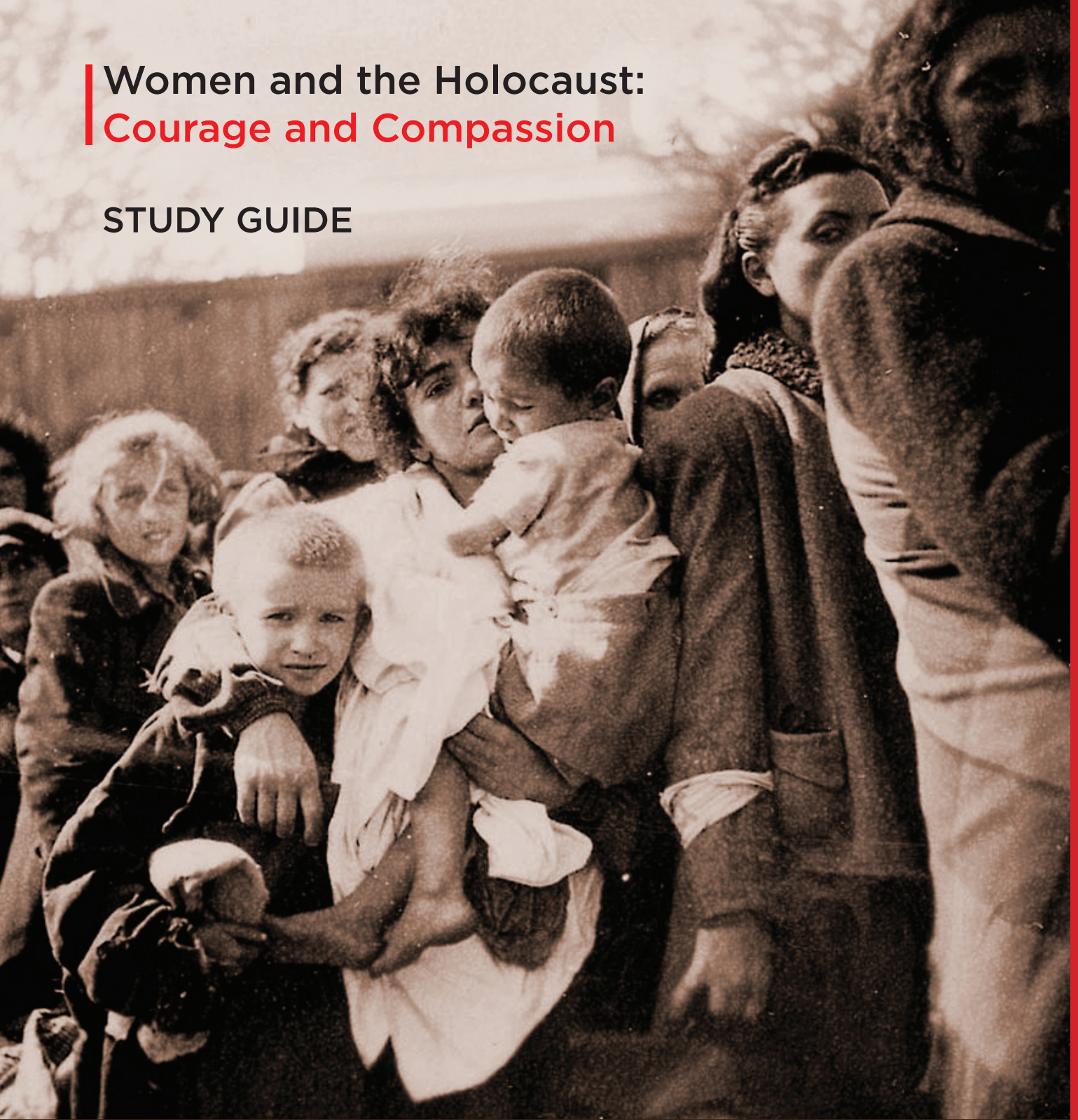


# Women and the Holocaust: Courage and Compassion

## STUDY GUIDE



Produced by the Holocaust and the United Nations Outreach Programme  
in partnership with the USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education  
and Yad Vashem, The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority



United Nations

*"JEWISH WOMEN PERFORMED TRULY HEROIC DEEDS DURING THE HOLOCAUST. They faced unthinkable peril and upheaval — traditions upended, spouses sent to the death camps, they themselves torn from their roles as caregivers and pushed into the workforce, there to be humiliated and abused. In the face of danger and atrocity, they bravely joined the resistance, smuggled food into the ghettos and made wrenching sacrifices to keep their children alive. Their courage and compassion continue to inspire us to this day".*

**BAN KI-MOON, UNITED NATIONS SECRETARY-GENERAL**

27 January 2011

# **Women and the Holocaust: Courage and Compassion**

## **STUDY GUIDE**

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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### FOREWORD

**THE UNITED NATIONS DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INFORMATION** has partnered with two leading institutions of scholarship, the USC Shoah Foundation Institute and the International School for Holocaust Studies at Yad Vashem, to produce a study guide and companion DVD with survivor testimony on women and the Holocaust. This educational product aims to help high school students better understand the experiences of Jewish and Roma and Sinti women during this period of upheaval and terror brought upon them by the Nazis and their collaborators.

Each chapter of the study guide highlights different ways in which the lives of these women were changed, often forever. Faced with discrimination, impossible living conditions, and the prospect of death at every turn, these women were determined to meet their families' needs and protect their children to the best of their ability. As their husbands, sons and fathers were arrested and deported, traditional gender roles changed, placing greater responsibilities upon women in the family and community in the ghettos, and often making the difference between life and death in the camps. Women organized soup kitchens and care for those who needed it and created a support system for each other and those who had come to depend upon them.

They did their best to see that their children received a basic education and observed religious traditions as much as possible. Once homemakers and caregivers, women had to work outside the home and adapt to stay alive in the worst of circumstances — even when their children were killed before their eyes. Many summoned the courage to resist Nazi policies and even join partisan groups. And, despite being subject to constant humiliation, deprivation and violence, many women went on to rebuild their lives after the Holocaust, a testimony to the human strength to persevere and endure, not just for oneself but for those from whom care is sought and those to whom it is given.

Today, the United Nations honours these brave women. The Organization is working to ensure the protection of the rights of women and girls around the world, and their capacity to contribute to human well-being. The recent establishment of UN Women, a new entity for gender equality and empowerment, reflects this mission.

Some months ago, the Department of Public Information launched a Twitter campaign where contributors were asked what message they would have sent Anne Frank, had they been able to reach out to her through this medium as she remained in hiding from the Nazis. The many messages we received reflected solace, courage and hope but, above all, solidarity.

Anne Frank herself put it the most eloquently when she wrote: *"It's a wonder I haven't abandoned all my ideals, they seem so absurd and impractical. Yet I cling to them because I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart"*.<sup>1</sup> That is the belief that animates the United Nations, and the women and men whose sacrifices, aspirations and endeavours gave it being.

**KIYO AKASAKA**

United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information

### ENDNOTES

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1. *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*, trans. M. Moyaart-Doubleday (Toronto: Bantam, 1993).

### INTRODUCTION

**DURING THE HOLOCAUST, APPROXIMATELY SIX MILLION JEWS AND COUNTLESS OTHER MINORITIES** were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators. Between the German invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941 and the end of the war in Europe in May 1945, Nazi Germany and its accomplices strove to murder every Jew under their domination. Driven by a racist ideology that considered Jews and other minorities to be inferior to the “superior” German people, the Nazis set out to subjugate and later, eliminate them.

The killing began with shootings and evolved to murder by gas. Because Nazi discrimination against the Jews began with Hitler’s accession to power in January 1933, many historians consider this the start of the Holocaust era. The Jews were not the only victims of Hitler’s regime, but they were the only group that the Nazis sought to destroy entirely. This genocide of the Jews resulted in the murder of two-thirds of European Jewry.

Numerous people fell victim to the Nazi regime for political, social, or racial reasons. Germans were among the first victims persecuted because of their political activities. Many died in concentration camps, but most were released after their spirit was broken. Germans who suffered from mental or physical handicaps were killed under a “euthanasia” program. Other Germans were incarcerated for being homosexuals, criminals, or nonconformists; these people, although treated brutally, were never slated for utter annihilation as were the Jews.

