 9 September 1941, the parliament of “independent” Slovakia, a Nazi puppet regime, ratified the Jewish Codex that stripped Slovakia’s Jews of their civil rights. The government press boasted that the Codex was even more severe than the Nazis’ Nuremburg Laws. The expulsion of Slovakia’s Jews to the death camps began in March 1942. The fascist Slovak leaders were so impatient to be rid of the Jews that they paid the Nazis DM 500 for every Jew that the Nazis deported. Slovakia was the only Nazi satellite regime that paid cash to expedite the expulsion of its Jews.

The Long Awaited Showers

After a gruelling seven days travel in cattle trucks under indescribable sanitary conditions, the train stopped as it did once a day every day to re-supply with water and food and to empty the barrel which stood in the middle of the carriage that was used for our bodily needs.

But this time the door opened with a crash. It was night time and we were greeted with loud shouting “schnell, schnell heraus” (quickly, quickly, out), dogs barking and beams of light shining from every direction. People were jumping to the station platform from the carriages, everybody was panic stricken. It is November 1944. It is raining and freezing.

Under terrifying pushing from the SS, we marched in a military fashion through the mud and pouring rain. My family consisted of my mother Judit, brother Miki, aunt Margo, cousin Eva, my grandmother Rosaline and myself. We huddled closely together so that we wouldn’t get separated. The march lasted about two hours. We were constantly being rushed, threatened, dogs were barking on each side of us.
We were absolutely drenched, tired, and exhausted when we finally passed through a large gate with tall towers on each side and light projectors shining and blinding us. We arrived at a wooden barrack with bunk beds, low ceiling and a couple of dim light bulbs along the centre of the barrack. Not much light got through on account of the bunk beds. We were glad that finally we had a roof over our heads. Cold, wet and exhausted, we quickly fell into bed and fell asleep.

Suddenly we heard a sharp whistle shrieking with the familiar shouts “schnell, schnell, aufstehen” (quickly, quickly, get up). We were still in our damp clothes but without hesitation everybody just rushed out. The demoralisation process was complete. Nobody asked anything, we just followed what we were told. Outside, we were ordered into lines for a roll call. My aunt Margo started to help to put the children and their mothers in lines. Next, the SS man turned to my aunt and said “du wirst sein die blockelteste” (you will be in charge). So my aunt became the go-between between us and the SS. At that stage she asked the SS man “where are we?” The reply was “North Germany in Bergen Belsen”.

So this was our new home in hell, winter 1944. I have vivid memories of the cold and the sound of bombing by the allied planes as the camp was not far from Hanover. Bergen Belsen was a detention camp divided into five sections with different categories of prisoners. We were in the women’s camp but our barrack was separated by a barbed wire fence due to the uniqueness of children being with their mothers.

We witnessed punishment and beatings in the neighbouring barrack everyday. I remember the most frequent punishment was seeing a woman, head shaven, standing barefoot on a box, in a light striped dress and around her neck hung a board which read the reason for her punishment. For example, “stole a potato”. She stood there for the whole day in the freezing cold. Some women just collapsed after a couple of hours. We did not know the fate of these women.

Our lives were basically spent waiting for something to happen. We awoke every morning to the shrieks of the whistle that my aunt used to get us out to the roll call. We struggled in the cold, where we had to stand sometimes for up to two hours until the SS commander arrived. My aunt had to call all the names to make sure that everyone was present.

Hygiene was never a priority as the water taps were outside under the open roof and due to the cold weather not much washing took place. One morning during the roll call, after about four weeks in the camp, we saw that the SS man was accompanied by a group of soldiers and barking dogs. He told my aunt that everybody should collect towels as they would be going for a hot shower.

Now this should have been welcome news, seeing as we had not washed ourselves much. Instead the atmosphere became very tense. We were put in rows and marched along the perimeter of the camp into the forest. It was very cold and nobody was uttering a word. You could see the fear in the eyes of the mothers. We were accompanied on each side by the soldiers with weapons on the ready. The atmosphere was very tense and frightening. As kids, the whole situation was puzzling to us as we did not understand, but in reality the mothers were convinced that we were being lead to gas chambers. I saw a woman remove her wedding rings which she threw away with the remark “these beasts will not get their hands on my gold”.

