



BIRMINGHAM  
HOLOCAUST  
EDUCATION  
CENTER

# DARKNESS INTO LIFE

Alabama Holocaust Survivors Through  
Photography and Art

## A HISTORY OF THE HOLOCAUST TO ACCOMPANY THE EXHIBIT

### Introduction

The term Holocaust refers to the state-sponsored, systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jewry by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945. It is derived from the Greek word meaning “a sacrifice by fire.” The Holocaust is not just Jewish history, it is human history.

It has been more than 80 years since the beginning of the Nazi reign of terror, during which, six million Jews died, as well as hundreds of thousands of others the Nazis considered socially undesirable. From the terrible darkness of the Holocaust to successful lives in Alabama, these Holocaust survivors embraced and enriched their new homes.

Who is a Holocaust survivor? A Holocaust survivor is any person, Jewish or non-Jewish, who was displaced, persecuted, or discriminated against due to the racial, religious, ethnic, social, and political policies of the Nazis and their collaborators between 1933 and 1945. In addition to former inmates of concentration camps, ghettos, and prisons, this definition includes, among others, people who were refugees or were in hiding.

For them, remembering is always a complicated patchwork and journey of stories ... some of childhoods past ... others of grandparents, parents, brothers, sisters, lost friends ... some of despair and sadness ... others of cruelty beyond belief ... many of bravery ... others of the joy of liberation.

In this sensitive exhibit of photography by Becky Seitel and art by Mitzi J. Levin, one is given special glimpses into the private memories of some of Alabama’s Holocaust survivors. Becky and Mitzi spent hours visiting each survivor and listening to their stories. They started with their memories of life before occupation and imprisonment and continued with their lives in Alabama. The exhibit features artwork and photographs of each survivor. Mitzi’s paintings focus on life before and during imprisonment or hiding, as well as escape or liberation. Becky’s photographs tell stories about the survivors in photojournalistic style. These are bold, thought-provoking, heart-warming paintings and photographs accompanied by educational narratives that tell the stories shared by the survivors.

Through the stories of these Alabama Holocaust survivors, we hope to impart this history, as well as a richer understanding of its impact on these individuals and their families. View their pictures. Read their stories. Allow this exhibition to move you. We hope that you, too, will then say, “Never again.”

### **Germany, Hitler becomes Chancellor January 1933**

The Jewish population of Germany was less than 1% (500,000) of the general population at the time Adolph Hitler was appointed Chancellor in January 1933, yet the new regime re-invigorated ancient antisemitic feelings, positioning the Jews as a threat to the future German Reich. What followed was a terrifying indictment of the power of human indifference and passivity.

Between 1933 and 1939 over 400 separate pieces of legislation, designed to cause the economic and social death of the Jews, were enacted. With the opening of Dachau in March 1933 as a camp for political opponents of the Nazi regime, it was clear that opposition was not to be tolerated.

<b>Ilse Scheuer Nathan &amp; Ruth Scheuer Siegler</b>	<b>— <i>Sinzenich, Germany</i></b>
<b>Sonja Adelberg Bromberg</b>	<b>— <i>Burg, Germany</i></b>
<b>Robert May</b>	<b>— <i>Camberg, Germany</i></b>
<b>Jack Bass</b>	<b>— <i>Bernkastel, Germany</i></b>
<b>Henry Stern</b>	<b>— <i>Westheim, Germany</i></b>

Despite the emigration of approximately 300,000 German Jews in the years following the Nazi assumption of power, almost 200,000 Jews were still in Germany at the start of World War II. While ghettos were generally not established in Germany or any country in Western Europe, strict ordinances forced Jews into certain areas of German cities.

Systematic deportations of Jews from Germany began in late September 1941, even before the extermination camps were established in occupied Poland. Most went to ghettos in Eastern Europe.

### **Austria, annexed by Germany March 1938**

As early as 1935, with the formation of the *Luftwaffe* (German Air Force), it was clear that Hitler was violating the Treaty of Versailles. In March 1938, Austria was “annexed” under the pretense of bringing native Germans back to their rightful homeland. The Allies did nothing. Vienna was the third largest Jewish community in Europe. The process of degradation, terror and expropriation that had taken five years in Germany was completed – and even surpassed – in a few months in Austria. Systematic mass deportations from Vienna, as elsewhere in Greater Germany, began in October 1941.

<b>Regina Roth Dembo</b>	<b>— <i>Vienna, Austria</i></b>
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### **Czechoslovakia, invaded by Germany September 1938**

After Hitler expressed additional desires for the Sudetenland region of northwestern Czechoslovakia, the Munich Agreement was signed by the Allies in September 1938 allowing the Germans one “last and final” territorial gain. Many of the Jews fled toward Prague, but were later caught in the Nazi net when the rest of the country was invaded in March 1939.

