

WHAT WAS THE HOLOCAUST?

The Holocaust was the persecution and murder of approximately six million Jews by the Nazi regime, led by Adolf Hitler. The Nazis had come to power in 1933. They believed that the Germans were a racially superior people and that the Jews were an inferior people who threatened to weaken the German race.

The Nazis targeted and murdered other groups that they considered inferior as well, such as gypsies, homosexuals, and the mental or physically ill. The Jews, however, were their main target.

When the Nazis came to power there were over nine million Jews living in Europe. Hitler and his collaborators created rules intended to exclude Jews from functioning in their society. They closed Jewish businesses and stole Jewish homes and belongings. They ostracized the Jews in every way possible to encourage them to leave. For those who did not leave, they created the so-called "Final Solution"-the murder of all the Jews of Europe. By the time World War II ended in 1945, there were only three million Jews left; the rest had been murdered.

How did the Nazis accomplish this ugly goal? Hiding behind the chaos created by the war, they adopted the position that the Jews posed a threat to Germany, and that is why they needed to be eliminated. During the war the Germans occupied Poland, other parts of Eastern Europe, and other lands and territories. They rounded up all the Jews they could locate and confined them in ghettos. The conditions in these ghettos were so horrific that many of its inhabitants died of starvation or disease while existing there.

Those who did not die in the ghettos were transported to concentration camps where they were either worked to death or murdered in gas chambers. The Nazis resorted to other means of murder as well, such as mass shootings, but most of the Jews lost their lives to the gas chambers. Some of the more notorious of these were Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, Treblinka, Majdanek and Sobibor.

Many people ask how such atrocities could take place. Did the non-targeted population turn a blind eye? Did anyone try to help these innocent victims? If caught, the Nazis would punish and even murder anyone who tried to hide or otherwise help Jews escape, so most non-Jews did turn a blind eye, even though the victims being rounded up and murdered had been their neighbors, friends, students or acquaintances.

Some brave souls did help, however, and they are often referred to as “The Righteous.” There are many stories available about these individuals and the clever methods they employed to save Jews. At risk to their own lives, they hid Jews in their homes or in other places, like churches or orphanages. Some Jews became resistance fighters and fought to protect their brethren using whatever tactics they could think of. Many of these Righteous were caught, tortured, imprisoned or murdered. These noble individuals have been honored in many ways since the end of the war, by Jews and Gentiles alike.

Toward the end of the war, when the Nazis knew that the Allies were moving in, they created forced “death marches” in an effort to murder as many additional Jews as possible before they could be liberated and released back into society. Allied forces, fighting the Germans and traveling across Europe, discovered the concentration camps and released the weak and starving prisoners. On May 7, 1945, the Germans surrendered to the Allies.

What became of the Nazis and their collaborators? Those who did not manage to escape capture were prosecuted, but many were never found and brought to justice. To this day, Nazi hunters continue their quest to see these evil people captured and punished.

After the war, only three million of the nine million Jews who had lived in Europe had escaped murder at the hands of Hitler and his troops. What became of these survivors? They were not able to return to their homes, which had been stolen, along with all their possessions. Most did not want to remain in their home countries anyway. There was nothing left for them except terrible memories.

Philanthropic organizations set up displaced persons camps throughout Europe, where the survivors could reside until they were strong enough to relocate. Many went to Israel and the United States, as well as other nations around the world who would take them in. There is a great deal of information available relating the story of these survivors - what happened to them during the war, and what their lives have been like since. Understandably, most never fully recovered from their experience and would struggle to lead the normal life that others take for granted. Many of them and their descendants have worked tirelessly in the ever-challenging fight against anti-Semitism and other forms of hate, all of which remains and has even increased in years since the great tragedy of the Holocaust.