Roma and Sinti were murdered by the Nazis in large numbers. Estimates range from 200,000 to over 500,000 victims. Nazi policy toward Roma and Sinti was inconsistent.<sup>1</sup> In Greater Germany, Roma and Sinti who had integrated into society were seen as socially dangerous and eventually were murdered, whereas in the occupied Soviet Union, Roma and Sinti who had integrated into society were not persecuted, but those who retained a nomadic lifestyle were put to death.

The Slavic People of Belarus, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Russia, Ukraine and Yugoslavia were also deemed racially inferior by the Nazis. As such, they were discriminated against, imprisoned and murdered as Hitler attempted to reorganize Europe on racial grounds.

This study guide provides an important educational tool for understanding one group’s experience during the Holocaust, that of women. Each chapter reveals a particular struggle that women faced and how they dealt with it, from caring for their families when deprived of basic needs to trying their hardest to maintain some sense of purpose, humanity and strength, when all hope appeared to be lost. The companion DVD contains the personal stories of six women who lived through this period and experienced the Holocaust in different ways.

What makes the study of women and the Holocaust so important? What can we gain from studying it? Today, there is a broader and deeper perspective of research, which now includes the comparison of the female experience in the Holocaust to that of men in physical, psychological and social terms.



Two women say goodbye as Jews are rounded up before deportation in Lodz, Poland.

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## Women and the Holocaust: Courage and Compassion

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While not physically equipped, women were required to perform hard labour, which, along with malnutrition and stress, had an adverse effect on their ability to conceive and care for their children. The psychological effects of such extraordinary circumstances came in the form of depression over the loss of their families, hope for rescue, and as a result of being deprived of their womanhood and femininity. Women also experienced anxiety over the fate of their children, and feared sexual abuse and rape.

Socially, women still attempted to create a home-like environment and provide some normalcy amidst the uncertainty of the daily life. Crowded into ghettos or deported, often separated from the men, they had to adapt. Despite the extreme situation, these women showed determination, leadership, compassion, dedication, courage and the willpower to survive.

### ENDNOTES

- 1 The Holocaust Resource Center, Yad Vashem, The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, <http://www.yad.vashem.org> .

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What was Nazi racist ideology?
2. Which groups were targeted by the Nazis for discrimination, imprisonment or murder?
3. What does study about women during the Holocaust tell us?
4. How can we combat racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism in our world today?





A woman with a baby begging in the ghetto, Warsaw, Poland, 1941.

### CHAPTER I : DETERMINATION

Emanuel Ringelblum, the historian who documented the Warsaw ghetto, wrote in his diary: “...*The future historian will have to dedicate an appropriate page to the Jewish woman in the war. She will take up an important page in Jewish history for her courage and steadfastness. By her merit, thousands of families have managed to surmount the terror of the times*”.<sup>1</sup>

To paraphrase Ringelblum, one of the important pages of history on the Jewish woman in the Holocaust should relate to her heroic role within the family unit. Irrespective of whether the family was Orthodox or secular, rich or poor, large or small, the Holocaust caused radical changes in familial daily life. The traditional roles within the Jewish family shifted, as it suffered from hunger, terror, fear, and murder by the Nazis. As part of life in the ghettos – as well as that in hiding, in the forest, in transit camps, or elsewhere – Jewish women, primarily mothers, were forced into a daily struggle for survival. This struggle principally revolved around assuring food supply, work, maintaining hygiene to prevent disease, and a desperate, stubborn attempt to keep family members alive. These changes caused an upheaval in the traditional gender roles, in which women took on new roles, and were forced to face extreme situations they had not previously encountered.

The continued deterioration in the women’s living conditions, the escape eastward of men in conquered Poland, their random recruitment to forced labour – and thus their fear to go out into the street – caused an expansion in the women’s sphere of operation, and increased their influence within the family. As a result, women were the first to be forced to deal with a range of hardships and difficulties. One sphere was the problem of hunger. In ghettos and in hiding places, where Jews still maintained a family unit, the family members endured terrible hunger. Some women and girls risked their lives to smuggle food. Mothers were forced to contend with pitifully small ration quotas, and thus faced the dilemma of how to divide food among the family members. Many mothers withheld food from themselves in order to try and protect their children. Forced to work, they suffered great anxiety while the children were often left home alone, under constant threat of house raids.

Jewish women and mothers tried stubbornly to preserve hygiene, under impossible circumstances, in order to prevent often fatal diseases. They protected and helped their sick children, even when they themselves were ill. They did their best to represent or defend their men when necessary and at times stood defiant against the Nazis at great personal risk. Hana Abrotsky (born in Warsaw, Poland, in 1932): “*In the ghetto, Mother revealed herself in all her resourcefulness. Mother – who before the war I had never seen in the kitchen, who had never cleaned, laundered, scrubbed or washed dishes with her bare hands – maintained our apartment’s cleanliness with gritting teeth and at great personal risk*”.<sup>2</sup>



Upon selection for forced labour at Auschwitz Birkenau, the women suffered further humiliation by having their heads shaved.

© Yad Vashem

The Holocaust was a cataclysmic event for Jewish and Roma and Sinti families, and most did not survive roundups, incarceration, deportation and the camps. The ability of the women to adapt, their capacity to improvise, and their bravery are some of the remarkable phenomena of the Holocaust. Irena Liebman (born in Lodz, Poland, in 1925), wrote in testimony submitted to Yad Vashem: "From what magical stream does my mother draw strength for all of this? There must be some great, hidden force, a force of love, a force of tremendous will to hold on and watch out for us".<sup>3</sup>

### ENDNOTES

- 1 Emmanuel Ringelblum, Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto, The Journal of Emmanuel Ringelblum, ed. and trans. Jacob Sloan, (New York: Schocken Paperback, 1974).
- 2 Hana Abrotsky, A Star among Crosses (Tel Aviv, 1995) 96-97 [Hebrew].
- 3 Irena Liebman Testimony, Yad Vashem Archives, O.3/3752.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What were some of the problems women had to contend with in their daily struggle for survival?
2. How did mothers help their families to survive in the ghettos?
3. In what ways did the traditional roles of women change during the Holocaust?
4. How did women find the strength to deal with such difficult circumstances?



Jewish women and girls are washing laundry in a concentration camp in France.

© Yad Vashem

### CHAPTER II : LEADERSHIP

*Blessed is the match consumed in kindling flame.  
Blessed is the flame that burns in the secret fastness of the heart.  
Blessed is the heart with strength to stop its beating for honour's sake.  
Blessed is the match consumed in kindling flame.*

— HANNAH SZENES

This poem was written by Hannah Szenes, 23, a Hungarian Jew and a member of a group of parachutists who were sent from Palestine on rescue missions to Nazi-occupied Europe. Although the chance of success was small, she felt that the group would be an inspiring and morale-raising symbol of hope for the Jews of Europe. Hannah was captured by the Nazis upon crossing the border into Hungary in 1944, tortured and later executed by firing squad.

Hannah was one woman among many who assumed leadership roles that were traditionally occupied by men. These women inspired their communities and provided strength and hope at a time when it was most needed. They headed community and social groups; they ran soup kitchens and day care centres for children; and they provided relief from the day's hardships for men, women and children.

Cecilia Slepak was a journalist and translator who lived in Warsaw before the war. Emanuel Ringelblum, founder of the archive "Oneg Shabbat", commissioned Slepak to conduct research on Jewish women living in the Warsaw ghetto. Held during the winter and spring of 1942, Slepak's interviews provide a unique description of women's strategies for coping with the increased dangers that they were facing and their shifting patterns of accommodation, defiance and resistance.



Rachel Rudnitzki joined a group of partisans that operated in Rudniki forest, Lithuania.

