



# Children OF THE HOLOCAUST

**The Survivors Speak.** We are the youngest survivors of the Holocaust. We eluded the Nazi's plan for the annihilation of all Jewish children by hiding in convents and orphanages, in haylofts and attics, in cellars and sewers, on farms and in woods, in villages and cities far from our homes.

We are the "lucky" ones—the last survivors to bear witness to the Holocaust.

This discussion guide recounts the war-time experiences of **three child survivors**. These survivors speak for their friends and siblings—the one-and-a-half million children who were murdered during the Holocaust.

# ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Until recently, the story of the children of the Holocaust was rarely told. Here to tell their stories are three child survivors: 5-year-old Lili, who was separated from her family and hidden in a convent; 7-year-old Krystyna, who lived for 14 months in a sewer, never seeing the light of day; and 14-year-old Alexander, who learned about death on a fateful day in the ghetto.

In addition to the stories of the survivors are resources and activities for middle and high school students that will help in increasing their awareness of the Holocaust and how it affected the children.

## Background

The Holocaust was the systematic persecution and annihilation of more than 6 million Jews as a central act of state by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945. Although millions of others, such as Romani, Sinti, homosexuals, disabled people and political opponents of the Nazi regime, were also victims of persecution and murder, only the Jews were singled out for total extermination. (See [Overview of the Holocaust](#).)

The children’s stories are filled with fear and suffering, both emotionally and physically. Every Jewish child was marked for destruction simply because he or she was Jewish. The Nazis murdered Jewish children because they wanted to create a biologically pure “Aryan” society.

Although the Nazi plan for the murder of all Jews was introduced in each occupied country at different times, the steps in this ruthless scheme were essentially the same. The mass annihilation was always preceded by a carefully coordinated sequence: violation of human rights, expropriation of property, removal from employment and confinement in designated areas, usually sealed ghettos or transitory camps. Everywhere, throughout this tragic period, Jewish children were confronted by overpowering, destructive forces.

Sometimes Jews were fortunate to find good people who said “no” to the Nazis. Although rescuers represented only a very small number of people in Nazi-occupied Europe, they could be found everywhere. Most countries had special sections of their underground resistance movements devoted to saving Jewish children. But, most often, those who helped acted as individuals. Ordinary people risked horrifying punishment and the safety of their families to rescue Jewish children. Whatever their reasons for helping—out of friendship, religious conviction, patriotism, or for money—they risked execution or deportation to a concentration camp for doing so.

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# ACTIVITIES

## Before Reading the Stories

Note that students may find the following three stories emotionally upsetting or sad. Teachers should allow sufficient time for young people to process their feelings around the readings.

1. Explain to the class that for many years after the war, the children of the Holocaust remained silent. They built new lives in new places and tried to forget how they had narrowly escaped annihilation at the hands of the Nazis. Still, after 50 years—after raising families and enjoying successful careers—they have discovered that they can no longer remain silent. As the youngest and last survivors of the Holocaust, they feel compelled to bear witness.
2. Two of the stories in this guide do not only speak of a monstrous past; they also tell us about heroism and rescue. Krystyna's family was saved by simple sewer workers, and Lili was placed in a convent by Father Bruno Reynders, a Benedictine monk who saved close to 400 Jewish children in Belgium.
3. To set the stage for the materials that follow, ask the students the following questions:
  - What elements do children need to succeed (e.g., good home, loving parents, stable environment, praise to build self-esteem)?
  - What are some important physical and emotional components or needs?
  - What might be the immediate consequences of depriving children of these elements?
  - What might some of the long-term consequences be?
4. Have students keep a log as they read about Krystyna, Lili and Alexander, listing incidents or acts of discrimination; who was involved, and what happened as a result. Encourage the students to be as specific as possible. Also have them note acts of kindness. Who was involved? What happened as a result?

