

The Happiest Man On Earth

by **Mark St. Germain**

Adapted from the memoir of the same name by **Eddie Jaku**

A **Dramaturgical** Casebook

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Eddie Jaku: Holocaust survivor and peace campaigner dies aged 101

from BBC.com

Eddie Jaku, a Holocaust survivor who described himself as the "happiest man on earth" has died aged 101.

During World War Two, he was imprisoned in four concentration camps, led a daring escape on a train, broke free from a death march and survived in a forest.

Jaku dedicated the rest of his life advocating for peace and kindness.

"I do not hate anyone. Hate is a disease which may destroy your enemy, but will also destroy you," he said.

Last year, to celebrate his 100th birthday, Jaku published his memoirs. Entitled *The Happiest Man on Earth*, it chronicles his extraordinary story of survival, weaving in his messages of tolerance and forgiveness. It also made him one of the world's oldest published authors.

"I have lived for a century, and I know what it is to stare evil in the face," he wrote.

"I have seen the very worst in mankind, the horrors of the death camps, the Nazi efforts to exterminate my life, and the lives of all people. But I now consider myself the happiest man on earth."

Jaku died at a care home in Sydney; he had lived in Australia since in 1950. He is survived by his wife of 75 years, Flore, their sons Michael and Andre, four grandchildren and five great-grandchildren.

Australia's Prime Minister Scott Morrison described Jaku as "an inspiration and a joy" who "chose to



Eddie Jaku

make his life a testimony of how hope and love can triumph over despair and hate."

'A witness of the most tragic times'

Born Abraham Jakubowicz in Leipzig, Germany, in 1920, Jaku was the only Jewish student at his school - but that was not a problem, he said, until Adolf Hitler came to power.

Jaku's family sent him to a boarding school, where he used the alias Walter Schleif, out of fear that others might realise he was Jewish. He studied mechanical engineering and graduated as the top apprentice toolmaker.

But when he arrived home on 9 November 1938 to surprise his parents for their wedding anniversary, no one was there.

It was Kristallnacht, the so-called Night of Broken Glass - when Jewish homes, businesses and synagogues were attacked throughout Germany and Austria. Many were killed and tens of thousands of Jews were rounded up and sent to concentration camps.

Jaku's family had already gone into hiding and the 18-year-old was all alone except for the family's dachshund Lulu.

At 5am, ten Nazi soldiers smashed down the door. In Jaku's memoir, he described how they brutally beat him, made him watch as they destroyed his family's 200-year-old home, and killed Lulu.

One of the soldiers started to engrave a swastika into Jaku's arm with his bayonet, he wrote.

"In front of my eyes, I lost my dignity, my freedom, and my faith in humanity.

"I lost everything I lived for. I was reduced from being a man to being nothing," Jaku said during a speech in 2019.

He was taken to Buchenwald concentration camp, but released five months later to work in a factory making tools.

He described how his father picked him up from the camp to take him to his new job - but instead they fled to the border and were smuggled into Belgium.

They were caught by Belgian police and once again locked up - not for being Jewish this time, but as German refugees.

After 11 months he was out and travelled to France, where he was eventually arrested in Lyon and sent to Gurs concentration camp. Seven months later, Vichy France started deporting Jews, and Jaku found himself on a train bound for Auschwitz.

He described how, before boarding, he stole a hammer, screwdriver and spanner from the train platform.

"I went to the train driver and asked him in French how long it would be until the train entered Germany," he wrote.

"It would be nine hours. I had nine hours to get out, after which there would be no hope of freedom."

It took nearly all that time to unscrew and chip away at the interlocked floorboards of the train carriage, but he was eventually able to do it. When the train was just a few kilometres out from Strasbourg, Jaku and eight other prisoners were able to wriggle underneath the carriage, he wrote.

He described how they "crawled through like spiders, clinging to the bottom of the train car" until it was slow enough to safely drop onto the tracks, where they lay as flat as they could between the sleepers.

The plan worked - they were not spotted and Jaku escaped back to Belgium where he secretly lived with his parents and sister in an attic.

For two months, his two aunts lived with them in the tiny space. However one day they went back to the family's old apartment in Brussels, where the Gestapo were waiting for them.

The women were arrested and put on a train to Auschwitz, but they did not survive the trip.

"Their train was diverted along the way and sealed in a tunnel, where it was allowed to fill with fumes, killing every man, woman and child aboard," Jaku wrote.

He was never able to find out where they were buried or their ashes scattered.

"This breaks my heart still, after all these years."

In October 1943, along with the rest of his family, he was arrested and sent to Auschwitz - "my hell on earth" as he described it.

His mother, aged 43, and his father, aged 50, were murdered in a gas chamber. Jaku was spared because of his engineering skills, he wrote.

In his memoir, Jaku described hearing people being killed throughout the night, or taking their own lives by throwing themselves on the electric fences. Jaku admitted there were times when he wanted to do the same, but his friend Kurt would not let him.

"Auschwitz was a living nightmare, a place of unimaginable horrors", he wrote. "But I survived because I owed it to my friend Kurt to survive... One good friend can be your entire world."

He did try to escape however - and succeeded until a Polish farmer shot him in the leg. Jaku wrote that he realised "with horror" that he would never survive if the local Polish people would not help him.