We marched about one and a half hours until we noticed a large square wooden building with a tall chimney in the distance. It was a very frightening unbelievable reality for the adults among us who really thought that these were the last moments of our lives. The chimney was the last straw. It made it even more believable that what they were seeing must be the gas chambers.

When we entered the building the SS were calling “schnell, schnell” (quickly, quickly). They were always in a hurry. They instructed us to undress and hang our clothes on rails. The routine was so familiar; at this time in 1944 the Jews knew what was happening in Auschwitz. The procedure was exactly the same as we were now experiencing. Everyone was handed a piece of soap as we entered a large square room with shower roses on the ceilings in rows at equal distances in each direction creating a mesh-like pattern.

When all of us were herded in, the doors closed. There were approximately 100 of us children and our mothers. We all looked upwards, my mother squeezing me and my brother tightly. We waited several moments. It was terrified anticipation. We were all looking up. Finally, after weeks we had a warm shower and I survived to write about this experience.

Later we learned there were no gas chambers in Bergen Belsen.

Tomi Reichental
BIRDSONG

The poor thing stands there vainly,
Vainly he strains his voice.
Perhaps he’ll die.
Then can you say
How beautiful is the world today?

Anonymous
The Terezin concentration camp outside Prague (in the old fortress of Theresienstadt) was created to cover up the Nazi genocide of the Jews. A high proportion of artists and intellectuals was incarcerated in Terezin, and culture flourished. A Red Cross inspection in 1944 found Terezin to be a “model ghetto.” What the Red Cross inspectors did not see was the starvation, disease and the constant dread of transports to the death camps of the east. Those who were brought to Terezin in crowded cattle cars after days of cruelty, humiliation and beatings, wanted to believe that here they would be safe. All of them were deceived; the same fate awaited all of them. Every one of the Terezin inmates was condemned in advance to die. Between 1942 and 1944, 15,000 children passed through Terezin – few more than 100 survived.

For a time, the children played, studied, drew pictures and wrote poems. They saw everything that adults see. Their poems and drawings allow us to see through children’s eyes what no child should ever have to see. They saw the funeral carts and the human beings harnessed to pull them. They saw executions, too, and captured these events with pencil and paper. They heard the shouts of the SS men at roll call and the meek mumblings of prayer from the adults.

But they were children. They drew and wrote about gardens and butterflies, warm colourful homes, happier times, feeding their kittens. In their art, we see their courage, their optimism, their hopes and their fears. They lived, locked within the walls and courtyards of Theresienstadt. It became their world, a world of colour, shadow, hunger and hope.

The poems and drawings of the children of Theresienstadt were hidden in a milk churn by the artist Friedl Dicker-Brandeis who was a prisoner in the camp, and who ultimately perished in Auschwitz. The cache of art was discovered after the war. The drawings and poems are all that is left of these children. Their ashes have long since drifted across the fields of Auschwitz.
The rescue of Denmark’s Jewish population

The German occupation of Denmark began in April 1940. Eager to cultivate good relations with a population they regarded as fellow Aryans, the Nazi occupiers allowed the Danish government to continue running their own domestic affairs. The Danes even held elections, and every day, King Christian X rode his horse through Copenhagen, thereby reassuring his people that the Danish establishment still continued.

The Danish-German Agreement of 1940, stipulated that Denmark’s 8,000 Jews were not to be deported. But in August 1943, the Danish government resigned rather than yield to new German demands. Three and a half years of relatively benign occupation came to an end when the Nazis proclaimed a state of emergency. Reich plenipotentiary, Werner Best, drew up plans to deport the Danish Jews.

Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz, the German attaché for shipping affairs, used his close contacts with leading Danish Social Democrats to inform them of the impending danger for the Jews. On 29 September, the day before the Jewish New Year, Denmark’s Chief Rabbi, Marcus Melchior, warned his congregation to go into hiding immediately with their friends and relatives.

The Nazis acted on 1 October. Danish police refused to cooperate, German special units knocked on Jewish doors, but found hardly anyone home. The Danish resistance had organised a rescue operation. Jews had left their homes by train, car, and on foot, finding refuge in private homes, hospitals, and churches. The rescue operation involved thousands of Danish people from all walks of life.