While very few women were able to join the ranks of the decision-makers in the ghetto, Gisi Fleischmann was accepted as a member of the male-dominated Judenrat in Slovakia. The Judenrat was a Jewish council set up in the ghettos by the Nazis to ensure that their orders and regulations were carried out. According to Professor Yehuda Bauer, a historian of the Holocaust, Gisi headed an underground group in the Slovak Judenrat and she was involved in efforts to get as many Jews as possible out of Slovakia. Professor Bauer indicated in his book, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, that the documentation shows that it was precisely because of her qualities as a woman, along with her strong personality, commitment, and wisdom, that the men accepted her leadership<sup>1</sup>.

Another woman who was involved in Judenrat operations was Dr. Rosa Szabad-Gabronska, a physician, who became a member of the Vilna Judenrat upon entering the ghetto. In this capacity she coordinated the care of young children, and at her initiative, a day-care centre was established, where children were fed, received medical aid, and played until their parents returned from work. Dr. Szabad-Gabronska also opened a special centre for the distribution of milk for young children, and a centre for orphans. Dr. Szabad-Gabronska was murdered in Majdanek, a concentration and death camp in Nazi-occupied Poland.

Women also led efforts to organize cultural activities whenever possible to lift spirits and foster a sense of community. At this time of darkness, there was an extraordinary need for some signs of normalcy, such as art, music and dramatic performances that provided relief from the persistent anxiety and despair. Vava Schoenova (Nava Schaan) was a famous theatre actress in Prague before the war. In July 1942, she was deported to the Terezin ghetto where she continued to perform, direct, and create theatre for children and youth. A woman survivor of Terezin told Schaan years later: "I owe you my childhood. ...When I was your 'firefly,' this became my best childhood memory: to run around the stage and sing 'the Spring will come.' It was for me more than you can imagine. You created there, under the difficult conditions, great moments for the children".<sup>2</sup>

### ENDNOTES

- 1 Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).
- 2 Nava Schaan, *To be an Actress*, Trans. Michelle Fram Cohen (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books, 2010).

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why could Hannah Szenes be considered a leader in her day?
2. Why are Cecilia Lepak's interviews with the women of the Warsaw ghetto so important today?
3. What was significant about the participation of a woman in the Judenrat?
4. In what other ways did women serve as leaders in their communities?



The title of Righteous Among the Nations was posthumously bestowed upon Elisabeth Hedwig Leja for saving Jewish children during the war.

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### CHAPTER III : **COMPASSION**

***“Whosoever saves a single life, saves an entire universe”.***

*(MISHNAH, SANHEDRIN 4:5)*

Attitudes towards the Jews during the Holocaust mostly ranged from indifference to hostility. Most people watched as their former neighbors were rounded up and killed; some collaborated with the perpetrators; many benefited from the expropriation of the Jews property. Yet in a world of total moral collapse there was a small minority who mustered extraordinary compassion to uphold human values. These were the Righteous Among the Nations. More than half of them were women.

Righteous Among the Nations is an official title awarded by Yad Vashem, The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, on behalf of the State of Israel and the Jewish people to non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust. The title is awarded by a special commission headed by a Supreme Court Justice according to a well-defined set of criteria and regulations.

The price that rescuers had to pay for their action differed from incarceration in the camps to execution. Notices warning the population against helping the Jews were posted everywhere. Many of those who decided to shelter Jews had to sacrifice their normal lives and to embark upon a clandestine existence – in fear of their neighbors and friends – and to accept a life ruled by dread of denunciation and capture.

Most rescuers were ordinary people. Some acted out of political, ideological or religious convictions; others were not idealists, but merely human beings who cared about the people around them. In many cases they never planned to become rescuers and were totally unprepared for the moment in which they had to make such a far-reaching decision. They were ordinary human beings, and it is precisely their humanity that touches us and should serve as a model.

#### **Elisabeth Hedwig Leja, was one of these rare people.**

Edward and Dora Gessler, a Jewish couple, lived with their children, in the city of Beilsko Biala in Southern Poland. In 1938, Elisabeth Hedwig Leja, a Polish Catholic woman of ethnic German origin joined the family as a nanny of the family's three young children, Elek, 11, Lili, 4, and Roman, 1. At the outbreak of the war, rather than join her family in safety, Elisabeth chose to remain with the Gesslers and help them as they fled from Beilsko Biala to Lvov. In Lvov, Dora, unable to bear the strain, committed suicide. Elisabeth remained to assist Edward, now a widower with three young children. Towards the end of 1941, Edward and his son Elek escaped to Hungary. Lili and Roman remained in the care of Elisabeth. Several months later in March 1942, fearing for their lives, Elisabeth, Lili and



© Yad Vashem

After the war's end, Bergen Belsen became the largest Displaced Persons (DP) camp in Europe, with 10,000 inhabitants in 1946.



Roman fled Lvov, and journeyed to Hungary via the Carpathian Mountains to join Edward and Elek. Elisabeth sewed her meager valuables into the lining of young Roman's coat, and hired a rickety cart and two guides to take them through the mountains. As darkness approached, the group was stopped by the Gestapo. Elisabeth, with her native German, successfully convinced the officers that she was hurrying to find a doctor for her sick children. Elisabeth went to great lengths to protect the children, even dying Lili's hair lighter and teaching them Christian customs, at real risk to her own life.

Eventually they were reunited with Edward and Elek in Budapest. Separated again when Elisabeth and Edward were arrested in 1944 and sent to a concentration camp, the family eventually was able to flee to Romania.

On 11 October 2007, the title of Righteous Among the Nations was posthumously bestowed upon Elisabeth Hedwig Leja Gessler.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Who is a "Righteous Among the Nations"?
2. What could have motivated people to rescue their neighbours or people they did not even know when punishment for this could have been death?
3. Why do you think more people did not try to help those persecuted by the Nazis?
4. Why is the story of Elisabeth Hedwig Leja so unique?



Yulichka Stern and her son were both murdered in Auschwitz Birkenau in 1944.

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### CHAPTER IV : DEDICATION

Women are identified with caring for others. The origins of this identification lie in the perception of women as those responsible for care of the family and others. During the Holocaust, women were thus relied upon as caregivers, dedicated to helping family and friends stay alive.

Prior to the Holocaust, women discharged a range of functions. They helped to support the household, sometimes even as sole breadwinners. They assumed roles that required academic training, such as doctors and nurses, social workers and university lecturers. Most working women, however, were kindergarten teachers, schoolteachers, shopkeepers, childcare providers, cooks, seamstresses and the like. Few women had economic power and none, to be sure, were among the leaders of European Jewry.

This behaviour pattern persisted during the Holocaust; one may even say that it expanded. Almost all women had to work, either to support their families or in German factories under Nazi duress. During the ghetto period, women accepted miscellaneous jobs that came their way, but many sought public functions that involved helping and caring for others.

Some had performed such tasks before the Holocaust as well, but many others utilized the skills they had acquired as housewives and extended them to community activity. Women managed soup kitchens, ran children's homes, and built networks for care of the elderly. They served as teachers and caregivers for children whose parents had been deported or mobilized for forced labour.

Women cared for other women who were no longer able to care for themselves and their families. They worked as doctors and nurses in the ghettos, with the partisans, and in the camps.

One of the initial dilemmas that the family faced was how to find a hiding place, especially for the children, while it was still possible. Arranging a hiding place for a child was a complicated, expensive, and relatively uncommon process. Parents could not marshal the psychological will to take such a step, knowing that they would never see their child again, unless they sensed that the alternative was death. Since such an insight was difficult to internalize, many parents did not surrender their children to others even when they could have done so. Some Jewish parents, however, recognized the imminent danger posed by Hitler before the war and were able to send their children on the Kindertransport to Great Britain, where some 10,000 Jewish children lived in safety with British families.

Amidst all this violent terror, women found the mental fortitude to continue loving their children, caring for them until the moment of death and making decisions about their fate that people until that time had never had to confront. Some mothers elected to die with their children even though they could have chosen differently. Rabbi Israel Meier Lau was given away by his mother moments before he was to be placed aboard the train together with her. He wrote: "Separation from one's mother is an inconceivable thing; its agony grips all corners of the psyche for all the years of one's life. It took me some time to realize that by shoving me toward Naphtali [his brother], Mother had saved my life".<sup>1</sup>



Jewish refugee children from Germany prepare to sail for Harwich, England.

