

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.