The Danish Jews were taken to the coast, where fishermen helped ferry 7,220 Jews and 680 non-Jewish family members to safety across the water to neutral Sweden. The previous year, Sweden had accepted 900 Jewish refugees from Norway, and they now absorbed the Danish Jewish community.

The collective heroism of the Danes in rescuing its Jewish population from the Nazis is recognised all over the world. The main door of Copenhagen’s Danish Jewish Museum bears a sign with the Hebrew word “mitzvah”, a good deed. Many Danes still see nothing extraordinary in what they did. The modesty of the Danish people for their exceptional altruism is reflected in the words of Danish police officer and fisherman, Knud Dyby, who has been honoured for his heroism in saving Jews, “If you wanted to retain your self-respect, you did what you could”.

The rescue of Denmark’s Jewish population

Photo: USHMM

Memorial to the Jews of Tromsö, Norway

17 Jews lived in Tromsö. The Nazis captured all of them and sent them to their deaths.
Anne Frank was born in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1929. Together with her parents Otto and Edith and her sister Margot, she lived a normal life until the Nazis came to power in 1933. Otto opened a branch of his company in Amsterdam, and moved there with his family in late 1933. Following the Nazi invasion of Holland in 1940, the freedom and civil rights of Jews were severely restricted. They were also beaten, victimised, and their property confiscated.

Fearful of the future, Otto Frank began preparing and stocking a hiding place in an annex behind his office at 263 Prinsengracht. On July 5th, 1942, the Frank family moved into the annex, together with some friends. They were helped by four brave Dutch people, who had all been Otto’s employees, and who risked their lives by bringing food, supplies and news of the world outside the darkened windows.

On her 13th birthday, Anne received a diary from her parents. She started writing her intimate thoughts and feelings about herself and her life. Over the course of the 25 months that the Franks were in hiding, Anne described her frustrations at being confined, hungry and bored, never free from the constant fear of discovery. Anne called her diary ‘Kitty’; it was her solace, her confidant, her friend, her constant companion. She recorded the ordinary thoughts and feelings of a teenage girl. But she was a teenage girl living under extraordinary circumstances in ominous times.

Anne’s diary came to an end on 4th August 1944. When their hiding place was discovered. Anne and the seven others who shared the cramped secret annex were deported to Westerbork transit camp. When the Allies began retaking Holland, the inhabitants of the camp were moved to Auschwitz, where Otto was separated from his family. In October 1944 Anne and Margot were evacuated from Auschwitz to Bergen-Belsen where starvation, cold and disease swept through the camp. Margot, and ultimately Anne, succumbed to typhus and died. Anne was 15 years old.

Otto Frank survived Auschwitz, and soon learned that he was the only one from the secret annex to do so. He was reunited with the Dutch people who had helped him, and they handed him Anne’s diary which they had found after the Gestapo had left. A beloved classic since its publication, ‘The Diary of Anne Frank’ has been an inspiration to millions. The diary’s universal appeal stems from the extraordinary circumstances in which it was written, and from the candid discussion of emotions familiar to every adolescent.

Anne Frank

“I still believe people are really good at heart” The Diary of Anne Frank

“I want to go on living even after my death! And therefore I am grateful to God for giving me this gift, this possibility of developing myself and of writing, of expressing all that is in me.”

Anne Frank
By the time war broke out in September 1939, Czechoslovakia was ruled by a Nazi military governor. In 1941, Hitler appointed Reinhard Heydrich, the man who later convened the Wannsee Conference that decided on the Final Solution, as the new military governor. His repressive rule rapidly made him very unpopular. On 27 May, 1942, Heydrich was severely wounded in a grenade attack on his car near Prague. On 4 June, Heydrich died of his wounds. The Nazis swore revenge, and decided on a policy of collective punishment.

One of the most notorious acts of Nazi revenge took place in the village of Lidice, ten miles from Prague. Before dawn on the morning of 10 June, 1942, trucks full of German soldiers and policemen arrived at Lidice and took the villagers from their homes. 192 men and boys and 71 women were shot in batches of ten behind a barn. A detail of thirty Jewish prisoners from Terezin buried the murdered villagers. The village was physically razed to the ground as a warning to anyone thinking of stirring opposition to Nazi rule in Nazi-occupied lands.