© Yad Vashem

At a certain point, some who had lost their families, found some consolation in caring for others. They risked their lives and health by treating contagious patients and children in hiding places. Many went to their death with the children although they could have been saved. They toiled from morning to night as the situation deteriorated with each passing moment, not allowing their physical weakness to abate their efforts. Stefania Wilczynska was Dr. Janusz Korczak's deputy. Together they ran the Warsaw Jewish orphanage. In a letter sent to her friends in Palestine, she wrote: "My dear, we are well. I work a little at the orphanage while Korczak is doing a great deal. I have not arrived because I do not want to go without the children".<sup>2</sup> Wilczynska and Korczak were given a choice not to join the children's deportation, but they refused, and went together with them to the gas chambers.

### ENDNOTES

- 1 Rabbi Israel Meir Lau, Do Not Raise Your Hand Against the Boy (Tel Aviv-Jaffa, Israel: Miskal - Yedioth, 2005).
- 2 Yehudit Inbar, Spots of Light: To Be a Woman in the Holocaust (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2007).

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What was expected of women prior to the Holocaust?
2. How were some women able to help others in the ghettos?
3. What types of dilemmas did women face regarding their children?
4. Why would some women care for other peoples' children?



Rózà Robotka saved lives by heroically smuggling gunpowder which was used to destroy Crematorium IV in Auschwitz Birkenau.

© Yad Vashem

### CHAPTER V : COURAGE

Jewish and Roman and Sinti women showed great courage during the Holocaust. Forced from their homes with just a few possessions, crowded into the ghettos under constant threat of arrest and deportation, and inflicted with every possible form of humiliation and abuse, these women had to summon the courage to face their Nazi persecutors and somehow survive.

Among these women were those who took great risks to help others, smuggle food, serve as couriers, and defy Nazi laws, policies, or ideology. Such activities always endangered the lives of those engaged in it, and were taken by both non-Jews and Jews, by men and women. Some hid their identities and obtained forged papers to help other Jews escape, others engaged in spiritual resistance in any way that was possible—by writing of diaries, practicing the Jewish faith, educating the young and passing on valuable information that could make the difference between life and death.

Under Nazi domination, women sometimes benefited from the stereotypes perpetuated by Nazi ideology, which relegated women to the spheres of child rearing, the home, and religion. The still existent stereotype of the passive, homebound wife dominated by her husband sometimes prevented Nazis from immediately suspecting women of “subversive” activities that did not fit this stereotype. In addition, Jewish women often had more contact with non-Jewish neighbors and were therefore slightly more familiar with Christian mores, which facilitated their assuming a false identity. For these reasons, and others, women were able to resist the Nazis in different ways than men, both spiritually and physically.



Jewish women wear a handmade star of David badge in the Włocławek ghetto in Poland.

© Yad Vashem

Women played an important role in various resistance activities. This was especially the case for women who were involved in Socialist, Communist, or nationalist youth movements. In Poland, women served as couriers who brought information to the ghettos. Emanuel Ringelblum wrote in a diary entry in May of 1942 about the female Jewish couriers: “These heroic girls, Chajke and Frumke - they are a theme that calls for the pen of a great writer. Boldly they travel back and forth through the cities and towns of Poland. [...] They are in mortal danger every day [...] Without a murmur, without a moment of hesitation, they accept and carry out the most dangerous missions [...] The girls volunteer as though it were the most natural thing in the world [...] Nothing stands in their way. Nothing deters them. [...] How many times have they looked death in the eyes? How many times have they been arrested and searched? [...] The story of the Jewish woman will be a glorious page in the history of Jewry during the present war”.<sup>1</sup>

Many women escaped to the forests of eastern Poland and the Soviet Union and served in armed partisan units. Women even played an important role in the French (and French-Jewish) resistance.

Some women were leaders or members of ghetto resistance organizations. Others engaged in resistance inside the concentration camps. In Auschwitz I, five Jewish women deployed at the Vistula-Union-Metal Works detachment – Ala Gertner, Regina Safirsztajn (aka Safir), Ester Wajcblum, Róża Robotka, and one unidentified woman, possibly Fejga Segal – had supplied the gunpowder that mem-

bers of the Jewish Sonderkommando (Special Detachment) at Auschwitz Birkenau used to blow up a gas chamber and kill several prison guards during the uprising in October 1944. Noah Zebludowicz, who was a member of the Jewish underground in Auschwitz, wrote in his memoirs of his deep appreciation for Roza. He recalled her last words to him after her arrest, in which she stated that she did not regret her actions. Nor was she sorry that it was her lot to die. The note that she gave to him to share with her comrades was signed with the exhortation: hazak ve-amatz (be strong and of good courage)".<sup>2</sup>

Some women survived the Holocaust to tell remarkable stories of heroism, determination, and courage. Most, however, were murdered by the Nazis; their stories of resistance have become their legacy.

### ENDNOTES

- 1 Emmanuel Ringelblum, Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto, The Journal of Emmanuel Ringelblum, ed. and trans. Jacob Sloan (New York: Schocken Paperback, 1974).
- 2 Gutman, I. ed., People and Ashes: The Aushwitz Birkenau Book, Memoirs of Noah Zebludowicz (Merhavia: 1957) [Hebrew].

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What forms of resistance are described in this chapter?
2. Why in some ways was it easier for women to join the resistance?
3. Why did women choose to join fighting groups against the Nazis?
4. What is spiritual resistance?



Women performing forced labour at the Ravensbrück Women's Concentration Camp in Germany.

© Yad Vashem



### CHAPTER VI : WILLPOWER

It was a combination of circumstances and willpower that helped many women to survive the Holocaust and rebuild their lives. Most survivors lost everything over the course of the war — their families, their homes, communities, property, professions, language and culture. The youth lost their childhood, education and hope. They lost their faith in people and in the world. Becoming engulfed in the loss and sadness would seem more feasible than finding the willpower to go on, yet many survivors did. They chose to start new families, study new occupations, and learn to love and be happy again, usually in new countries.

Yafa Hart, an Auschwitz survivor who lost her entire family in the war, wrote in praise of Holocaust survivors: “[...] I think the victory is greater if you can return to being a human being, with values, a person [...] We, Holocaust survivors, deserve commendation. Because [considering] all we had gone through, where we came from and what we’ve seen, we’ve managed to start a new generation, to live and to contribute [...] Because we had the power to prove that we were not broken into pieces; that we were able to build on top of the ruins”.<sup>1</sup>

Some women who survived the Holocaust went on to a life of achievements and fame as artists, writers, actresses, scientists, philosophers and politicians. Natalia Karp (née Weissman), a Polish Jew, is one such example. At age 18, she made her debut with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. During the war, she was sent to the Kraków-Plaszów concentration camp, where her musical talents had saved her life because she played for the camp commander, and later she survived Auschwitz. After the war, Karp went on to perform with the Krakow Philharmonic Orchestra. She had recalled thinking then that she wanted to show the Nazis that she was not beaten.<sup>2</sup> Performing into her nineties, she often placed a pink handkerchief on her piano as a symbol of luxury and femininity, of which she had dreamed in the concentration camps.

Another well-known Holocaust survivor is Gerda Weissmann Klein. After surviving the terrible conditions in the camps and hard labour, she was forced by the Nazis to join a 350-mile death march with other weak and sick prisoners. Later in life, she founded with her husband the Gerda and Kurt Klein Foundation, which promotes tolerance, respect, and empowerment of students through education and community service. In 2006, Weissman Klein gave a moving tribute at the first observance of the International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust held at United Nations Headquarters in New York<sup>3</sup>. In 2010, Weissmann Klein was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by the White House, the highest civilian honour granted in the United States.

Madame Simone Veil, the French lawyer and politician, was deported by the Nazis at the age of 17 to Auschwitz and later Bergen-Belsen. Veil went on to become one of France’s most beloved



A group of women receive bread upon liberation of Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, April 1945.