## After Reading the Stories

1. Allow plenty of time for students to discuss how they feel after reading the stories. Have students briefly summarize the three stories and have them share the data noted in their logs. Make sure they include the significant facts of each story. Ask students:
  - Despite differences in age, what did Krystyna, Lili and Alexander have in common?
  - How did each child attempt to cope with his or her circumstances and the problems he or she faced?
  - Does being hidden away from one's family make a difference in how each child coped?
  - What do you think was crucial to the survival of each child?
2. Although these stories are about children in extreme circumstances, many of the attitudes and behaviors discussed have some relevance to how students "problem solve" in general. Have students discuss "what works for them" and what behaviors and attitudes have contributed to their own successes and failures.

3. The discussions arising out of these readings are meant to be open-ended. However, students must be willing to support their conclusions with evidence or examples.

## Extension Activity

Using words and pictures from current newspapers and magazines have students create a collage to make a connection between “then” and “now.” Images and metaphors should express feelings and attitudes as well as behaviors and events. The overall effect should reflect their viewpoint on whether the present world has learned the lessons of history. Students may focus on only one theme or on several issues that they find particularly relevant to their own lives.

# BEYOND SECRET TEARS

By Lili Silberman



Lili Silberman and brother, Charles, with their mother in Brussels before going into hiding.

I was 4 years old and my brother was 5-1/2 years old when we were first separated from our parents and placed in a Protestant orphanage in Belgium. I was a depressed and confused child, but with the passing of time, I began to believe that all children lived away from their parents.

After several months, the director of the orphanage had reason to suspect that the Germans might discover the few Jewish children hidden there and my brother and I were suddenly returned to our parents. Eager to surprise them, I was happy again.

They were not expecting us when our escort knocked on their door. My parents were certain the Germans had come for them. The terror on my mother's face as she opened the door devastated me. I had expected her to be happy at my homecoming; instead, gloom and despair permeated our home.

The next day, a strange man<sup>1</sup> came to the house, removed my brother and me, and accompanied us by train to a convent in Bruges. I was sure I had done something terrible. The convent had two separate facilities, one for boys and one for girls. I was immediately separated from my brother. My fifth birthday had just passed and I was now alone in a strange place.

The nuns were strict disciplinarians. But as terrified as I was of the nuns, I was equally afraid of the older children. When unsupervised, some of them would abuse the younger ones. As one of the youngest and smallest, I lived in constant terror. There was no place to hide and I did whatever I could not to bring attention to myself.

What little food we had often had worms, and the bread was always rancid and moldy. We lacked clothing, heat and medical attention. I don't remember ever bathing. I never saw a toothbrush, a handkerchief or toilet paper. When I did not see newspaper scraps, I used my clothing. I was awakened at night by lice crawling inside my ear and I had a chronic bloody infection on my scalp.

Even in the freezing winter, we were sent outside. I was swollen and numb from the cold, and my hands, blistered from frostbite, were scarred for years. I knew that I was diseased from filth and neglect, but I thought that this existence was normal.

I hungered to be with my mother and father. I clung to their memory. I desperately yearned for my mother's gentleness. I longed to be noticed, to be touched and caressed. I craved so intensely, I remember my body always aching. Yet I seemed unable to cry and I dared not make noise.

I thought that if I were good, the nuns would tell my parents and they would come for me. I would play by myself, always pretending that I was talking with my mother, always pleading with her to come for me.

I longed to see my brother, believing that he could protect me. He was then 6-1/2 years old. Hoping I might see him, I routinely looked through a keyhole when no one was looking.



Lili Silberman and brother, Charles, at convent during their hiding.

When Mother Superior occasionally appeared, I would plead through my eyes for her to notice me, to see my loneliness, my despair. I was a beggar for a look, a touch. From the age of 4, I never saw the world outside, never knew that children live together with their parents, never knew that they play in the park while their mothers watch over them. Everything had been taken from me. I was to remain only with a distant memory of my parents' faces. I came to feel that I was a nothing in this world, and, at the age of 5, I felt old and worn out.

It would be four years before we were reunited with our parents. Their own ordeal and terror, their grief at the loss of so many cherished family members, their long and mournful separation from us, all had emotionally weakened them.

As I became aware of how broken these two gentle people were, I began to grieve for them. I became overly cautious of my behavior and my main concern was to not cause them any distress.