82 children from Lidice later perished in Chelmno. The remaining women were taken to Ravensbruck, and most of them survived the war.

I had the opportunity to see the infamous Dr Mengele at his macabre game, doling out life or death with his forefinger. Like a metronome this finger swayed from side to side as each victim appeared before him, with a face molded in ice, without a flicker of an eyelash. Only the finger was alive, an organism in itself, possessed of a strange power; it spelled out its ghastly message... When their turn came to stand before this automaton, they stretched out their pitiful arms and pleaded and beseeched, “Please, Herr General, look how strong I am. I can work. I want to live. See how strong!” But the calculating machine in human guise swayed the finger to the left and they all went to the gas chambers. German economy had no use for the efforts of a twelve year old.

He stopped a youngster in the group. “How old are you?” “Seventeen”, answered the boy shakily. “How old are you?” Mengele repeated, somewhat louder. “Seventeen”, “how old?” …The boy’s nerve broke. “Fourteen, but I can work, I am strong. I can work!” screamed the child as he sensed the shadow of death creeping nearer.

Simcha age 17

The Garden
A little garden, Fragrant and full of roses.
The path is narrow And a little boy walks along it.
A little boy, a sweet boy, Like that growing blossom.
When the blossom comes to bloom, The little boy will be no more.

Franta Bass

Report from the front

...Regarding: Executions by EK [special commando] 3 until February 1, 1942.
Ref.: your telex no. 1331 of 2.6.42
A) 136, 421 Jews
B) 1,064 Communists (including 1 commissar, 1 senior political officer, 1 political officer)
C) 56 Partisans
D) 635 mentally ill
E) 44 Poles, 28 Russian prisoners of war, 5 Gypsies, 1 Armenian
Total - 138, 272, including 55,556 women, 34,464 children.
...Unspeakable horror

We had scarcely been inside a few minutes when Isa, a girl I had chatted too on the way here, pulled me to a window. “You must see this, look.” I didn’t want to look. I was too afraid of what I might see. But I had to go and stand beside her. Not fifty yards away was an incredible sight. A column of people had been shuffling from the direction of the railway line into a long, low hall. When the place was full, there was a delay; but I went on watching, hypnotised. What I was witnessing was murder, not of one person, but of hundreds of innocent people at a time. Of course we had known, had whispered about it, and been terrified of it from a distance; but now I was seeing it, right there in front of me…

On the outside of the low building a ladder had been placed. A figure in SS uniform climbed briskly up. At the top he pulled on a gas mask and gloves, tipped what looked from here like a white powder into an opening in the roof, and then hurried back down the ladder and ran off…

Screams began to come out of the building. We could hear them echoing across to our hut, the desperate cries of suffocating people. I held my breath and pressed my hands over my ears, but the screams were so loud you’d have thought the whole world must be able to hear them. “It’s over.” Someone was shaking me. “It’s all right, it’s gone quiet. They’re all dead now!…”

I went on staring at the building. Smoke was beginning to billow out of the tall chimneys. Soon a spurt of flame shot up into the sky. The black smoke became thicker and darker and choking, bringing with it the smell of burning fat and bone and hair. As evening came, the whole sky was red. Smoke and flames were pouring out of all the chimneys now. None of us slept that night. It was no longer possible to pretend even to yourself that the stories were not really true. All that we had heard and guessed was now before our eyes. Here were the death factories.

Kitty, age 14

Tears

And thereafter come…tears, without them there is no life.

Tears — inspired by grief tears that fall like rain.

Alena Sunkova
The Newryman who helped bring Jews to safety

Sergeant Peter Joseph Markey from Newry was part of the unsuccessful British parachute assault on Arnhem in September 1944. Markey was incarcerated in Sagan prisoner-of-war camp in Germany and was liberated by the Russians in February 1945. Desperate to return to Britain, Markey realised that the best route was to go east, via Odessa. He met a horse and cart which turned out to be driven by two Jews, Hans Andriese from Holland and his friend Sal Berkovitz a Czech-born Belgian. They invited Markey to climb aboard and travel with them. Markey resolved to find a way to repay their kindness.

Hans and Sal had just been liberated by the Russians. Due to severe illness, they had been left to die when most of the inmates had been force-marched deeper into Germany before the Russians arrived. Hans had been imprisoned in Westerbork transit camp and was on the train to Auschwitz along with 1,710 Dutch Jews when it stopped in Kosel where the able-bodied were ordered off. For 30 months Hans survived extreme conditions, ending up in Kittlitztreben.