© Yad Vashem

political figures, admired for her political and personal courage. She served in different capacities in the French government, including as Health Minister, and was appointed as the first President of the European Parliament, and is one of only a few women to be accepted into the prestigious Académie Française. In 2007, Madame Veil delivered the keynote address at the annual observance of the International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust at United Nations Headquarters in New York.<sup>3</sup>

These are the stories of three women out of those that survived the Holocaust and went on to become mothers, wives and grandmothers. In many ways, choosing life over despair was their response to the fate intended for them by the perpetrators.

### ENDNOTES

- 1 Ms. Yafa Hart Testimony, Yad Vashem Archives– O.3/8873
- 2 “Obituaries: Natalia Karp”, *The Telegraph*, 11 July 2007
- 3 See testimony at [www.un.org/holocaustremembrance](http://www.un.org/holocaustremembrance)

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What motivated Holocaust survivors to rebuild their lives?
2. Why was it so difficult for them to do so?
3. What did the pink handkerchief symbolize to pianist Natalia Karp?
4. How did their experience during the Holocaust shape the lives of Gerda Weissman Klein and Simone Veil?



Women survivors receive new clothes upon liberation of Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, Germany, April 1945.

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### ANNEX

#### HOLOCAUST TIMELINE

30 January 1933	Hitler appointed Chancellor of Germany
1 April 1933	Boycott of Jewish-owned businesses in Germany
7 April 1933	Jews dismissed from civil service in Germany
2 August 1934	German President Hindenburg dies; Chancellor Hitler took over presidential powers
19 August 1934	A nationwide plebiscite held in Germany to affirm Hitler's new position as an absolute leader (Führer)
15 September 1935	Nuremberg Race Laws enacted in Germany, depriving Jews of civil rights
6-15 July 1938	Conference on the Jewish refugee problem held in Evian-Les-Bains, France
17 August 1938	All people in Germany whom the Nazis defined as Jews were required to carry identity cards marked with the letter "J" for Jew (Jude)
9 November 1938	Kristallnacht, commonly known as the "Night of Broken Glass", widespread violence in Germany against the Jews and their homes, businesses and synagogues
15 November 1938	Jewish children expelled from German schools
1 September 1939	Germany invaded Poland, beginning WWII
October 1939	Hitler issued an authorization for mass murder of people with physical and mental disabilities living in institutions in Germany
20 May 1940	Auschwitz I* Camp opened (German-occupied Poland)
12 October 1940	Jews in Warsaw (German-occupied Poland) ordered into Ghetto
22 June 1941	German SS and police-manned killing squads accompanied German invasion of the former Soviet Union
8 July 1941	Mobile killing squads began the massacre of Jews in Minsk (former Soviet territory, now Belarus)
15 September 1941	Yellow badge identifying Jews introduced in Germany

## Women and the Holocaust: Courage and Compassion

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29-30 September 1941	Tens of thousands of Jews killed at Babi Yar ravine outside Kiev, Ukraine
8 October 1941	Auschwitz II (Birkenau)* Camp opened in German-occupied Poland
October 1941	Lublin/Majdanek Camp opened in German-occupied Poland
15 October 1941	Systematic deportation of Jews from "Greater Germany" to ghettos, labour and extermination camps in German-occupied Poland and the German-occupied former Soviet Union began
28 October 1941	Mobile killing squads massacred thousands of Jews in Kaunas (German-occupied Lithuania)
8 December 1941	First extermination camp Chełmno opened in German-occupied Poland
16 January 1942	Systematic deportation of Jews from Łódź Ghetto in German-occupied Poland to Chełmno began
20 January 1942	Wannsee Conference held in Berlin to coordinate the implementation of the "Final Solution" or extermination of the European Jews
15 March 1942	Systematic deportation of Jews from Lwów (L'viv) Ghetto in Ukraine to the Belzec extermination camp in German-occupied Poland began
27 March 1942	Systematic deportation of Jews from German-occupied France primarily to extermination camps began
31 May 1942	Auschwitz III* Camp opened in German-occupied Poland
15 July 1942	Systematic deportations of Jews from German-occupied Netherlands primarily to extermination camps began
22 July 1942	Systematic deportation of Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto primarily to Treblinka extermination camp began
16 December 1942	German police authorities ordered mass roundup and deportation of Roma and Sinti in the so-called Greater German Reich to Auschwitz Birkenau *
15 March 1943	Systematic deportation of Jews from German-occupied Greece, primarily to extermination camps began
19 April 1943	Warsaw Ghetto uprising began
21 June 1943	Liquidation of remaining ghettos in Soviet-occupied territories began
15 September 1943	First deportation of Jews from German-occupied Italy

## Women and the Holocaust: Courage and Compassion

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15 May 1944	Systematic deportation of Jews from German-occupied Hungary
27 January 1945	Soviets liberated Auschwitz camps
7-9 May 1945	Nazi Germany surrendered unconditionally
24 October 1945	United Nations Charter comes into force
20 November 1945	Nuremberg Trials of Nazi war criminals began
9 December 1948	United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (resolution 260 III A)
10 December 1948	United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights
1 July 2002	Rome Statute, creating the International Criminal Court (ICC), entered into force
12 July 2004	United Nations Secretary-General appointed the first Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide
1 November 2005	United Nations General Assembly passed the Holocaust remembrance resolution (60/7)
3 May 2006	United Nations Secretary-General appointed an Advisory Committee on Genocide Prevention
26 January 2007	United Nations General Assembly passed the Holocaust denial resolution (61/255)
27 May 2007	United Nations Secretary-General appointed a new Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide

**NOTE: \* Auschwitz Birkenau: German Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camp (1940-1945). The World Heritage Committee agreed to change the name of the camp on UNESCO's World Heritage List in June 2007.**

**THE KILLING CENTRES**



© Yad Vashem

## HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS FEATURED ON THE COMPANION DVD



**JULIA LENTINI** (née Bäcker) was born on 15 April 1926 in Eisern, Germany to Ludwig and Johanna Bäcker. Julia's father, a basket weaver and horse trader, was also a talented woodworker who built travelling family wagons. Julia had a happy childhood in a close-knit Roma and Sinti family. She spoke Romanian at home, and German with her friends.

The family led a fairly normal life following the Nazis' rise to power in 1933. After the Bäckers relocated to Biedenkopf, Germany, Julia and her sisters worked in a knitting factory and on local farms.

On 8 March 1943, the Bäckers were taken from their home and put on a train, staying close together during the three-day journey to the Auschwitz Birkenau concentration camp in Poland. Following a long wait to be processed into the camp, Julia remembers that other than her mother's plea that the family be kept together, her family remained mostly silent.

In the camp, Julia and three of her sisters were assigned to kitchen duty. There Julia contracted typhoid fever, and was transferred to a sick block. Within six months, Julia's mother, father and sister Mathilde had all succumbed to disease and starvation. Around the same time, her brother William was taken away and never heard from again. In early 1944, Julia was transferred without her siblings to the Schlieben concentration camp in Germany, where she was again placed on kitchen duty. In one incident, she was severely punished in front of all the other prisoners after she was caught stealing food.

When Schlieben was liberated by the Soviet armed forces in 1945, Julia returned to Biedenkopf, as her mother had instructed all the children to do. There she found a few of her siblings and her home still standing, although it had been stripped of all the family's possessions.

While in Biedenkopf, Julia met Henry Lentini, an American soldier. Eight months later, despite language barriers, they married. In 1946, Julia and Henry arrived in the United States and settled in California. They have two daughters, Cynthia and Rosanne, three grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren.



Julia Lentini is pictured with her family before the war broke out.