He decided the only option was to return to the camp. Timing it with the factory workers' shift change, he wrote that he simply walked back into Auschwitz - the Nazis never even realised he had been gone.

In 1945 as Soviet forces got closer to Auschwitz, the camp was evacuated. Tens of thousands of prisoners were made to walk enormous distances day and night with no food or water - these were the death marches.

He survived the first march and was sent to work in a factory at a smaller camp.

Jaku was put in charge of 200 machines, and wrote that he was made to wear a sign around his neck that said if any of them broke down - he was to be hanged. An impossible task, so Jaku said he made 200 whistles and gave one to each prisoner working the machines, to alert him to any issues.

One of those prisoners was his sister Henni, who had also survived.

When that camp was also evacuated, Jaku found himself on another march, but this time he managed to escape, and hid in a cave in a forest for about two months - eating slugs and snails to survive, he wrote in his memoir.

He described how he became seriously ill after drinking poisoned water from a stream, but managed to crawl to a highway where he was rescued by American soldiers.

It was June 1945 and the war was over.

But Jaku was in a bad way - he was malnourished and had cholera and typhoid. A nurse told him he had a 65% chance of dying, he said.

But he survived, and not long after the end of World War Two, married his wife Flore in Belgium. They moved to Australia in 1950, along with her mother Fortune and his sister Henni.

'The happiest man on earth'

Despite the nightmare he endured and the trauma he lived with, Jaku's lifelong message was clear - he did not hate anyone, and only ever wanted to spread messages of peace and forgiveness to try and heal the wounds that Adolf Hitler had inflicted on the world.

He was a longstanding volunteer at the Sydney Jewish Museum, sharing his story with visitors.

In 2013 he was awarded the medal of the Order of Australia for his service to the Jewish community.

Jaku received a standing ovation after giving a powerful TED talk in Sydney in 2019 in front of some 6,000 people.

"I'm doing everything I can to make this world a better place for everyone, and I implore you to do your best too," he told the audience.

"Happiness does not fall from the sky. It's in your hands. If you're healthy and happy, you're a millionaire."



Eddie (front right) with members of his extended family in 1932.
He would be the only one to survive.

Holocaust Timeline: A Chronology of Events from 1933 to 1945

from tlholocaustmuseum.org

The Holocaust was built through years of deliberate policy, dehumanization, and escalating violence, and it's easy to mix up historical events within the timeline of the Holocaust or World War II. This historical timeline documents the key events, from Hitler's appointment as Chancellor in 1933 to the liberation of the kill centers in 1945.

This is a list of many of the key historical Holocaust events to show the progression of persecution to mass murder, relevant events of WWII, and the subsequent liberation of concentration camps.

Hitler's Ascent to Power (1933–1935)

1933

- January 30: Adolf Hitler appointed Chancellor of Germany
- February 27: The German Parliament (Reichstag) Building burns down.
- March 22: Dachau concentration camp, the first of the Holocaust, opens.
- March 23: Enabling Act passes, which gave the German Cabinet—most importantly, the Chancellor—the powers to make and enforce laws without the involvement of the Reichstag or Weimar President Paul von Hindenburg.
- April 1: National Boycott of Jewish shops and businesses.
- April 7: Laws for Re-establishment of the Civil Service passes, barring Jews from holding civil service, university, and state positions.
- April 25: Law Against Overcrowding in Schools and Universities passes, which dramatically limits the number of Jewish students attending public schools.
- May 10: Public burnings of books written by Jews, political dissidents, and others not approved by the state takes place.
- July 14: Law for the Prevention of Offspring with Hereditary Diseases mandates the forced sterilization of certain individuals with physical and mental disabilities. Provided the basis for the involuntary sterilization of people/groups targeted by Nazi Germany, including Roma and Sinti and Afro-Germans.
- October 4: Editors Law forbids non-“Aryans” to work in journalism.

1934

- August 2: German President von Hindenburg dies. With the support of the German armed forces, Hitler becomes President of Germany.
- August 19: Hitler abolishes the office of President and declares himself Führer (dictator) of the German Reich and People, in addition to his position as Chancellor. In this capacity as Führer, Hitler's decisions are not bound by the laws of the state.
- November-December: SS chief Himmler consolidates control over and de facto unifies the German state political police forces into the Gestapo office in Berlin under the authority of his deputy, Reinhard Heydrich.
- December 10: SS chief Himmler creates the Inspectorate of Concentration Camps under the leadership of SS General Theodor Eicke. This move formalizes the SS takeover and centralization of the concentration camp system that had taken place in July 1934.

1935

- March 17: Nazi Germany resumes compulsory male military service.
- April 1: Nazi Germany bans Jehovah's Witness Organizations. The ban is due to Jehovah's Witnesses refusal to swear allegiance to the state, as it went against their religious convictions.
- June 28: The German Ministry of Justice revises Paragraphs 175 and 175a of the German criminal code to facilitate the systematic persecution of gay men and provide police with broader means for prosecution.
- September 15: Nazi Germany enacts the Nuremberg (Race) Laws. These Anti-Jewish racial laws determine who was considered a "Jew," and deem that Jews were no longer considered German citizens ("Reich Citizenship Law") and that Jews cannot marry Aryans, nor can they fly the German flag ("Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor").