Markey concocted a cover-story for Hans and Sal which saved their lives. He gave them false identity papers, Royal Engineers’ numbers and Sagan POW numbers. At every stage of their tortuous journey east, Markey persuaded doubting Russian and British officers that Hans and Sal had volunteered their services to the British in Arnhem. The journey to Odessa took 15 days when the friends finally boarded a troop ship for Glasgow. They celebrated St Patrick’s Day on board with Markey who waved wistfully at his native country as they sailed around the west coast of Ireland for Scotland.

Of the 107,000 Dutch Jews transported to the East by the Nazis, only 5,000 survived. Of the 550 men who alighted from the train at Kosel, only 30 survived. The women, children and elderly who remained on that train were murdered in Auschwitz. Not one of the Kittlitztreben prisoners force-marched West before the Russians liberated the camp, survived.

Simon Wiesenthal, who was known as “the conscience of the Holocaust,” was born in the Ukraine in 1909. When the Nazis invaded Russia in 1941, the organised genocide machine started operating with deadly consequences. Within months, Wiesenthal and his wife lost 89 members of their families.

Wiesenthal survived unbelievable hardship in the concentration camps, and was barely alive when Mauthausen was liberated by the Americans in May 1945. Soon after, Wiesenthal started gathering and preparing evidence on Nazi atrocities for the US Army’s War Crimes Section. When this work ended in 1947, Wiesenthal devoted himself to bringing the perpetrators of Nazi war crimes to justice.

In the face of growing international indifference and apathy, Wiesenthal helped provide the evidence that prosecuted over 1,100 Nazi War Criminals. One of the most infamous of these was Adolf Eichmann, the technocrat who supervised the implementation of the “Final Solution”.

Others Wiesenthal located and brought to court were Franz Stangl, the commandant of the Treblinka and Sobibor concentration camps, and Mrs. Hermine Ryan, nee Braunsteiner, who was responsible for the killing of several hundred children at Majdanek.

Simon Wiesenthal died in Vienna in October 2005 at the age of 96, leaving behind his remarkable legacy motivated by his purpose in life, “Justice not vengeance.”

Liberation

We had been liberated. I was no longer only a number doomed to die in a Nazi gas chamber, a prisoner without the right to life. Germany had been defeated. Once again I was an ordinary girl. True, I was different from the other girls my age, very different in many ways, but – I was free!

Chava
Holocaust Memorial Day

HONOURED GUESTS

Suzi Diamond – Bergen-Belsen
Tomi Reichental – Bergen-Belsen
Geoffrey Phillips – Kindertransport
Doris Segal – Sudetenland
Zoltan Zinn-Collis – Bergen-Belsen
Rosel Siev – Aurich, Germany

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Childrens’ diary quotations and testimonials from: Through our eyes: children witness the Holocaust by Itzhak B. Tatelbaum

Photograph of Kindertransport children, The Jewish Joint Distribution Committee

Gate-tower and Ramp at Auschwitz-Birkenau: courtesy Panstwowe Muzeum, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Poland

Map of Europe: reproduced in Never Again

Little French Girl: reproduced in Never Again

Letter to the Department of Justice, 1938: Briscoe family

Portrait of a young girl: reproduced in Fireflies in the dark…

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Our generation, and the generation or two after us, will be the last that will be able to say that we stood and shook the hands of some of those who survived.

Go home from this place and tell your children and your grandchildren and your great-grandchildren that today in Listowel, you looked into eyes that witnessed the most cataclysmic events ever unleashed by mankind upon mankind.

Tell them that you met people who will still be remembered and still talked about and still wept over 10,000 years from now – because if they are not, there will be no hope for us at all.

The Holocaust happened and it can happen again, and every one of us, if only out of our own sense of self-preservation, has a solemn duty to ensure that nothing like it ever occurs again.

_Paddy Fitzgibbon_

_at the unveiling of the Holocaust memorial_

_in Listowel, Co. Kerry, 1995_
Portrait of a young girl in watercolour by Friedl Dicker Brandeis, her final painting before she perished in Auschwitz