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### TESTIMONY

#### Julia Lentini

We did not know, we begged, but we did not even make such a big commotion, because my dad said: "Well that if that is what has to be done, we have to do it, whatever". He did not know what it was all about. Sure enough, we went down to that railroad there, and the depot, and there was a passenger car. But the passenger car was empty. It was for us. We were all in there. And my mother was a little upset and a little nervous you know, carrying those kids, and the kids were small you



know. And my dad said: "Don't worry about it, nothing to worry about". But I will tell you, they did not know about the concentration camps. They knew about "arbeitslagers". [Tell us what that is.] Where they put people who did not want to work, even before the war. People who owed the government money for the children, they didn't pay to support their children. They called them "arbeitslagers", they made them go for six months or a year in those work camps. And that is all we knew about, but Auschwitz, that was not on the map. It was there but they did not publicize this, you see. This is how backwards my parents were. [The Nazi soldiers that were there, were they from out of town or did you know them?] They were all from, they were not from this little Biedenkopf, they came from some military thing you know... Biedenkopf was just a little sleepy town. It was never bombed, no big factories of any kind, just all homemade little stuff you know. So it was not bombed at all. So anyway, when we got to Frankfurt with that single wagon... [How long a drive was it?] Frankfurt is 110 kilometres from my hometown. So as we moved we got changed around a little bit, but we got to Frankfurt, and it was late in the afternoon. So one of the Nazis came on, in the door, and said "Well pack all your little things, we've got to get out here, and we have to stop here. Tomorrow morning you will be able to talk to someone". My dad said: "Well what's going on, why can't I talk to someone here? I mean, what is going on here?" So he said: "Well, that is all I have to say. We have to get out, we have to bring you over there" somewhere, like something they had where they collected all the personal things, the Jewish people, Gypsy people, they got them together. We didn't know it at the time, but that's what it was. So of course we had to get out and walk into this big hall, and there were stalls in there. It was full with people. And that is when my dad found out, from the Jewish people, what was going on, and that we were going to go to Auschwitz. And he heard about Auschwitz and my dad said: "Oh no, that's not us. Oh no, no, we have to go, tomorrow morning, and I'm going to see the captain, and they are going to take us here to the...". He never came. Next morning, that big train came, it was already wagon full. All the people they had picked up were in there. My mother knew already, my mother said: "Hold hands, stay together, hold hands, keep together, carry the small ones, all of us stick together, so that we don't get lost. Get into that one wagon you know". So many people they put in. And no peepee, there was no nothing, they had some straw in the corner, and you had to do your thing there. Anyway, we didn't get out of there for three days. We were in there for three days. Night and day, on occasion in big cities I guess, we had to stop, and to another train, we were connected again and again, until at the end that whole train was just full of prisoners, "heflingers", what we called them: Jewish people, Gypsy people, Polish people, political people, all kinds in different wagons.

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*"They opened the doors, the squeaking doors... and a little bit of air came... When we arrived in Auschwitz, we were already numb: the bones, the legs were not moving anymore. Two men in striped uniforms, because they heard us speaking Ladino, they told us in Ladino, 'We are Greeks from Saloniki. Give the children to the old people,' they told us. Again, we didn't [understand] what this meant. How can you understand, 'Give the children to the old people?' And then they were afraid to talk to us and that's all, 'Give the children to the old people.'"*

*The testimony of Laura Varon, Yad Vashem Archives O.3/10423, Jerusalem: 1996, p. 19*



**VLADKA MEED** (née Peltel) was born in Warsaw, Poland. Vladka and her sister, Hania, and brother, Chaim, grew up in a traditional, Jewish home. Her father, Shlomo Peltel, owned a haberdashery, and her mother, Hanna, was a homemaker. Vladka attended a trade school, where she learned to sew.

The family was moved to the Warsaw ghetto, where Vladka's father died of pneumonia soon after. Her sister worked in a public kitchen in the ghetto, her brother performed the forced labour assignments given to other ghetto inhabitants, and Vladka worked as a cashier in a small cooperative store. She later became active in the youth self-help organizations in the ghetto, and joined the illegal Social Democratic Youth Organization, Future-

Zukunft.

In 1941, Vladka's mother and siblings were deported to the Treblinka death camp. The following year, Vladka joined the *Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa* (ZOB), where she was responsible for purchasing arms for the ghetto fighters. While working for the ZOB, she met her husband, Benjamin Meed.

Prior to the Warsaw ghetto uprising, Vladka was provided with a false identification card, and being able to pass as a non-Jew, she found herself outside the ghetto walls during the uprising. She helped several Jewish fighters escape through the ghetto's sewer system, and later travelled between various partisan camps in Poland, providing supplies and lines of communication to the partisans.

After World War II, Vladka and Benjamin returned to Warsaw and found it completely destroyed. They went to Łódź in search of surviving family members. The couple married in Łódź, and in 1949 immigrated to the United States. Both Vladka and Benjamin spent much of their postwar lives focusing on their experiences during the Holocaust. Vladka began writing articles about her life during the war, which later developed into an autobiography. The Meeds have two children and five grandchildren.



© United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Benjamin (Miedzyrecki) Meed

**Vladka Meed carried a false identity card which she used while serving as a courier for the Jewish underground in Warsaw.**

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## TESTIMONY

### Vladka Meed

At the same time in the ghetto, I was involved with the illegal youth organization, the Social Democratic Youth Organization called Future-“Zukunft”. And we used to come together, illegal groups, having all kinds of lectures, listening to music sometimes, having a seminar. But this was small groups, reading illegal literature. And this was in a way, a little bit of an involvement, which my mother, although she was not too much anxious for us to do this kind of work, knowing that if we would be found out, then death. There was no school at that time in the ghetto, and we the young people, started to be involved in teaching the children in the so-called, we called this the children's corners, when children who were not able to go to school, the schools were closed, we used to take them together, to teach them songs, to teach them how to write and, in a way, giving them a little bit of life. In the houses there, there were created house committees, to help with the starvation which started in the ghetto. In the ghetto, in the Warsaw Ghetto itself, over two thousand house commit-

tees were created by the Jews themselves, the so-called self help. Illegal Jewish culture organization was created, and we, the young people, started to have seminars. I recall that. And later assigned to places to go after the curfew and to have lectures for the peoples of the houses, which were closed up. So I, a 16 or 17 year old, went to such lectures, and I recall it was on Paraja 30, and I was talking about Peretz, about Bonczik Zweig at this particular lecture. And two young people, children, were outside, the windows were covered, in case the Germans would come, and knock to have time that we would be able to disperse. And I slept over at the time, in one of the apartments of the people. It is very difficult for me to say how the lecture, what they talked. But I still remember the atmosphere, the uplift. That in the ghetto there was so much starvation, and the typhus epidemic which started, and hunger and misery. We were talking about literature. And a young girl was talking to all the people, and they were listening. And somehow, it was they told the hope that this will pass, that it was a time that will not remain forever. And this kind of hope was constantly in the life of the ghetto.



**ESTHER BEM** (née Svabenic) was born to an affluent, religious Jewish family in Osijek, Yugoslavia in 1930. Two years later, the family moved to Zagreb, Croatia, where Esther went to a Jewish school until the Germans occupied Croatia in April 1941.

The Svabenic family had to leave their apartment when officials of the Croat government, now under the control of the Nazi regime, moved into their apartment building. Both Esther's sisters, Jelka and Vera, later joined the partisans. Jelka was caught and hanged by the Germans, and Vera survived the war. To avoid deportation, Esther and her parents fled to the Italian-occupied Zone in Croatia, and later into Italy where they lived in a small village for two years as civil prisoners of war.

The family was forced to flee again in September 1943, upon learning that the Germans were approaching the village in search of Jews. They escaped to the mountains, where they lived with Italian peasants in various locations until February 1944. During that time, living in hiding and under false identity, Esther lost her childhood. She had no contact with anyone her own age, very little food, and she lived in constant fear of being caught by the Germans. But, she never forgot the goodness and decency of their saviors.

Esther and her parents were liberated in April 1945 and moved to Venice, Italy, where they learned that Vera had survived the war. The family reunited in Zagreb, Croatia. Esther moved to Israel in 1950, and married Mirko Bem in 1952. Their daughter was born in 1954, and their son in 1962. The family moved to Canada in 1966, where their three grandchildren were born. Mirko passed away in 1975, and Esther remarried in 1978.



Esther Bem with parents in Italy.

