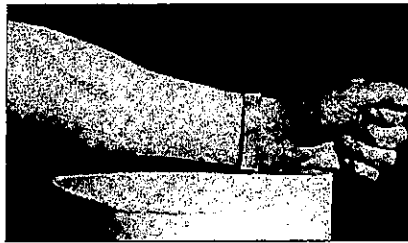


# 26 A Final Solution



On arrival in a Nazi camp, new inmates' clothes and belongings were taken away, their heads shaved, and identification numbers tattooed on their arms.

In Germany, as soon as the Nazis came to power, Jews were persecuted for no reason except their religion. Jews who weren't even religious were persecuted. A Jewish grandparent was enough to get you into trouble.

There was an evil disease in the world that had been around for a very long time. It was called anti-Semitism. It was hatred of Jews. No one was quite sure where it came from—although the subject was studied endlessly.

No question about it. Jews have been troublesome to some kings and priests. Jews believe that every person is equal before God, which, if you think about it, means that a king is no different from a peasant. Now that is a nonconforming idea. It must have been maddening to some authorities. Imagine where it might lead if everyone thought that way. (Just where might it lead? To democracy, eventually?)

The Jews are people with a powerful book. It is a freedom document, written in Hebrew, and called a *bible*. It tells stories that make people think and ask questions. It tells how, a long time ago, the Jews escaped from Egypt, where they were slaves of the pharaoh.

It tells of Queen Esther and how she saved the Jews when they refused to bow to the king's agent, wicked Haman (HAY-mun). That Bible became the starting point for a new religion called Christianity, and



Using principles based on "scientific" ideas, Nazis subjected people to absurd tests of their ethnic origins, such as measuring the size of a nose.

**He who permits evil, commits evil. This is what makes for the haunting sense of guilt in our culture. Many a member of the dominant group will earnestly aver that he never intended that Negroes should be insulted and maltreated: that his heart is sore and ashamed when he reads of the defiling of the Jewish synagogues by hoodlums. He did not intend these things, but he created the social sanction for these things.**

—HENRY A. OVERSTREET



Berlin, the morning after *Kristallnacht*, November 10, 1938—the “Night of Broken Glass,” when the windows of Jewish businesses were shattered by yelling mobs.

for another, called Islam.

At first, Christians were persecuted. Then, in the fourth century C.E., the Roman emperor Constantine became a Christian. Before long, most Europeans were Christians. But not the Jews. The Jews stayed with their beliefs. They wouldn't

change their religion even for the emperor or the pope. It was frustrating to those in charge. Others might catch their independent ideas. So some of those in power hated them, and blamed them for whatever was wrong at the time. If there was a plague, it was the Jews' fault; if there was an economic disaster, it was the Jews' fault. Finally, many of Europe's Christians went on religious wars called *Crusades*. The crusaders' aim was to recapture Jerusalem from the Muslims; but anyone not a Christian was considered an *infidel*—a heretic—and was liable to be murdered. Thousands of Jews died, and Jewish property was up for grabs among the crusaders.

In Spain, in 1492, Jews were told they had to leave the country (Jews had already been expelled from many other parts of Europe). They couldn't take their possessions with them. It was a windfall for the rest of the Spaniards. Jews who converted to Christianity were able to stay in Spain, but some were tried by a religious court called the Inquisition, and, if they were found guilty of not being sincere Christians, they were burned alive. That was the opposite of what real Christianity stands for, but most people didn't question the rulers and priests who were in command.

So anti-Semitism stayed in the air. It was still mainly about that nonconformism. Then, in 1517, Martin Luther came into conflict with the Catholic Church and things got complicated. The Catholics, and each of the new Protestant sects, seemed to believe that they alone had the only true religion; that led to centuries of religious wars. Christians were killing Christians—as well as Jews. Hatred and killing in the name of God

### Freedom of Conscience

In Virginia's Statute for Religious Freedom, Thomas Jefferson wrote:

*Be it enacted by the General Assembly, that no man shall...suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief.*

John Adams, discussing the subject of religion and government was, as usual, blunt:

*Congress shall never meddle with religion other than to say their own prayers.*

And James Madison said:

*Religion and government will both exist in greater purity, the less they are mixed together.*

The Founding Fathers were clear: ours was to be a nation founded on the idea of equality and fairness. There are no religious restrictions on citizenship in the Constitution.