Ours was a home where memories were not welcome, a home with no past. I was encouraged to believe that I was too young to understand, and that the only thing that mattered was that we were all very lucky to be alive and together again. While I grew up waiting for my parents to ask about that once-orphaned child, I was to remain secretly tormented by my painful memories.

My brother tried to dissociate himself from his past and in so doing, he distanced himself from me. Our common history was never discussed. We were to become a family of strangers.

After having once begged for a touch, I was to spend years hungering for an ear. When I tried to break the silence, I was always quickly reminded how lucky I was, far luckier than most.

When I began to realize that my parents had no awareness of the sorrow I carried, and no desire to know of my hidden past, I came to believe that my feelings had never been important to anyone.

When, through the years, I encountered unexpected kindnesses from strangers, the tears began to flow and I welcomed them. And, today, I can finally say I have found my peace.

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<sup>1</sup> The strange man was Father Bruno Reynders, a Benedictine monk, who hid close to 400 Jewish children in Christian homes and institutions. He was recognized by Yad Vashem, the Israel Holocaust Museum, as a "Righteous Among the Nations."

# KRYSZYNA'S STORY



Krystyna Chiger in 1941

*On February 6, 1947, 11 1/2-year-old Krystyna Chiger was interviewed by Magistrate Maria Holender. During the war, she had been hidden with her family in the sewers of Lvov, a city in Poland. Here is what she said.*

When Daddy found out that there would be a liquidation of the Ghetto, we hid in the cellar. We usually went there in the afternoon when Mommy would come back from work. I was 7 years old then and I knew about everything.

Later we headed for the sewer. It was very wet and dark. I was very scared and I was shaking, but I tried to be calm and only asked Daddy if we still had far to go. There were stones with yellow worms crawling all over. We put all our things over the stones and sat on top of them. It was awful there. Water seeped from the walls and it smelled bad. I saw large, red rats which ran by us just like chickens. At first I was very afraid, but later I got used to it. My little brother, Pawelek, was not scared at all.

I lay on Mommy's knees and Pawelek was on Daddy's. This lasted five weeks. We couldn't move or get up. There were 20 other people with us. Every day, from the first day, the Polish sewer workers brought us food: black bread and margarine. They were very nice to us.

Because they were afraid that someone might notice them, they always came into the sewers through different sewer covers.

We had a carbide lamp which was lit all the time. It hung from a hook. Daddy brought us water in a jug which he carried in his teeth because he had to walk very stooped. I was not allowed to talk loudly; I only whispered into Mommy's ear. I dreamt that the war would end so that we could go out into the world. I



missed the sunshine, the air and the flowers. Once, I asked our sewer workers for some field flowers. I wanted to see our dog, but I didn't tell Mommy because she had so many other worries.

In the summer, when the rain seeped in, there was a lot of water everywhere. Then we had to lean very low on the stones right next to the wall so that the water would not flow on us. Pawelek was very small at that time. He was only 3 years old, and he cried a lot. Mommy was very upset because she was afraid that someone would hear us. Once, a man who was hiding with us got so angry at Pawelek that he pointed a gun at him.

After five weeks, other sewer workers found our hiding place. We had to run away. We ran through the main pipe, straight ahead, and we didn't know where we were going. Suddenly, we saw our sewer workers. They were very surprised and asked us where we were going. Daddy told them everything. Then they led us to a side pipe and told us to stay there overnight. In the morning, they led us farther in. While walking, I felt much better. I did not have to sit any more. I walked barefoot in a summer dress. I was shaking from the cold but I felt happy. I got a pin in my foot but I took it out myself because I didn't want to delay the others.

We finally reached a cement pipe and we stayed there the whole day. It was so cold there that we couldn't stand it. There was also no place to sleep. The next day our friends led us away again. By then we were only 11 people. The others had died.

Once, my Uncle Kuba almost drowned in the Poltwa when he went for water and there was a storm. He went under because the water pulled him down. In this new sewer, we had it much better. There was more room. We slept on cots which Daddy built from planks that he found. I slept with Daddy and another man. It was very crowded and uncomfortable. Mommy slept with Pawelek and a lady. The rats ate our bread. When Daddy frightened them with a stick, they ran away. Pawelek fed the rats as if they were pets. The rats came very close and squeaked, but Pawelek wasn't scared. One lady cooked soup and coffee and Mommy divided it among us so that I was not hungry. Pawelek got used to everything and he no longer cried. One lady gave birth to a child. They covered this child with a washbasin. It suffocated and was thrown into the Poltwa.