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### TESTIMONY

#### Esther Bem

And we [she and her parents] left. We started climbing mountains; there were mountains behind that village. It was a very picturesque, beautiful village. But we never went so high into those mountains; we would go to the outskirts of the mountain. And we climbed and we climbed. And we saw huts, abandoned, abandoned, but people lived there. And we knocked at somebody's door in the middle of the night. And I remember distinctly, this was a family with three sons. Their names were Primo, Secondo and Terzo; First, Second and Third. That was their names. We said we were desperate. I mean, in desperation, you are not trying to convince them yes or no. We told them: "Look, we are refugees, we are Jews. We have to hide, Germans are after us, take us in". They did. They took us in. They found a clean – they cleaned up a room, gave us a bed and kept us for a few days. I would like the post-Holocaust generation to know that there was decency and goodness in those days. That not everything was negative. I think in my case, I can thank these people, not only the whole Italian population, which of course I do, but to people that really knew that they will have no reward, no gratification from us. People that sacrificed their life, their security, the future maybe of their families. Because if found out, they would have been executed. This was in times when the Nazi machinery, death machinery, was functioning beautifully. It was oiled well. They made a choice - to save us, to shield us, to feed us, when they didn't have anything themselves. They were people totally altruistic.



**AGNES KUN** (née Diamantstein) was born on 3 May 1926 in Satu Mare, Romania. Her father, Dezsö Diamantstein, was an accountant as well as a grain exporter. Her mother, Ethel Diamantstein (born Ethel Kohn), was a housewife. Very educationally minded, her mother and father spoke several languages. Agnes learned to speak English, French, German and Romanian, in addition to her native Hungarian. Along with several Jewish friends, she attended a Catholic elementary school. An only child, she led a privileged life.

Following the Hungarian annexation of Northern Transylvania in August 1940, which included Agnes' hometown, anti-Jewish laws were enacted. Agnes was no longer allowed to attend the Catholic school, but was able to continue her education at a public high school. Following the German invasion of Hungary, living conditions became increasingly more difficult, and in early May 1944, Agnes and her parents were forced to enter the Satu Mare Ghetto.

On 3 June 1944, only three days before D-Day, Agnes and her parents were deported to the Auschwitz Birkenau Concentration Camp. Agnes was separated from her parents upon arrival at the camp. Her mother was sent to the gas chambers immediately, and her father managed to survive for a while, but died before liberation. Agnes was saved by her cousin, Anna Koppich, a physician, who became the prisoner doctor at the camp's hospital. Agnes was put to work as a medical assistant under her cousin's supervision. In November 1944, she was transferred to the Braunschweig Concentration Camp in Germany, where she stayed for a short period of time prior to her arrival at the Salzwedel Concentration Camp. There, she became a forced labourer in a munitions factory. Agnes was liberated from Salzwedel by the US army in April 1945.



**Agnes Kun High School photograph 1 May 1944.**

Agnes remained at the Salzwedel Displaced Persons Camp after liberation, and then returned to her hometown, where she lived with some cousins while attending university. There she met and married her husband, Andrew Kun. The couple attempted to emigrate from Romania, but was not allowed to due to immigration policies established by the Communists. In 1962, they and their two daughters, Annie and Marianne, immigrated to the United States and settled in Southern California.

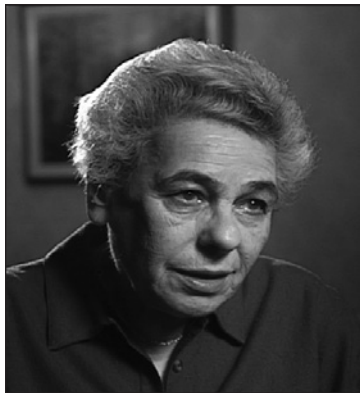
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## TESTIMONY

### Agnes Kun

I was working actually in a ward where the scarlet fever people all were. And it was a very, very mild epidemic, so they were basically doing very well, all of them. They had very slight fever in the beginning and then they were ok. Our duties were to sweep the room, which at the beginning—I think, the spoiled little brat that I was—I think I had never had a broom in my hand before so someone would get off the bed, an older person, and showed me how to do it. But eventually I did learn that and I also learned how to bandage pretty well with paper bandages, which was the only thing that we had. Sometimes we would get unsorted medicine from the transports. This way we got, I remember, some calcium tablets. And my cousin gave me handfuls of calcium tablets hoping that it

might help me get into better shape because I was in pretty miserable shape, with all that fever and everything. In this hospital we had it a little better physically than outside. We, who worked there, first of all, instead of seven people sleeping on double cot, two of us slept on a single cot, which was a major improvement. We did not stand roll calls, which was also not only for the fact that we didn't have to get up at three o'clock in the morning but also that we didn't feel that, we didn't feel that our life is in danger every day by being selected. There is absolutely no question about it that if my cousin hadn't kept me in the hospital I would not have survived the first selection.



**ANNA HEILMAN** (née Wajcblum) was born on 1 December 1928 in Warsaw, Poland. She and her two sisters, Sabina and Ester, grew up in a traditional, assimilated Jewish family. Anna's father, Jakob Wajcblum, ran a factory producing Polish crafts, and her mother, Rebeka Wajcblum, was a homemaker. As a child, Anna attended a Catholic public school.

During the German aerial assault on Warsaw in 1939, Anna and her mother were nearly killed when their apartment was bombed. Anna's sister, Sabina, and her fiancé fled to eastern Poland before the Germans captured the city. The rest of the family was incarcerated in the Warsaw ghetto in 1940. Anna secretly attended Hashomer Hat-zair meetings and put up posters for the Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa (ZOB), a Jewish resistance group in the ghetto. After witnessing the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943, Anna was deported with her parents and Ester to the Majdanek concentration camp, where the sisters were separated from their parents.

In September 1943, Anna and Ester were transferred to the Auschwitz Birkenau death camp. They were put to work in the Weichsel Union Werke munitions factory, from which they smuggled gunpowder to aid in the Sonderkommando Uprising. Ester and three other women--Róża Robotka, Alla Gärtner, and Regina Safirsztain--were publicly executed in the camp in January 1945 for their part in the insurrection. That same month, Anna was transferred to the Ravensbrück and the Neustadt-Glewe concentration camps, both in Germany.

Anna was liberated from Neustadt-Glewe by Soviet and British forces. She immigrated to Brussels, Belgium, and lived there for one year. In 1947, Anna immigrated to Palestine and reunited with her sister Sabina. She married Joseph Heilman and gave birth to two daughters in 1951 and 1953. The family immigrated to the United States in 1958, and moved to Canada two years later, where Anna worked as a social worker. Anna and Joseph have four grandchildren.



**Anna Heilman (left) with sister Sabina (centre) and sister Esther (right).**

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### TESTIMONY

#### Anna Heilman

I used to take the two boxes to my sister. She used to put a little bit of gunpowder wrapped up in a little rag, tied with a string, into a box and put garbage on the top box. And I was walking with these two boxes from my place to her door, and from her door back into my place, and put it under the table and put it inside the cuff of my dress because we didn't have pockets. From there, I used to go to the washroom and in the washroom share this gunpowder with another girl, with Ella. And on the way from the factory, it was about three kilometres to Birkenau, where we lived, we used to carry this on our bodies. From time to time there were searches. When we heard that there was a search, we used to unwrap this gunpowder, throw it on the ground, and mix it with our feet on the ground so it was not distinguishable from their underfoot. [And if there was no search?] Then we used to bring it to Birkenau. I gave it to my sister and my sister gave it to, I don't know, either directly to Róża Robotka or to somebody else, I don't know exactly who gave it to Róża Robotka. [And from Róża Robotka, it

went?] It went to a special hiding place. Rózà Robota had contact with a man from the crematorium. And they had privileges to come into the women's camp, and in that particular spot, they used to come and pick it up and bring it into the crematorium. In October 1944, there was a revolt in the crematorium. The Sonderkommando, those were the people who were manning the crematorium, knew that from time to time, after a certain period of work, they were being murdered, as to not bear witness. And that particular group decided that they were going to rebel. They used this gunpowder, and manufactured little hand grenades, made out of metal round boxes of shoe polish, with a wick and filled with gun powder and when you lit it, it exploded. I don't know how much damage it did or it didn't. This revolt took place on 7 October 1944. It was aborted, either they were betrayed or whatever, all the Sonderkommando people were killed. But, the crematorium was destroyed as well. There were four crematoriums in Birkenau and one was destroyed by this. After the revolt, the Germans found these little hand-made grenades and they identified the gun powder, which of course we didn't know that gun powder has some special characteristics. They identified this gun powder as coming only from the Union and only from Pulverei where my sister worked. They started an investigation. They imprisoned the four girls: Rózà Robota, Alla Gärtner, Regina Safirsztain and Ester Wajcblum. They tortured them mercilessly, and eventually hanged them publicly on 5 January 1945.