Troops force Polish Jews out of the Warsaw ghetto.

### In the Name of Science

That pseudo-science of race led to another "science" called *eugenics*, based on the idea that races should keep their blood pure by getting rid of problems. In the 1880s, Pennsylvania began sterilizing children who were said to be "feeble-minded." (*Sterilizing* means they were made unable to have children themselves.) Indiana was the first state to pass a law forcing the sterilization of certain people who were thought undesirable. (That usually meant the retarded, or criminals, or, often, boys and girls who were sexually active.) Another 31 states followed with sterilization laws. In California, some 17,000 people were sterilized, most of them immigrants. In Virginia, a 1924 sterilization law was challenged, taken to the U.S. Supreme Court—and upheld. In that case, *Buck v. Bell*, Carrie Buck had been sterilized because she was said to be retarded. Recent evidence suggests that was not even true. The Nazis used Virginia's law as a model. Under their sterilization act, thousands were made unable to have children.

After 1939, all Jews in Germany had to wear a yellow Star of David sewn onto their clothes.



shouldn't make sense, but it seemed to some people (who couldn't have been thinking deeply).

There was another factor that produced anti-Semitism. It was economic. Jews were often successful and provided competition. That may have made some people jealous or annoyed.

Then, toward the end of the 18th century, things began to change. After the French Revolution (in 1789), Jews, in one nation after another, were emancipated. They entered Europe's mainstream. People who had been locked in ghettos were suddenly let out and began a period of great achievement. Especially in Germany, Austria, and Hungary, Jews flocked to the universities, and soon many of them were doctors, lawyers, bankers, store owners, newspaper writers, musicians, teachers, and political leaders. Although Jews made up only about one percent of the German population, they won one quarter of all Germany's Nobel prizes in the first third of the 20th century. Some Germans were proud of that achievement, but others saw it as a problem.

There was something else. It had to do with a science—at least, some people thought it was a science. It was racism, and today we think of it as a false, or pseudo- (SU-doe) science. But, in the 19th century, some thinkers (who believed in what they were doing) divided the world's peoples into races and then said that some races were better than others. They even said that race determines blood, and character, and brain size. They said that the Jews were an evil race that was polluting Aryan (white northern European) blood. They said that people of color were inferior to whites. Since this theory was supposed to be scientific, there were many who believed them.

Hitler used that idea of racism, and bad blood, and the old anti-Semitic virus to explain Germany's problems. It was convenient. Whatever was wrong must be the fault of the Jews. Inflation? Depression? The Treaty of Versailles? It was all because of the Jews, said Hitler. He was an astonishing speaker. People were swept up by his words; they believed him. It was easier than blaming themselves.



The start of the journey for most eastern European Jews, like these people from Cracow in Poland, was a filthy, crowded train journey in a boxcar. The luckier ones ended up in camps where they had to work for the German war effort, such as at this airfield.

Besides, many Jews had good jobs and nice homes. All their property was inviting. Hitler was soon giving it away.

Germany went farther down the road of wickedness than any nation in history. The Nazis used the technology of the modern world for purposes of murder. They built factories for killing (they put all the death camps in Poland). Then they hunted down the Jews of Europe, packed them in railroad cars, and sent them to be slaughtered. They didn't just kill Jews. Hitler hated Slavs (who lived in eastern Europe), gypsies, people who were crippled, and anyone who didn't agree with him. The Nazis killed as many of those people as they could. They enslaved others. It made Hitler and his terror troops feel powerful (and it set an example for other dictators in the future). Because of what was happening to the Jews and Hitler's other victims, all of Europe shivered. People knew that after the Jews were gone it could happen to them.