Escalation and Persecution (1936–1939)

1936

- March 3: Jewish doctors barred from practicing medicine in German institutions
- July 12: Sachsenhausen concentration camp opens.
- August 1-16: Olympics held in Berlin, Germany. They are a show of Nazi propaganda, stirring significant conflict. In Germany, many non-Aryans are excluded from participating and attending. Despite the exclusionary principles of the 1936 Games, countries around the world still agree to participate

1937

- July 15: Buchenwald concentration camp opens.
- November 8: Josef Goebbels, Reich propaganda minister, and Julius Streicher, editor of the antisemitic newspaper, Der Stürmer (The Attacker) open the antisemitic exhibition Der Ewige Jude (The Eternal Jew) at the library of the German Museum in Munich, Germany.

1938

- March 11-13: Germany annexes Austria, in what is known as the Anschluss, incorporating the country into the German Reich.
- April 26: Mandatory registration of all property held by Jews inside the Reich.
- July 6-15: Evian Conference: delegates from 32 countries and representatives meet to discuss the German-Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany. Though countries are encouraged to find a long-term solution to the problem, the United States and other countries are unwilling to ease their immigration restrictions. Except for the Dominican Republic, no country is willing to accept more refugees.
- August 1: Adolf Eichmann establishes the Office of Jewish Emigration in Vienna to increase the pace of forced emigration.
- August 17: The Executive Order on the Law on the Alteration of Family and Personal Names ("Jewish Name Law") requires German Jews bearing first names of "non-Jewish" origin to adopt an additional name: "Israel" for men and "Sara" for women.
- September 30: Munich Conference: Germany, Italy, Great Britain, and France sign Munich Agreement in the hopes of preventing war. The agreement permits German occupation of the Sudetenland, previously western Czechoslovakia.
- October 5: Following request by Swiss authorities, Germans mark all Jewish passports with a large letter "J" to restrict Jews from immigrating to Switzerland.
- November 9-10: Kristallnacht (Night of Broken Glass): Anti-Jewish pogrom in Germany, Austria, and the Sudetenland where over 1,400 synagogues are destroyed, 7,500 Jewish shops looted, and 30,000 male Jews sent to concentration camps (Dachau, Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen) in one night.
- November 12: Decree on the Elimination of the Jews from Economic Life passes, forcing all Jews to transfer retail businesses to Aryan hands.
- November 15: All Jewish pupils are expelled from German schools.
- December 2: First Kindertransport arrives in Great Britain. Kindertransport (Children's Transport) was a series of rescue efforts (organized by Jewish communal groups in Germany and Austria) which brought thousands of refugee Jewish children to Great Britain between 1938 and 1940.

1939

- January 30: Reichstag Speech: Führer and Reich Chancellor, Adolf Hitler, tells the German public and the world that the outbreak of war would mean the end of European Jewry.
- February 9: FWagner-Rogers Bill is introduced to the U.S. government – never passes. Senator Robert Wagner of New York and Representative Edith Rogers of Massachusetts introduces a bill to permit the entry of 20,000 refugee children, ages 14 and under, from the Greater German Reich into the United States over the course of two years. The bill dies in committee in the summer of 1939.
- March 15: Germany occupies Czechoslovakia.
- May 13: German transatlantic liner St. Louis sets sail from Hamburg, Germany, for Havana, Cuba. On board are over 900 passengers, almost all of them Jews fleeing from Nazi Germany. They are denied entry into Cuba upon arrival and sent back to Europe (also being denied entry into the United States enroute back). Only two-thirds survive the Holocaust.
- August 23: German-Soviet Pact is signed. It allows Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union to control/invade portions of eastern Europe, while pledging not to attack each other for 10 years.
- September 1: Beginning of World War II: Germany and Soviet Union invade Poland.
- October: Euthanasia Program officially begins. Hitler signs a secret authorization to protect participating physicians, medical staff, and administrators from prosecution. This authorization is backdated to September 1, 1939, to suggest that the effort was related to WWII actions.
- October 28: Nazi Germany and allies establish first Polish ghetto in Piotrkow.
- November 23: Jews in German-occupied Poland forced to wear an arm band or yellow star

World War II and the Final Solution (1940–1945)

1940

- Early February: Establishment of Lodz Ghetto.
- April 9: Germany invades Denmark and Norway.
- May 10: Germany invades the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France.
- May 20: Concentration camp is established at Auschwitz.
- June 10: Italy declares war on Britain and France, entering WWII.
- June 14: The first mass transport arrives at Auschwitz I, consisting of 728 Polish political prisoners from Tarnow.
- June 15: Soviet Union invades Lithuania (other Baltic States are invaded next day).

- September 27: Axis Alliance is formed between Germany, Italy, and Japan with the signing of the Tripartite Pact.
- October 12: Decree to establish Warsaw Ghetto.
- October 28: Italy invades Greece.