Krystyna and Pawelek Chiger together in 1941.



Pawelek Chiger in 1941

I heard how cars drove above us. I heard people's voices and children playing and laughing. I thought how happy I would be if I could play like them. I got very sick with measles. Then Pawelek got it from me. One sewer worker brought him eggs in his teeth. He had to crawl to come to us.

We lived like this for 14 months. Our sewer workers helped us all the time. When we ran out of money they brought us food for nothing.

Towards the end of our hiding, I heard the whistles of sirens and the noise of cannons. I was afraid but I knew that our liberators, the Russians, were near. One day we heard a strong knocking on the sewer grates. These were our sewer workers who told us that we were free. For a few minutes we walked through the pipe, then we pulled away the sewer cover and our sewer workers pulled us up on the surface of the earth. We no longer looked like children. People felt sorry for us and one lady bought us gooseberries. I was so happy

when I saw the sun, flowers and people. But Pawelek cried a lot. He wanted to go back to the sewer because he wasn't used to the light and he was afraid of people.

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*Krystyna's complete story can be read in Robert Marshall's book, In the Sewers of Lvov: A Heroic Story of Survival from the Holocaust, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.*

# MY FIRST KADDISH

By Alexander Kimel

On March 19, 1942, I was sent by the Judenrat (the Jewish Council) to build underground storage facilities. Our group was led to a bleak, desolate place outside the city where a tall German with a red, square face told us that if we worked hard we would get extra food rations.

After a long day of digging, breaking up large boulders and carting away the dirt in wheelbarrows, I went home with a coupon for an extra half pound of bread, and, with some pride, I gave it to my father. But I was disappointed when he said, "I've arranged a new job for you. You'll be a carpenter for the German army." I was upset. I did not know carpentry and I did not want to lose the extra bread rations.

Anxious and worried, I left for my new job the next morning. It was still dark outside and lights shone through the small windows. The ramshackle streets were covered with a blanket of white snow. The ghetto seemed quiet and peaceful.

I was assigned to help a German soldier named Hans. He turned out to be a friendly fellow who laughed heartily at my clumsy handling of the saw. "To make a straight cut you have to pull the saw gently. Don't jerk it. Don't use force," he admonished.

I was so absorbed in my work that I took no note of the sporadic shooting that erupted at midday.

At lunch time, I sat at the roadside with Willy, the other Jewish carpenter. A passing Ukrainian peasant warned, "They are killing the Jews in town. Why aren't you boys hiding?"

"Killing Jews? What are you saying?" I asked in disbelief.

"Look, there," he said, "see for yourself."

When I followed the old peasant's pointing finger, I saw, about 500 yards away, heavy German trucks disgorging groups of people who were then forced to walk uphill. The shooting persisted, intermittently, but I could not believe that killings were taking place.

I did not know what to do, but before I could decide, Willy took off, running in the direction of the railroad station. After a moment's hesitation, I bolted after him.

We found shelter in a storage room, hiding in a far corner under a mound of cement. The shootings grew louder and louder, soon turning into a continuous barrage. I leaned against Willy and felt his heart racing.

We sat there for what seemed to be forever. At 5 o'clock, the shootings stopped. Covered with cement dust, we crawled out of our hideout, and, still dazed, we walked back to the ghetto.

On the way home, I saw a horse-drawn wagon heaped with stained clothing. The driver walked alongside, whip in hand, and behind were five Jews.

I heard someone call out, "Al, come help us. We are taking the bodies for burial." It was our neighbor, Jankel.

"For burial?" It still made no sense. Nobody buries stained clothing. As I looked more closely, my heart skipped a beat. The wagon did not haul bloodstained clothing—these were dead bodies!

I wanted to run home to see what happened to my family. But how could I refuse? I joined the other Jews behind the wagon.