"The removal and transportation of Europe's Jews was a fact known to every inhabitant of the continent," says John Keegan, a historian of the Second World War. "Their disappearance defined the barbaric ruthlessness of Nazi rule...and warned that what had been done to one people might be done to another."

### Guests or Prisoners?

After 1943 (until war's end), no Jews entered the United States except for 874 "guests of the president" who were denied visas, sent to an internment camp in Oswego, New York, kept behind barbed wire, and told they would have to leave the country as soon as the war was over. Some had close relatives in the U.S. One refugee, whose paralyzed wife lived on Long Island, could not visit her even at holiday time.

More than 55,000 immigrant quota spots for eastern Europeans went unfilled in 1944. During the war years, about 100,000 German prisoners of war—mostly Nazi soldiers—were safe in the United States.



Visiting through the barbed wire at Oswego.

## Arrival in Auschwitz

**A**uschwitz (OWSH-vits) had been a Polish military barracks, but in 1940 it was turned into a concentration camp. Two years later, gas chambers and furnaces (for killing purposes) were added at a section of the camp called Birkenau. By this time Hitler was frantically rounding up Jews from across Europe; Auschwitz, because it was on a major railroad line between Cracow (in Poland) and Vienna (in Austria),

was where most were sent. Day and night, sealed trains arrived from Holland, France, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Italy, and other European countries. Auschwitz grew to encompass 40 square miles.

The Wiesels arrived in 1944 on a train from Hungary. One of the family survived: a son named Elie. He wrote a book called *Night* that tells what happened to him. Here is some of it.

**T**he cherished objects we had brought with us thus far were left behind in the train, and with them, at last, our illusions.

Every two yards or so an SS man held his tommy gun trained on us. Hand in hand we followed the crowd.

An SS noncommissioned officer came to meet us, a truncheon in his hand. He gave the order:

"Men to the left! Women to the right!"

Eight words spoken quietly, indifferently, without emotion. Eight short, simple words. Yet that was the moment when I parted from my mother. I had not had time to think, but already I felt the pressure of my father's hand: we were alone. For a part of a second I glimpsed my mother and my sisters moving away to the right. Tzipora held Mother's hand. I saw them disappear into my distance; my mother was stroking my sister's fair hair, as though to protect her, while I walked on with my father and the other men. And I did not know that in that place, at that moment, I was parting from my mother and Tzipora forever. I went on walking. My father held on to my hand.



*Children at the camps were photographed in prison uniform so they could be identified if they escaped. Few lived long enough to try.*

Behind me, an old man fell to the ground. Near him was an SS man, putting his revolver back in its holster.

My hand shifted to my father's arm. I had one thought—not to lose him. Not to be left alone.

The SS officers gave the order: "Form fives!"

Commotion. At all costs we must keep together.

"Here, kid, how old are you?"

It was one of the prisoners who asked me this. I could not

see his face, but his voice was tense and weary.

"I'm not quite fifteen yet."

"No. Eighteen."

"But I'm not," I said. "Fifteen."

"Fool. Listen to what I say."

Then he questioned my father, who replied: "Fifty."

The other grew more furious than ever.

"No, not fifty. Forty. Do you understand? Eighteen and forty."

He disappeared into the night shadows. A second man came up, spitting oaths at us.

"What have you come here for, you sons of bitches? What are you doing here, eh?"

Someone dared to answer him. "What do you think? Do you suppose we've come here for our pleasure? Do you think we asked to come?"

A little more, and the man would have killed him.

"You shut your trap, you filthy swine, or I'll squash you right now! You'd have done better to have hanged yourselves where you were than to come here. Didn't you know what was in store for you at Auschwitz? Haven't you heard about it? In 1944?"

No, we had not heard. No one had told us.

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## WAR, PEACE, AND ALL THAT JAZZ



Did all this have anything to do with the United States?

That is a good question.