1941

- January: Pogroms (Anti-Jewish riots) held in Romania, hundreds of Jews murdered.
- April 6: Germany invades Yugoslavia and Greece.
- June 6: Nazi Germany issues Commissar Order: Commissars were officials in the Soviet communist party assigned to military units to spread patriotic, pro-communist propaganda. They were not active soldiers. This order authorized German soldiers to execute commissars, which goes against the International Laws of War.
- June 22: Germany invades the Soviet Union (“Operation Barbarossa”).
- June 24: Germany invades Lithuania.
- August 24: Euthanasia Program “ceases” due to public attention/protest (simply goes underground).
- September 1: Jewish badges/Stars of David required to be worn by Jews in the Reich
- September 29-30: Mass shootings occur in Kyiv, Ukraine. In two days, German police and the Einsatzgruppen, along with local collaborators, murder over 30,000 Jews in a ravine called Babyn Yar (Babi Yar).
- October 15: Nazi Germany initiates plan to murder approximately two million Jews living in German-occupied Poland. Later code-named Operation Reinhard, three killing centers (Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka) were established under this plan.
- October 29: German SS and police units and Lithuanian police auxiliaries murder 9,200 residents of the Jewish ghetto in Kovno (Kaunas; Kovne), Lithuania, in Fort IX on the edge of the city.
- November 24: Theresienstadt ghetto-camp is established.
- December 7: Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.
- December 8: Chelmo killing center begins operations.
- December 8: United States declares war on Japan, entering WWII officially a few days later

1942

- January 20: Wannsee Conference in Berlin: Plan is developed for “Final Solution”
- March 1: Auschwitz-Birkenau killing center is established.
- March 17: Mass murder operations begin at Belzec killing center.
- May: Mass murder operations begin at Sobibor killing center.
- May 27: Czech agents attempt an assassination of Reinhard Heydrich, chief of Reich Security. He dies of his wounds in early June and becomes the namesake of Operation Reinhard.
- June: Jewish partisan units establish in the forests of Byelorussia and the Baltic states.
- July 23: Mass murder operations begin at Treblinka II killing center.
- Summer: Deportation of Jews to killing centers from Belgium, Croatia, France, the Netherlands, and Poland; armed resistance by Jews in ghettos of Kletzk, Kremenets, Lachva, Mir, and Tulin.
- October: Mass murder operations begins at Majdanek killing center.
- Winter: Deportation of Jews from Germany, Greece and Norway to killing centers; Jewish partisan movement organizes in forests near Lublin.
- December 17: The Allied nations issue a declaration stating explicitly that the German authorities were engaging in mass murder of the European Jews, and that those responsible for this “bestial policy of cold-blooded extermination” would “not escape retribution.”

1943

- February 2: German defeat at Stalingrad. The battle became a turning point, ending a string of German victories and beginning the long retreat westward.
- April 19: Warsaw Ghetto uprising begins. During this uprising, U.S. and British diplomats at the Bermuda Conference reject all new recommendations to rescue the Jews of Europe.
- Summer: Armed resistance by Jews in Bedzin, Bialystok, Czestochowa, Lvov, and Tarnow ghettos
- August 2: Uprising in Treblinka II killing center begins.
- September 8: Italy surrenders to the Allies.
- October 14: Uprising in Sobibor killing center begins.
- September-October: Danish Jews escape to Sweden with help of Danish resistance.
- November 3: Operation “Harvest Festival” (Aktion Erntefest) begins. Nervous due to recent uprisings, the SS decide to murder the remaining Jews in Majdanek.

1944

- January 22: US President Franklin D. Roosevelt creates the War Refugee Board.
- March 19: Germany occupies Hungary
- May 15: Nazis begin deporting Hungarian Jews.
- June: Chelmo is reopened and restaffed to murder the remaining Jews in Lodz ghetto.
- June 6: D-Day occurs as U.S., British, and Canadian troops land on the beaches of Normandy.
- July 23: Soviets liberate Majdanek.
- August 9: Liquidation of the Lodz ghetto begins.
- October 7: Prisoner Revolt begins at Auschwitz-Birkenau killing center; one crematorium blown up.
- November 25: Heinrich Himmler orders the destruction of the Auschwitz-Birkenau gas chambers and crematoria to destroy evidence of mass killings.

1945

- January: Lodz ghetto is liberated.
- January 17: Death march begins from Auschwitz.
- January 17: SS abandon Chelmo as Soviets approach.
- January 27: Soviet Army liberates Auschwitz.
- April 4: Liberation of Ohrdruf by US Troops. This was the first Nazi camp liberated by US troops.
- April 15: Liberation of Bergen Belsen by British Army.
- April 26: Death march begins for inmates of Dachau.
- April 29: Liberation of Dachau by U.S. Troops.
- April 30: Hitler takes his own life by suicide.
- May 5: Liberation of Mauthausen and Gusen by U.S. Troops.
- May 7: Germany surrenders.
- Spring: Large numbers of Holocaust refugees are housed in Displacement Persons (DP) camps across Europe.
- September 2: World War II comes to an end after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the U.S. More than 200,000 Japanese civilians were killed due to the bombings.
- November 20: Nuremberg Trials begin.
- December 22: President Truman gives preference to Holocaust survivors for U.S. immigrant visas. However, the process of immigrating continues to be complicated and difficult in the years to come.

The Liberation of Auschwitz

from nationalww2museum.org

Auschwitz was a large complex of camps in and around Oświęcim and Brzezinka, Poland. From 1942 to 1944, gassings took place in the best known of the three main sites, Birkenau. During this time, over 1.1 million people, mainly European Jews, were killed in the gas

chambers, shootings, hangings, and from starvation, disease, and exhaustion.