<b>Jenny Fried Cohen</b>	<b>— <i>Česká Lípa, Czechoslovakia</i></b>
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### **Kristallnacht, November 1938**

November 9-10, 1938 was a crucial turning point in Germany policy regarding the Jews. *Kristallnacht*, or the “Night of the Broken Glass,” was the first, government-organized act of mass violence against the Jews. Hundreds of synagogues throughout Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia were destroyed. At least 7,500 Jewish businesses were vandalized or destroyed. Schools and cemeteries were also targeted. Over 30,000 Jews were sent to concentration camps. Although most of the population did not support the violence, no public demonstrations opposed it. There were, however, complaints regarding the fires and broken glass, and so from this point on, all large-scale attacks against Jews took place out of sight of the German population, either in the countryside or in Poland.

In the weeks following *Kristallnacht*, the Nazis unleashed a new wave of anti-Jewish legislation including the closing of Jewish schools, forbidding the practices of most Jewish professionals, as well as forcing Jewish businessmen to close their enterprises or sell them to “Aryans” at a fraction of their true value. Jews realized that life was no longer safe in Nazi Germany. Although emigration had been on the rise since Hitler took power, it now soared. European Jewry began to flee to neighboring countries in an attempt to stay one step ahead of the Nazis. This created large refugee populations throughout the continent. Yet for many, emigration was only a dream. The world’s democracies were not opening their doors; paperwork and visas were difficult to obtain; without family abroad, the necessary sponsors were unattainable; and the ever-increasing financial expense became prohibitive. By 1938, emigrants could leave Germany with only 10% of their net worth. After *Kristallnacht*, Jews who emigrated could take only \$4.00. By October 1941, it was illegal to emigrate from Nazi Germany.

### **Poland, invaded by Germany September 1939, World War II begins**

Hitler’s ultimate goals were the elimination of Jews and the conquest of living space in the East for Germany. He believed that Germany had to conquer a vast empire in the East to secure a place in the world for the German “master race.” To this end, German forces attacked Poland on September 1, 1939, and World War II began.

Poland was home to the largest Jewish community in Europe (3.3 million). Unlike the German Jews whose developing persecution occurred over several years, the Polish Jews were bombarded with even greater persecutions within a matter of weeks. Terror, senseless violence and killings became daily rituals. Emigration was not an option. By October there were official decrees requiring forced labor. Labor camps were set up outside the big cities. Some of which – Treblinka and Majdanek – eventually became extermination camps.

By December 1939, all Jews in Poland were to don white armbands with a blue Star of David. Similar decrees were issued in Germany (September 1941), France (June 1942) and all countries that came under Nazi rule.

**Aisic Hirsch  
Leon Skurko  
Henry Aizenman  
Stan Minkinow**

**— Mogielnica, Poland  
— Lukov, Poland  
— Przytyk, Poland  
— Lodz, Poland**

### **Ghettos**

Shortly after the invasion of Poland, it was decreed that Jews were to be concentrated into large cities with the intention of establishing ghettos. Jews were said to be carriers of epidemic illnesses and were even accused of cooperating with Germany’s enemies, and thus needed to be isolated.

Each ghetto was unique. Initially inhabitants were from the same city or the immediate area, but eventually new inhabitants arrived from more distant cities/countries. Most were surrounded by walls with limited or no access. Housing was overcrowded and in poor condition. Food was strictly rationed. Disease was rampant. Forced labor was common. It is estimated that 1/5 of ghetto inhabitants died of disease and hunger-related illnesses.

By 1942, most of the Jews of Eastern Europe were in ghettos. By the Fall of 1944, no ghettos remained. Any remaining ghetto inhabitants were deported to death camps, and the ghettos were closed.

### **Belgium, invaded by Germany May 1940**

The German attack on Western Europe came quickly. For the Jews in each country, the anti-Jewish policies followed the familiar scenario of that witnessed in Germany between 1933 and 1939, only much swifter. In April 1940, Norway and Denmark were invaded. May 1940 brought the invasion of Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Belgium. Shortly thereafter, in June 1940, France fell.

**Max Herzel**

**— Antwerp, Belgium**

The armistice with France provided for a German occupation of the northern 2/3 of France. The southern 1/3 became known as Vichy, France under a collaborative French government. By late 1942, this too was under German control.

By June 1940, Italy had joined the Axis. Hitler continued his conquest of Western Europe with a failed attack on Great Britain in July 1940.

### **Romania, joins the German Axis November 1940**

Romania was home to the third largest Jewish community in Europe. With the fall of France, the Soviet Union, Hungary and Bulgaria expressed their desires for territorial gains in Romania. Nazi Germany supported these demands and during the summer and fall of 1940, Romania lost about 30 percent of its territory and population.

June 1940	Bessarabia and northern Bukovina were given to the Soviet Union
August 1940	Northern Transylvania was ceded to Hungary
September 1940	Southern Dobruja was given to Bulgaria

In 1940, Romania and Hungary joined the Axis. Bulgaria followed in 1941.

Romania participated fully in the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. Following the invasion of the Soviet Union, Romania re-annexed Bessarabia and northern Bukovina, which had been seized by the Soviets a year earlier. After the conquest of the Ukraine by German and Romanian troops in July and August 1941, Romania was given the territory between the Dniester and Bug Rivers. Romanian authorities established a military administration there and dubbed the region "Transnistria."

Both in support of Nazi efforts and on their own initiative, the Romanians massacred thousands of Jews in Bessarabia, northern Bukovina, and Transnistria. In October 1941, those left alive were deported to camps and ghettos in Transnistria.