**ANITA LASKER-WALLFISCH** (née Lasker) was born in 1925 in Breslau, Germany. Her father, Alfons Lasker, was a lawyer and her mother, Edita Lasker (born Edita Hamburger) was a violinist. Anita and her two older sisters, Marianne and Renata, grew up in a very educationally minded and non-observant Jewish home, in which music played an important role. Anita played the cello and her two sisters played the piano and the violin. Anita went to Berlin to study with an accomplished cellist, but returned to Breslau soon after the November Pogrom, Kristallnacht, in 1938.

Living conditions for the Lasker family became progressively more difficult following the outbreak of war in 1939. Anita's sister, Marianne, fled to England and her parents were deported from Breslau, never to be heard from again. Anita and Renata were able to evade deportation as forced labourers at a paper factory, where they met French prisoners of war and began forging false documents. In 1942, Anita and her sister attempted to flee Germany under false identity, but were arrested by the Gestapo and sent to prison in Breslau. They lived there under unbearable conditions for several months.

In 1943, Anita and her sister were deported to the Auschwitz Birkenau Concentration Camp. There she was selected to play the cello with the women's camp orchestra, under the direction of fellow-prisoner, Alma Rosé. Her membership in the orchestra, which gave concerts for the SS, saved her life. She was transferred to the Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp in October 1944. The British Army liberated Bergen-Belsen on 15 April 1945.

After liberation, Anita remained in the Belsen Displaced Persons Camp, where she worked as a translator for the British Army. In 1946, Anita and Renata joined their sister, Marianne, in the United Kingdom. Anita became a professional cellist in London, where she performed with the English Chamber Orchestra and as a soloist. Anita married musician Peter Wallfisch. The couple has a son, Raphael, who is an accomplished cellist.



Anita Lasker-Wallfisch - post liberation with cello.

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### TESTIMONY

#### Anita Lasker-Wallfisch

Suddenly I was the cellist. And I was taken to the music block. [Tell me about music block. Was it separate from everything else?] No, it was just one of the blocks, one of the blocks was the music block: number 12. And there I saw this bunch of people there you know, with the most peculiar instruments. I mean, you must not think in terms of a proper orchestra. There were people with mandolins, and guitars, and a few violins and a couple of accordions, that sort of thing. Now there was a cello, a base. You know, that is exactly what they had been waiting for. [And there was a cello for you?] There was a cello there. People have often asked me where did it come from. Strangely enough, it never occurred to me to wonder when I was there. But, looking back, it probably came from somebody who had a cello under his arm when he was taken to the East, soit-disant (so to speak) to work, you know. I mean, people come with instruments. You know, somebody comes to your house and says I give you two hours or even 24 hours, you take what you think is the most precious thing to you

personally. And that could have been somebody's cello. So there was a cello there. So, she asked me to play something, and I mean I hadn't played the cello for about two years. So, I asked for a little bit of time to you know, see whether I could still know where the notes are. And I played something to her, slow movement of the Boccherini Concerto. I tried to play it, but there was no danger of my not passing the audition. I mean she needed a cello, however badly I played. So I became the cellist of the orchestra, which I think is the reason why I have survived. [Who was Alma Rosé?] Alma Rosé was a very remarkable lady. In retrospect, we all agree, who are still alive and still in touch, we all agree that we have to thank her for our lives. She was the daughter of Arnold Rosé, and Arnold Rosé was a leader of the Vienna Philharmonic, and a very famous string quartet, the Rose quartet, and she was the niece of Gustav Mahler, I mean a tremendous musical tradition there behind. She herself was a very, very fine violinist. But, most importantly she was a very, very strong personality. She commanded respect from us, anyway I mean we were scared stiff of her, but even from the SS. She was never... she was dignity personified.

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### FOR FURTHER READING

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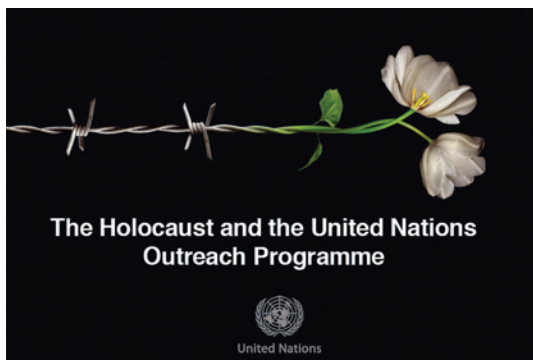
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**UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY RESOLUTION 60/7** on Holocaust remembrance called for the establishment of a programme of outreach on the subject of the "Holocaust and the United Nations" and measures to mobilize civil society for Holocaust remembrance and education in order to help to prevent future acts of genocide. Since its establishment by the Department of Public Information in January 2006, the Holocaust and the United Nations Outreach Programme has developed an international network of civil society partners and a multifaceted programme that includes: innovative on-

line educational products for educators, social media campaigns, student video conferences, a Discussion Papers Journal, DVDs, seminars and training programmes, a film series, book signings, a permanent exhibit at United Nations Headquarters in New York, and the annual worldwide observance of the International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust.

The Holocaust Programme has worked closely with Holocaust survivors to ensure that their stories are heard and heeded as a warning of the consequences of anti-Semitism and other forms of discrimination. It also continues to combat Holocaust Denial through educational events and information materials. In all of its activities, the Holocaust Programme draws essential links between the underlying causes of genocide, the lessons to be learned from the Holocaust and the promotion of human rights and democratic values today.

For more information, please write to [holocaustremembrance@un.org](mailto:holocaustremembrance@un.org) or visit [www.un.org/holocaustremembrance](http://www.un.org/holocaustremembrance)



FOR VISUAL HISTORY  
AND EDUCATION

**THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA SHOAH FOUNDATION INSTITUTE FOR VISUAL HISTORY AND EDUCATION** collects and preserves the testimonies of Holocaust survivors and other witnesses of genocide. With nearly 52,000 audio-visual testimonies from 58 countries and in 34 languages, the Shoah Foundation Institute seeks to overcome prejudice, intolerance, and bigotry — and the suffering they cause — through the educational use of the Institute's visual history testimonies through research and education.

[www.usc.edu/vhi](http://www.usc.edu/vhi)



**YAD VASHEM, THE HOLOCAUST MARTYRS' AND HEROES' REMEMBRANCE AUTHORITY**, is dedicated to Holocaust commemoration, research, documentation and education, and imparts the legacy of the Holocaust through its archives, library, school, museums and recognition of the Righteous Among the Nations. Drawing on the memories of the past, Yad Vashem aims to protect basic human values and strengthen commitment to Jewish continuity. [www.yadvashem.org](http://www.yadvashem.org)

# Women and the Holocaust: Courage and Compassion

## STUDY GUIDE

**THE HOLOCAUST AND THE UNITED NATIONS OUTREACH PROGRAMME**, in partnership with the USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education and Yad Vashem, The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, has produced this study guide and DVD for high school students to better understand how the Holocaust affected women. Women were forced to adapt and find strategies that would help to keep their families alive under impossible conditions. Each chapter of the study guide explores different situations and ways in which these courageous and caring women struggled to survive. Through their determination, leadership, compassion, dedication, courage and willpower, they fed their families, helped to maintain a sense of community and religious traditions and faced Nazi persecution with dignity and strength.

The companion DVD features Holocaust survivors from several countries who share their personal stories: Esther Bem, Anna Heilman, Agnes Kun, Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, Julia Lentini and Vladka Meed. These survivor testimonies, along with the biographies, are included in the study guide. The project is also available online at [www.un.org/holocaustremembrance](http://www.un.org/holocaustremembrance).