The Beginning of the End

In summer 1944, the gas chambers and crematoria at Auschwitz-Birkenau were running at maximum capacity. Over 400,000 Hungarian Jews were arriving in the camp, the majority of whom would be murdered in the gas chambers. Plans were also in progress to expand the camp, despite its already massive size. Though it was not obvious, this was the beginning of the end of Auschwitz.

That spring, the Red Army had advanced on the Eastern Front, pushing German forces out of Soviet territory. As they pushed westward, the SS running camps and ghettos on the Eastern front raced to evacuate prisoners who might testify about their experiences or even join Soviet forces in fighting the German military.[1] In some cases, where prisoners could not be evacuated to camps further west, they were killed on the spot.

With the beginning of Operation Bagration in June 1944, the Soviets began advancing even further west, threatening German troops and camps set up in Eastern Poland. In July 1944, Soviet forces overran Majdanek, the first intact death camp to be liberated.

The liberation of Majdanek struck fear into the hearts of SS men at Auschwitz-Birkenau. If Auschwitz-Birkenau was found intact, with all of its documentation, they might be tried for war crimes. If the prisoners were found alive, they might testify against the SS or take violent revenge. The SS began at once to destroy evidence of their crimes. The Political Department, which oversaw the punishment of prisoners, destroyed hundreds of thousands of records of Jewish prisoners who had been gassed or executed. They also destroyed transport lists of Jewish prisoners but kept intact lists of registered prisoners who were still alive.[2] Though the Soviet Army was advancing, it was not clear yet that they would win. The SS still held out hope that Auschwitz could continue operating.

In August 1944, they began another campaign to protect themselves. Nazi authorities ordered the dispersal of Polish political prisoners to camps in Germany. After the Warsaw Uprising, they feared that Polish political prisoners might band together and fight back. In the following months, as the front drew closer and closer, more and more prisoners were transferred to other camps. Survivor Wanda Koprowska describes her evacuation from Auschwitz to Ravensbrück in October 1944:

“They took away the sweaters, warm underwear, and everything else that the women had “organized” with such difficulty. [...] They were leading us out one by one. This gave [the guard] Stenia another chance to show what she was capable of. She bellowed like a wild woman, shoving people around and saying that she hoped “this gang’s train derails.” It was pitch dark outside and pouring down rain. [...] The wagon grew cramped and impossibly stuffy. We were very cold there next to the window because we were soaked to the skin, and the rags we were wearing did not want to dry out. I was standing on one leg because there was nowhere to put the other one. Eighty-five women filled three-fourths of the freight car, and the rest was reserved for the SS men.”

Between October and December 1944, for the first time in the camp's history, the number of prisoners transferred out of Auschwitz outpaced the number of new prisoners arriving. As tens of thousands of prisoners were transferred to camps in Germany, these sites became overcrowded and faced food shortages. Though the prisoners were no longer in the shadow of the gas chambers, their lives were threatened by starvation, exhaustion, and disease in ever greater numbers.

At the end of 1944, there were only 67,000 people left in Auschwitz, down from its peak of 135,000 prisoners. The SS was now preparing for the final evacuation of Auschwitz.

Destroying the Evidence

At the end of summer 1944, transports of Jewish prisoners began to slow down, limiting the work at the gas chambers and crematoria. The Sonderkommando, the prisoners forced to work in these facilities, caught wind of plans to murder them as living witnesses to the genocide committed in the gas chambers. *In October 1944, they revolted*, destroying Crematorium IV. Most of the Sonderkommando members were killed, and the surviving prisoners were put back to work operating the crematorium ovens.

In early November 1944, Reichsführer-SS *Heinrich Himmler* ordered a stop on the use of gas chambers and called for their destruction. Over the following two months, Crematoria II and III were dismantled and their usable parts were shipped elsewhere.[5] Crematorium V, though no longer used for gassings, was kept in operation as a crematorium. Though the gas chambers were no longer in use, the killings did not stop; instead, prisoners selected for execution were shot in the gas chamber or in the yard of Crematorium V.

As the SS forced prisoners to dismantle the crematoria, they also planned the dismantling of barracks and warehouses. The supplies and materials stripped from these buildings were shipped to Germany. At the same time, the warehouses in the camp, stocked full of items confiscated from Jewish prisoners who had been murdered in the gas chambers, were packed up and the goods shipped to Germany.

Death Marches

The SS felt that the prisoners were the last bit of evidence to be disposed of. They knew that they had to keep the prisoners out of Allied hands because of what they had witnessed. There were two options: evacuate the prisoners to camps in Germany or kill the prisoners and raze the camp to the ground.

Without the gas chambers, killing 67,000 prisoners was a logistical nightmare. In addition, though the prisoners were malnourished and weak, they could still work as forced laborers. As such, the U-Plan was hatched, covering the evacuation of civilians, industrial workers, POWs, and prisoners from Upper Silesia, the region of Poland where Auschwitz was located. In mid-January 1945, this plan was made a reality.