Overloaded with the corpses, the buggy swayed. The horses slowed.

"Let's push," yelled the driver. Grabbing the wooden railing, I saw, to my horror, the face of a classmate. "Oh my God! It's Arnoldek." I felt a tremor passing through my body.

Arnold Rek, or Arnoldek as we used to call him, was a plump, good-natured boy. We shared the same bench at school. He loved candy and his rustling of crushed wrappers used to drive me crazy. Only yesterday I kidded around with him. Now he lay dead, his head piercing through the wagon's side spindles.

When we arrived at our destination, a hideous scene unfolded: in a tremendous pit, bodies floated in a sea of blood. The Germans were gone but the pit was guarded by the Ukrainian militia. They told us to dump the bodies into the pit and to collect those of the victims who had been shot trying to escape.

After we finished our ghastly task, Moses the Shoemaker called out, "Jews, let us say Kaddish."

We lined up at the edge of the pit and began to recite the age-old prayer. "Yisgaddal w'yiskadash Shmej Rabu ... And the name of the Lord be sanctified and extolled." But standing before this mass grave of innocent victims, praising God seemed sacrilegious, blasphemous! I couldn't do it.

I glanced at the mourners, these broken people who with rhythmic motions repeated the sacred prayer as their forefathers had for a thousand years. In them, I had a glimpse of the indestructible Jewish soul, the source of our strength and our weakness.

After the Kaddish, the group moved slowly and silently toward the ghetto. Some passersby glanced at us in shock, others laughed.

As we approached the boundaries of the ghetto, my heart pounded wildly. I jumped over the border stream and ran to our house. No one was in the kitchen. A pot of blackened potatoes, soaking in water, was on the table. My poor mother would never leave potatoes like that. I was certain she was dead.

I ran out of the house and to my great relief found my parents in the alley. "Mom," I screamed, "You are alive." I embraced my parents and burst into tears. But when I didn't see my sister, I cried out, "Where is Luba?"

My mother broke down, sobbing, "My darling daughter must be dead. I will not survive this."

I had to find Luba!

Running through the ghetto in search of my sister I saw doors ajar, furniture in disarray, feathers, torn from bedding, floating in the air. But I will never forget the people—moaning, numb shadows—moving about forlornly.

At one house, a little boy, about 4 years old, was crying for his mother. His sister, Rachel, a 6 year old, was trying to comfort him. "Don't cry, Mottel. Mommy will come back." She pulled him up and with her small hand she wiped away his tears.

At another, an ashen-faced neighbor, Abe Tunis, was weeping quietly for his wife and three children. Esterka, one of his daughters, was my age. She had red hair, a freckled face, and was always neatly dressed in a black school uniform with an immaculate white collar. Esterka's main concerns in life were her freckles and her grades. She spent all her lunch money on exotic creams to rid her face of these blemishes. Now she was gone.

I did not know what to do or what to say. Silently, I left the crying man and continued my search for my sister. When it grew dark I returned home.

My mother was still standing in the alley, waiting. "Did you find out what happened to Luba? Where were you all this time? I'm so scared."

I turned my head in pain and just then I spotted my sister walking with Mr. Baczynski, the Commandant of the Ukrainian Police. Luba had been working as a cook for his outfit. Not knowing what to do or where to run, she had spent the whole day cooking.

Seeing her alive and well, I felt euphoric! "We made it! We're all alive!" Amid all the human devastation in the ghetto, I was unable to suppress my exhilaration! But at the same time I felt ashamed of my good fortune. I repeated over and over again, "You are a selfish bastard!"

This feeling of shame has stayed with me throughout my adult life. It is only recently that I came to understand the precariousness and limitations of the human existence. A man can't control his feelings and, in time of danger, he rarely controls his deeds.

I often think of my friend Willy with whom I survived this dreadful day. Willy, the indestructible, with his raspy voice and charming smile, was a fighter. In December 1942, Willy was caught, stripped naked and sent to the gas chambers. With bleeding fingernails, he pried open the planks of the cattle car and jumped off the train.