**Riva Schuster Hirsch**  
**Max Steinmetz**  
**Martin Aaron**

**— Novaseletz, Romania**  
**— Târgu-Lăpuș, Romania**  
**— Sapinta, Romania**

### **Soviet Union (including the Ukraine), invaded by Germany June 1941**

The Germans invaded the Soviet Union, home to over 3 million Jews, in June 1941. With this, mass killing of the Jews became operational policy. The *Einsatzgruppen* followed the advancing German army with the primary task of killing Jews, Communists, gypsies, political leaders and intellectual elites. With thorough efficiency, victims were rounded up, marched to remote locations and shot in mass execution style. More than 1.2 million Jews were killed between July 1941 and March 1942, more than had been killed at the hands of the Nazis during the previous eight years. Yet the process was not efficient enough. Plans were underway for the construction of special gassing facilities at extermination camps to more efficiently and “humanely” murder the vast numbers of Jews now under German control.

**Treyger-Zel’Tser Anya Itskovna  
Leonid Shilkrot  
Jack Schniper**

**— *Kruti, Ukraine*  
— *Gershunovka, Ukraine*  
— *Cherson, Ukraine***

### **Hungary, invaded by Germany March 1944**

Hungary had joined the Axis in November 1940 to protect its territory. During this time, Hitler had allowed them to control their internal affairs – including the Jewish population. Although anti-Semitic legislation was passed, the Hungarians did not deport the Jews. Hungarian troops subsequently assisted in the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. As a result of this assistance, Germany awarded Hungary with part of Czechoslovakia. Hungary seemed to be the last haven of relative security for the Jews.

After the German defeat at Stalingrad in 1942-43, Hungary began to negotiate an armistice with the Allies. In retaliation, the Germans occupied the country on March 19, 1944 and by the end of April Jews were being concentrated in ghettos in the large cities and deportations to Auschwitz had begun. In less than two months, nearly 440,000 Jews were deported from Hungary – most to Auschwitz, but thousands were also sent to the border with Austria to dig fortification trenches

**Agnes Löwinger Tennenbaum**

**— *Miskolc, Hungary***

### **Concentration Camps**

By the winter of 1941, 1.5 million Jews had been eliminated, but there was an additional eleven million targeted for annihilation in what has become known as the “Final Solution.” Using Germany’s best scientists, engineers, and architects, the Nazis built an unprecedented, modern and efficient method to eliminate human beings. The term “Concentration Camps” includes a vast array of camps including labor camps, transit camps, prisoner of war camps and extermination camps. Even among these categories, each camp was unique in its administration, physical attributes and severity of conditions. While there were many deaths in other camps due to work, conditions or murder, only six camps were designated as extermination camps, where all or part of the prisoner population was gassed upon arrival:

Auschwitz  
Belzec  
Chelmno  
Majdanek  
Sobibor  
Treblinka

Ultimately, of the approximately six million Jews murdered in the Holocaust, more than half were systematically killed in the extermination camps. Even as Germany was losing the war and their troops were in need of supplies, the trains were prioritized for the deportation of Jews.

## **Death Marches**

By November 1944 it had become apparent that the war was lost, yet efforts were still being made to provide Germany with slave labor and more time to complete the "Final Solution."

In the dead of winter, prisoners were taken first by train and then marched by foot toward the heartland of Germany. Prisoners were given little or no food and water and hardly any time to rest. Those who paused or fell behind were shot. An estimated 100,000 Jews died as a result of these "death marches."

## **Liberation**

As Allied troops began advancing on German territories, they came upon startling evidence of Nazi atrocities. In the camps they found remnants of human beings, so sick, so starved, and so weak, that many could not even survive being free. Allied troops, physicians and relief workers tried to provide nourishment and care.

Survivors had mixed reactions to their new-found freedom. While some looked forward to being reunited with family members, others felt guilty for surviving when so many of their relatives and friends had died.

## **Displaced Persons (DP) Camps**

May 8, 1945 marked the end of hostilities and a turn toward peace. For those who had survived the Nazi Holocaust, the end of the war brought the beginning of a long and arduous period of rebirth. Bereft of home and family, some Jewish survivors tried to return home, often to have their homecoming marked with violence. Others were placed in Displaced Persons camps organized by the Allies to provide basic necessities and assist in finding permanent homes. Jewish DP's created flourishing communities within these camps and life began anew.

## **Survivors**

Why did they survive? A question asked repeatedly by survivors of the Holocaust.

Most will tell you it was luck, while others will attribute it to personal courage, resourcefulness, optimism or faith. However, all agree that they survived in order to tell their stories, their pains, and their joys, with the hopes that future generations will learn from the mistakes of the past.

*Life began again for these nine Holocaust survivors on their liberation day. Out of pain and sadness came a deep appreciation of life and the desire to reclaim their future. They shared their memories and asked that we never forget. Memory is powerful. It is the blueprint of consciousness, and to be conscious is to be awake to world events. We will never forget!*

- Becky Seitel, Photographer, Mitzi J. Levin, Artist  
*Darkness into Life*