On January 17, 1945, the first evacuation group left Auschwitz on what would soon be referred to as a “death march.” Over the course of the next six days, 58,000 prisoners would leave the camp on foot, marching for days, inadequately clothed and with little food to sustain them. Hundreds of prisoners succumbed to exhaustion and hypothermia – others were shot if they lagged behind or tried to escape. Harry Osers, just a teenager at the time of the death march, recalled:

“Those who could not keep up were allowed to remain at the end of the column and then shot dead. We hoped the Russian army would come quickly, but on the 21st of January, we were forced to leave with the last transport. We clearly heard gun duels and artillery shots. [...] The march ended at Leslau. We were loaded into open wagons. On that same train but in a different wagon were the remainder of the Birkenau Boys. So now, after six weeks we were reunited. It snowed heavily throughout the time we were on the train. While passing through Moravska Ostrava, the Czech citizens outside threw food to us. One was killed by the SS for this activity. The trip took three days via Prague to Mauthausen in Austria.”

After marching for as much as 63 kilometers (roughly 39 miles), the prisoners were loaded onto cattle cars for transport to other camps. Many took advantage of the relative distance from SS officers to escape from the

carriages, though the SS shot at them as they jumped out the windows and ran. During the death marches from Auschwitz, approximately 15,000 people were killed.

Liberation at Last

As the prisoners marched past the looming metal gates of Auschwitz, most remaining SS officers and guards went with them. They hastily covered their tracks, blowing up Crematoria II and III, which had been partially dismantled. On January 23, the SS set fire to the warehouses. Before the building was set ablaze, many SS men, as well as retreating Wehrmacht troops, raided the warehouses, taking anything of value for themselves. On January 26, as the Red Army marched closer to the gates, the few SS still at the camp blew up the last crematorium.

With the death marches departed, only around 8,000 prisoners remained, the majority of them too ill or wounded to march. Eva Schloss was one of those prisoners, staying behind with her mother who was in the camp hospital barracks. When the majority of the SS left, Eva reflected that

“We could have walked out; the gates were open. But, of course, we didn’t know what was outside. [...] And many, many people died still in those barracks, and I was one of the few people who was still able to take out the dead bodies. There was, of course, no way of burying them because of course we didn’t have tools and the ground was frozen. So we had to heap them up outside the barrack. I see this still in front of my eyes, those skeleton bodies being heaped up in the snow.”

While waiting for liberation, hundreds of prisoners died of starvation, disease, and exhaustion. Those who were able scavenged for food. Before the warehouse was set alight, many prisoners risked their lives to take food and clothing, often being shot at by SS men.[10] In the barracks, the prisoners took care of one another. Former doctors and nurses tended to the bedridden with what little medical supplies they had. Other prisoners kept the barracks as clean as possible and brought in water.

Outside the camp, the Red Army was drawing closer. On January 27, the 1st Ukrainian Front pushed toward Oświęcim and Brzezinka, engaging in a firefight with retreating Wehrmacht troops and SS men. Driving relentlessly towards the gates of Auschwitz, Birkenau, and Monowitz, the three main camps, 231 Red Army soldiers were killed.[11] That morning, the first liberators to arrive were scouts on reconnaissance patrols. Eva Schloss recalls their astonishment at seeing the first Red Army soldier:

“At the gate we saw this huge creature with icicles and wrapped in fur. It was terribly, terribly cold. [...] First, we really thought it was a bear, but when we looked closer, we realized it was a human being. It was the first Russian soldier who had come into the camp. And I took him to show him to the barrack, and this big man who must have seen terrible things had tears running down his cheeks.”

That afternoon, the 60th Army of the 1st Ukrainian Front marched through the gates of Auschwitz. Though they had heard warnings of what they might see, they were still horrified. Officer Vasilii Davydov wrote:

“Wherever one looked, he saw piles of human bodies. In some places, the former prisoners, looking like living skeletons, sat or lay around. Many of them could not be helped. A few who could still walk took us around the camp and told us what happened there. It is impossible to describe everything we saw there. When we were there, the State Committee started to investigate the fascists’ terrible crimes. They opened huge ditches filled with human corpses, bones, and ashes (the fascists sold these ashes as fertilizer for five marks a pound).”

The day after liberation, the Extraordinary Soviet State Commission for the Investigation of the Crimes of the German-Fascist Aggressors began their investigation into the crimes committed at Auschwitz. They did autopsies on bodies at the site, opened mass graves, and spoke to former prisoners. Later in 1945 and 1946, Polish authorities conducted further investigations at the site, leading to the trials of former Auschwitz

concentration camp commandant Rudolf Höss and 47 other former camp personnel. Other Auschwitz criminals would be tried during the Nuremberg Trials, like Otto Moll, who oversaw the operations of the crematoria.

The Survivors

The majority of the prisoners who were still at the camp upon liberation were too sick to leave. Those few who could walk set out for Cracow immediately, where they hoped to connect with aid organizations who could help them find surviving family members and get home.

On the site of the main camp, which had brick barracks and plumbing, the Soviet military and the Polish Red Cross set up a

field hospital, which was used to nurse the 4,500 remaining prisoners back to health. Caring for their physical needs was challenging, but many prisoners were also mentally scarred by what they experienced. When nurses came to bathe them, they hid, associating the word “bath” with the gas chambers. Others stashed bread underneath their mattresses, not believing that they would be given more food at each mealtime.[14] Despite these challenges, by June 1945, the majority of prisoners had left and only 300 prisoners, mostly Jews, were still too weak to leave. Those who left faced a new challenge: finding home.