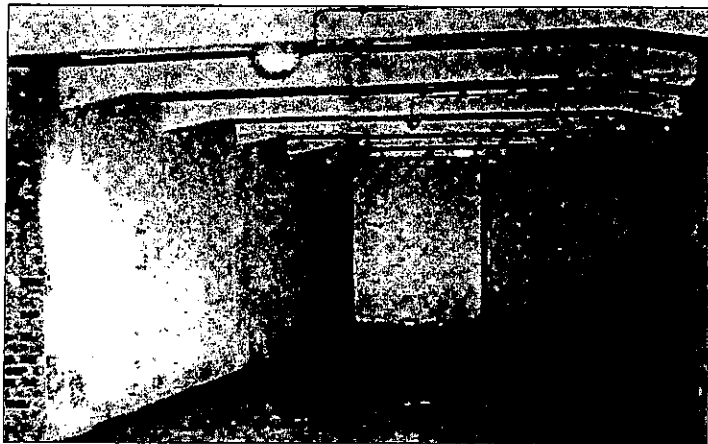
Suppose you see someone beating up someone else. Really beating her up. She is going to end up in the hospital, or maybe dead.

What do you do? This isn't your fight. If you try to break it up you almost certainly will get slugged. Should you call the police? Should you stay out of it? If someone is killed it won't be your fault. Or will it?

Are we responsible for others? Do you agree that "He who permits evil, commits evil"?

In 1939, 20,000 children—all under 14—were in danger in Germany. Hitler wished to get rid of them. He was willing to let them leave the country. Many were Jewish; some were not. Quakers, Jews, Catholics, and members of other American church groups agreed to take responsibility for them. It would not cost the government any money. Surely America would accept them.

This is the land of promise. The land built on a spirit of generosity. The land that, from the days of the Pilgrims, has been a place of refuge for the persecuted of other nations.



Top left: laborers at the camp at Buchenwald. Many starved to death or were killed when too weak to work. Top right: inmates in an Austrian camp where the Nazis were said to perform "scientific" experiments on human beings. Center: a gas chamber at Maidanek, in Poland. New arrivals were told to undress for showers; poison gas came out of the shower heads. Left, a box full of the wedding rings that all were made to remove.

**The League** of Nations had given Jews the right to buy land in Palestine, but the British put pressure on European nations not to let them emigrate to Palestine. In 1942, the ship *Struma*, with 769 refugees aboard, was turned away from Palestine by the British. The ship sank in the Bosphorus; one passenger survived.



Many Jews and opponents of the Nazis did escape, some to the United States. Among them were pianist Rudolf Serkin (top) and philosopher and writer Hannah Arendt (bottom), who wrote an important book about Hitler and fascism called *The Banality of Evil*.

Those who had founded this nation, and written its constitution, had been clear about it. Although they were much alike—white, male, Protestant, and of English descent—the Founders didn't limit the nation to people like themselves. For they were unselfish in spirit and very wise. They believed they were creating something new on earth, a generous nation that would find strength in diversity. A nation that would take peoples from all over the world and allow them to become a new people—an American people—more varied in its roots than any before it.

The Founders offered the gift of citizenship, not just to their kinsmen, not just to the strong, or the handsome, or the rich, but fully and equally to all who came here to live.

The nation grew, and its citizens understood what was intended. Under the Statue of Liberty they carved the words *Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free*. Men, women, and children—from all over the world—came to this “promised land.” Many were *refugees*—people fleeing tyranny and persecution.

Of course the children Hitler was threatening with death would be welcome in America. Or would they?

There was another tradition here. It was not the tradition of Jefferson, Washington, and Madison. It was a spirit of greed and selfishness.

It was that selfish spirit that had caused Alien and Sedition acts to be passed soon after the nation was founded. It was that spirit that had caused men to rise in Congress and say that slavery was a “positive good.” It was the spirit behind the Know-Nothing Party and the nativists. It was the spirit of the Ku Klux Klan and the only-one-race-allowed country club. It was mean-spirited. It was anti-American, but it was there.