After the liquidation of the ghetto, Willy survived the raids, the hunger and the cold of the forest. He was drafted into the Russian Army, and on May 9, 1945, one day before the signing of the Armistice, Willy Bloch died in the Battle for Berlin.

For Willy, Esterka, Rachel, Mottel and all the other victims, I do recite Kaddish now.

# SUPPLEMENTAL READING



*Hitler's War Against the Jews: A Young Reader's Version of the War Against the Jews, 1933–1945* by David A. Altshuler and Lucy Dawidowicz

This is a simplified and shortened version of Dawidowicz's carefully researched survey of the Holocaust.



*The Holocaust: Maps and Photographs* by Martin Gilbert

This is an excellent documentary resource for teachers and students, containing 23 maps, 59 photographs and captions.



*The Diary of a Young Girl* by Anne Frank

In her diary, Anne Frank recorded a vivid account of the horrors of war as seen through the eyes of a 13-year-old Jewish girl in hiding with her family.



*Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry

When German troops begin to “relocate” Denmark’s Jews, the Johansen family takes in Ellen Rosen and pretends she is part of their family. Their act of courage mirrored that of other Danes who helped save the great majority of Danish Jews.



*Daniel's Story* by Carol Matas

Published in conjunction with an exhibit called “Daniel’s Story: Remember the Children” at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, this fictionalized story is based on a true-life composite of devastating experiences that children faced during the Holocaust.



*Memories of the Night: A Study of the Holocaust* by Anita Meyer Meinbach and Miriam L. Klein Kassenoff

This is a highly recommended curriculum of the Holocaust by multicultural specialists. Ideal for lessons on anti-bias, character education and cultural diversity.



*Night* by Elie Wiesel

*Night* is a young teen's powerful story about his nightmarish experiences at Auschwitz and the loss of his family.

# WHO ARE THE CHILDREN OF THE HOLOCAUST?

When Germany came under Nazi rule, the country adopted as official policy a racist ideology aimed at the destruction of the Jews. To bring about the complete eradication of this entire population, the Nazi strategy demanded that not only adults be marked for destruction but that children be targeted as well. In fact, in each European country conquered by the Germans, the survival rate of children was much lower than that of the overall Jewish population. It is estimated that one and a half million Jewish children, from infants to older teens, were gassed or shot to death in Nazi-occupied Europe. This means that nine out of ten Jewish children were murdered, not as a result of some tragic accident or some wild scheme gone wrong, but simply because they were Jewish.

Such deliberate and systematic killing of children was unprecedented in human history. Very few escaped the Nazi plan of Jewish annihilation. Those who were sent to concentration camps were killed upon arrival. Only an occasional, healthy-looking teen-ager managed to slip through the system.

For the most part, the children who eluded the Nazis survived because they were hidden from their persecutors. Sometimes for years, they lived out of their captors' sight, in convents, orphanages, haylofts, woods, basements or sewers. Some lived openly, concealing their names, pretending to be Christian.

Often, families were torn apart. In a desperate attempt to save their children, parents made the agonizing decision to leave their little ones with strangers. And, frequently, children were left to fend for themselves, wandering through forests and villages in search of food and shelter.

## WHO ARE THE HIDDEN CHILDREN?

Even today, no one knows how many Jewish children were hidden during the war. The one most people know is Anne Frank. But there were many others, perhaps as many as 100,000, who lived their own nightmares.

The survival of these hidden children depended mostly on their parents' actions. Parents needed the means, the will, the determination and the courage to move the family into the forbidden, Christian world. To increase the chances of their children's survival, they often placed them in Christian homes and institutions, thus separating these "lucky" youngsters from everything they held dear—their families, friends, traditions and communities.

To support their new identities, these hidden children had to learn new names, dates and places. And to blend in, they were taught to practice Christianity. Any inconsistency could arouse suspicion; one slip could mean disaster.

From an early age, hidden children were expected to contribute to their own safety by leaving their past behind and remaining silent. For many, giving up their true identity created an emotional void which lasted a lifetime.

Many of the youngest hidden children never knew they were Jewish. Others learned this secret many years later. Even today, many Christians are only now learning of their Jewish birth and that their "real" families perished in the Holocaust.