Former Auschwitz Commandant Rudolf Höss and Kurt von Burgsdorff are transported in shackles by American soldiers. Höss served as a defense witness for Ernst Kaltenbrunner and then was handed over to Polish authorities to stand trial in Poland. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Eddie Murphy (Estate).

Mark St. Germain

from theatricalrights.com



Mark has written the plays FREUD'S LAST SESSION (Off Broadway Alliance Award), CAMPING WITH HENRY AND TOM (Outer Critics Circle Award and Lucille Lortel Award) FORGIVING TYPHOID MARY, (Time Magazine's "Year's Ten Best") and BECOMING DR. RUTH, the story of Dr. Ruth Westheimer. Other plays include THE HAPPIEST MAN ON EARTH, AMCHITKA, PUBLIC SPEAKING, ELEANOR, BEST OF ENEMIES, EARS ON A BEATLE, SCOTT AND HEM, RELATIVITY and OUT OF GAS ON LOVER'S LEAP. With Randy Courts, they have written the musicals GIFTS OF THE MAGI, JOHNNY PYE and JACK'S HOLIDAY. Mark has also written STAND BY YOUR MAN, The Tammy Wynette Musical, for the legendary Ryman Auditorium in Nashville. With John Markus he wrote THE FABULOUS LIPTONES.

Mark co-wrote the screenplay for Carroll Ballard's Warner Brothers film, DUMA. He directed and co-produced the documentary, MY DOG, An Unconditional Love Story, featuring Richard Gere, Glenn Close and Billy Collins among others. Television credits include THE COSBY SHOW and Dick Wolf's CRIME AND PUNISHMENT. He wrote the award winning children's book THREE CUPS.

Mark is a member of the Dramatists Guild, the Writer's Guild East and a Board Member of the Great Barrington Public Theater.

Guidelines for Teaching About the Holocaust

from The Holocaust Memorial Museum

Teaching Holocaust history requires a high level of sensitivity and keen awareness of the complexity of the subject matter. The following guidelines reflect approaches appropriate for effective teaching in general and are particularly relevant to Holocaust education.

Define the Term “Holocaust”

A historically accurate and precise definition of the Holocaust is essential as part of a successful lesson or unit. Defining the Holocaust at the beginning of a unit provides students with a foundation from which they can further explore the history and its lasting influence, identifying who was involved and placing the history into geographical and temporal context. It provides students with sound footing as they confront the question, “What was the Holocaust?”

The Holocaust Was Not Inevitable

The Holocaust took place because individuals, groups, and nations made decisions to act or not to act. Focusing on those decisions leads to insights into history and human nature and fosters critical thinking. Just because a historical event took place, and it is documented in textbooks and on film, does not mean that it had to happen.

Avoid Simple Answers to Complex Questions

The history of the Holocaust raises difficult questions about human behavior and the context within which individual decisions are made. Be wary of simplification. Seek instead to convey the nuances of this history. Allow students to think about the many factors and events that contributed to the Holocaust and that often made decision making difficult and uncertain.

Strive for Precision of Language

Because of the complexity of the history, there is a temptation to generalize and, thus, to distort the facts (e.g., “all concentration camps were killing centers” or “all Germans were collaborators”). Avoid this by helping your students clarify the information presented and encourage them to distinguish, for example, the differences between prejudice and discrimination, armed and spiritual resistance, direct and assumed orders, concentration camps and killing centers, and guilt and responsibility.

Words that describe human behavior often have multiple meanings. Resistance, for example, usually refers to a physical act of armed revolt. During the Holocaust, it also encompassed partisan activity; the smuggling of messages, food, and weapons; sabotage; and actual military engagement. Resistance may also be thought of as willful disobedience, such as continuing to practice religious and cultural traditions in defiance of the rules or creating art, music, and poetry inside ghettos and concentration camps. For many, simply maintaining the will to live in the face of abject brutality was an act of spiritual resistance.

Try to avoid stereotypical descriptions. Though all Jews were targeted for destruction by the Nazis, the experiences of all Jews were not the same. Remind your students that, although members of a group may share common experiences and beliefs, generalizations about them without benefit of modifying or qualifying terms (e.g., “sometimes,” “usually,” “in many cases but not all”) tend to stereotype group behavior and distort historical reality. Thus, all Germans cannot be characterized as Nazis, nor should any nationality be reduced to a singular or one-dimensional description.

Strive to Balance the Perspectives that Inform Your Study of the Holocaust

Make careful distinctions about sources of information. Encourage students to consider why a source was created, who created it, who the intended audience was, whether any biases were inherent in the information, whether any gaps occurred in discussion, whether omissions

were inadvertent or not, and how the information has been used to interpret various events.

Most documentation about the Holocaust comes from the perspective of the perpetrators. In contrast, survivor testimonies and collections humanize individuals in the richness and fullness of their lives.

Strongly encourage your students to investigate carefully the origin and authorship of all material, particularly anything found on the internet.