Here is what Abraham Lincoln wrote in 1855:

*As a nation we began by declaring that “all men are created equal.” We now practically read it, “all men are created equal except Negroes.” When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read “all men are created equal except Negroes and foreigners and Catholics.” When it comes to this, I shall prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty.*

The Imperial Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, in 1923, said: *Negroes, Catholics, and Jews are the undesirable elements in America*. The Imperial Wizard was a bigot, but some people listened to him. They didn't know their history. Maybe they hadn't read the famous letter George Washington wrote the Jews of Newport, Rhode Island. In it, he said: *The government of the United States...gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance*.

In 1924, Congress passed a racist immigration bill. Its aim was to keep Asians, Jews, blacks, and people who can't speak English out of America.

Anti-Semitism and xenophobia (zen-uh-FO-bee-ya—anti-foreignism) had infected some Americans. Some of the people with the disease were in Congress, the State Department, and other government offices. Did they realize they were being un-American?

Most Americans are hospitable. Eighty-five newspapers wrote editorials urging Congress to pass a bill letting in those 20,000 children from Germany. Citizens offered their homes to the young refugees. Leaders of church, labor, and social organizations spoke out. But not loudly enough.

The head of a powerful group, the American Coalition of Patriotic Societies, told Congress to "protect the youth of America from this foreign invasion." He shouted the message of the racists. There was fear in the world, and a depression, and Congress listened.

Does this have anything to do with you? Isn't anti-Semitism a Jewish problem? No. It is a human problem. People who hate become hateful. A nation that allows bigotry and persecution is diminished by it. In 1939, the United States government gave sanction to bigotry and assistance to persecution. Those children were not allowed into the United States.

Hitler now knew that no one would rescue the children. He felt free to build death camps. That is where most of those 20,000 children—and a girl named Anne Frank—ended their lives.

## The St. Louis Is Turned Back



**L**iane Reif-Lehrer, pictured here (left) in 1938 with her mother and brother, was born in Vienna, Austria, in 1934. These are her words:

*I should have been a normal little girl, happy with my special doll, my big brother (who thought me a noisy nuisance but loved me anyway), and my dotting parents. But the world around me was going mad, and the life I should have had was not to be.*

**L**iane's father was a dentist, but the Nazis would not let him or other Jews work. One day he was found dead at the bottom of a stairwell. Did he commit suicide or was he murdered? Liane has never been quite sure.

She was not yet five when she, her mother, her brother, and 934 other Jewish passengers set sail for Cuba from the port of Hamburg, Germany, on the luxury liner *St. Louis*. The passengers all had Cuban entry permits, and most had quota numbers that would have let them into the United States eventually. But while they were at sea, Cuba changed its immigration policy. Most of the passengers were not allowed off the ship.

After days of frantic negotiations, the *St. Louis* was forced to leave Cuba. The captain didn't want to take the Jewish passen-

gers back to Germany; he knew what would happen to them there. He headed for Miami. Telegrams were sent to President Roosevelt asking him to grant asylum to the refugees. The telegrams were not answered: A U.S. Coast Guard boat stayed close to the *St. Louis* to make sure no passengers jumped overboard and tried to swim ashore. Finally, the captain could do nothing; he headed back to Europe. Here are Liane's words again:

*My mother and brother and I were among the passengers who survived—about a fourth of those on the ship. We were sent back to Europe and given haven in France, only to find the Nazis at our doorstep again a few months later. But somehow we managed to get to the U.S. in 1941. I was seven, a wide-eyed, bewildered girl, greeted by New York children playing street games to wartime hate ditties. I remember a particularly popular one: "Whistle while you work, Hitler is a jerk, Mussolini is a meanie, and the Japs are worse."*

*I tried to explain that some Germans were good and some bad. On more than one occasion my "non-groupy" response earned me the wrath of the parents, who did not hesitate to suggest that I "go back to where I came from." It hurts even now when I remember the tone with which those words were delivered.*

Dr. Liane Reif-Lehrer became a research scientist and then a consultant. She lives in Massachusetts and is writing a book that tells her story.