Avoid Comparisons of Pain

A study of the Holocaust should always highlight the different policies carried out by the Nazi regime toward various groups of people; however, these distinctions should not be presented as a basis for comparison of the level of suffering between those groups during the Holocaust. One cannot presume that the horror of an individual, family, or community destroyed by the Nazis was any greater than that experienced by victims of other genocides. Avoid generalizations that suggest otherwise.

Similarly, students may gravitate toward comparisons between aspects of the Holocaust and other historical or contemporary events. Historical events, policies, and human behaviors can and should be carefully analyzed for areas where there may be similarities and differences, but this should be done always with careful consideration of evidence and contextual factors, differentiating between fact, opinion, and belief.

Avoid Romanticizing History

Portray all individuals, including victims and perpetrators, as human beings who are capable of moral judgment and independent decision making. People who risked their lives to rescue victims of Nazi oppression provide compelling role models for students. But given that only a small fraction of non-Jews under Nazi occupation helped rescue Jews, an overemphasis on heroic actions can result in an inaccurate and unbalanced account of the history. Similarly, in exposing students to the worst aspects of human nature as revealed in the history of the Holocaust, you run the risk of fostering cynicism in your students.

Accuracy of fact, together with a balanced perspective on the history, is necessary.

Contextualize the History

Events of the Holocaust, and particularly how individuals and organizations behaved at that time, should be placed in historical context. The Holocaust should be studied in the context of European history as a whole to give students a perspective on the precedents and circumstances that may have contributed to it.

Similarly, the Holocaust should be studied within its contemporaneous context so students can begin to comprehend the circumstances that encouraged or discouraged particular actions or events. For example, when thinking about resistance, consider when and where an act took place; the immediate consequences of one's actions to self and family; the degree of control the Nazis had on a country or local population; the cultural attitudes of particular native populations toward different victim groups historically; and the availability and risk of potential hiding places.

Encourage your students not to categorize groups of people only on the basis of their experiences during the Holocaust; contextualization is critical so that victims are not perceived only as victims. By exposing students to some of the cultural contributions and achievements of 2,000 years of European Jewish life, for example, you help them to balance their perception of Jews as victims and to appreciate more fully the traumatic disruption in Jewish history caused by the Holocaust.

Translate Statistics Into People

In any study of the Holocaust, the sheer number of victims challenges comprehension. Show that individual people—grandparents, parents, and children—are behind the statistics and emphasize the diversity of personal experiences within the larger historical narrative. Precisely because they portray people in the fullness of their lives and not just as victims, first-person accounts and memoir literature add individual voices to a collective experience and help students make meaning out of the statistics.

Make Responsible Methodological Choices

Educators who teach about the Holocaust seek to honestly and accurately investigate a history in which millions of people were dehumanized, brutalized and killed while ensuring a safe classroom environment in which their students can engage in learning and critical thinking. Graphic material should be used judiciously and only to the extent necessary to achieve the lesson objective. Try to select images and texts that do not exploit the students' emotional vulnerability or that might be construed as disrespectful to the victims themselves. Instead of avoiding important topics because the visual images are graphic, use other approaches to address the material.

In studying complex human behavior, some teachers rely upon simulation exercises meant to help students “experience” unfamiliar situations. Even when great care is taken to prepare a class for such an activity, simulating experiences from the Holocaust remains pedagogically unsound. The activity may engage students, but they often forget the purpose of the lesson and, even worse, they are left with the impression that they now know what it was like to suffer or even to participate during the Holocaust. It is best to draw upon a variety of primary sources, provide survivor testimony, and refrain from simulations or games that lead to a trivialization of the subject matter.

Art projects featuring Nazi imagery, word scrambles, crossword puzzles, counting objects, model building, and gimmicky exercises tend not to encourage critical analysis but lead instead to low-level types of thinking and, in the case of Holocaust curricula, trivialization of the history. If the effects of a particular activity run counter to the rationale for studying the history, then that activity should not be used.

Resources for Genocide Education and Prevention

Click the heading to visit website

Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide

The US Holocaust Memorial Museum is a nonpartisan, independent establishment of the US government. It teaches that the Holocaust was preventable and that by heeding warning signs and taking early action, individuals and governments can save lives. With this knowledge, the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide works to do for the victims of genocide today what the world failed to do for the Jews of Europe in the 1930s and 1940s.

The Auschwitz Institute for the Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities

More than 80 years after the Holocaust, genocide and other violent atrocities remain a threat to global peace and security. Since 2008, the Auschwitz Institute for the Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities (AIPG) has worked to build a world that prevents genocide, driven by the knowledge that governments, institutions, and individuals can act to save lives before, during, and after the outbreak of mass violence. However, doing so successfully requires training, technical know-how, resources, and a commitment to action among multiple stakeholders. The lessons of the Holocaust are central to our approach to prevention, inspiring our mission of building a world where never again will people be targeted for violence and death due to their identity.

The Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention and Human Security

The Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention, named after Raphael Lemkin, was founded to fill a gap in the global prevention protocols. We noticed during several trips to northern Iraq in 2016 and 2017 that very little of the work that goes on at high levels of governments, in international organizations, and among large civil society groups ever reaches people facing genocide and mass atrocity, although they are the people for whom all this work is supposed to be done.