

# NEVER TO FORGET

The Jews  
of the  
Holocaust



MILTON MELTZER

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 HarperCollins *Publishers*

NEVER TO FORGET: THE JEWS OF THE HOLOCAUST

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I have also drawn upon the record of testimony given at the postwar trials of Nazi officials in Nuremberg, Germany, and the Adolf Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, Israel.

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*In Memory of Max Hahn*

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**The Jews  
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Holocaust**

## Why Remember?

I was fifteen years old when I first noticed the strange words “Nazi” and “Hitler” in the newspaper. I lived in Worcester, a city in the center of Massachusetts. It was September 1930, and I was just starting my junior year in high school. I used to read the papers, but not very thoroughly. Sports, the funnies, stories about local people, rarely any foreign news.

But on this day something caught my eye in a report datelined from Germany. A hundred-odd members of Adolf Hitler’s Nazi party had just been elected to the German legislature—the Reichstag they called it—and they had shown up for the first session wearing brown uniforms and shouting, “*Deutschland erwache! Jude verrecke!*”

The paper obligingly explained what those foreign words meant: Germany awake! Jew perish!

Who was Hitler? What was a Nazi? Did the Germans take that slogan seriously—“Jew perish!”

It was those words that had leaped out at me from the small print. I wasn’t looking for them; I didn’t know they would be there. Still, I saw them as with a special sense, attuned to those three letters, J-E-W. The same sudden alarm would go off in a busy place—the school gym, the Y swimming pool, the corner hangout—if the word “Jew” were spoken by someone in the crowd. Through the confusion of noise the sound would arrow straight into my brain.

I was Jewish, of course, but a feeble kind of Jew, as I think of it now. I mean I had no religious training and almost no knowledge of Jewish life, history, or language. Our neighborhood was very mixed, and so were the schools I went to. I thought of myself as an American. If someone said yes, but what *kind* of American, then I'd say Jewish. Once on a Saturday morning an old Jewish widow who had just moved into the neighborhood saw me on the street and asked me to come into her house and light the stove. I wondered why she couldn't light it herself, but I did it, and she gave me a cookie. When I told my mother about it, she laughed and said, "She took you for a *Shabbos goy*." She explained that religious Jews could not light a fire on the Sabbath. If they needed it, they'd ask a non-Jew, a goy, to do it.

I thought it was funny, too.

Then why did my skin prickle when I saw those words in the newspaper? Whatever kind of Jew I was, I had somehow absorbed the knowledge that Jews lived under threat. I had heard of the Jews of Egypt, enslaved under Pharaoh, and of how Haman's plan to annihilate the Jews of Persia had been foiled by Queen Esther. I knew vaguely about the persecution of the Jews during the Crusades and that the Inquisition had driven the Jews from Spain. Somewhere I had seen the word "pogrom" in print, knew it meant bloody riots against the Jews, and linked it to the immigrants who, like my mother and father, had fled Eastern Europe. On the street I had heard Jewish boys called "kike" and seen them fling themselves upon their tormentors.

But for politicians to stand up now in public and shout that the Jews must die?

I shuddered. "That could never happen here, could it, Pa?" He looked up, then smiled to reassure me. "Don't worry about it," he said. "Hitler and those Nazis of his—they won't last long."

They didn't. Not in the long perspective of time. They took power in 1933; they lost power in 1945. Twelve years. It's the length of time most of us spend in grade school and high school. That's only about a sixth of the average life span.

But how do you measure the cost of those dozen years of Nazi rule over Germany and most of Europe? By the time Hitler's



power was smashed, 29 million people were dead. They were from many different countries, including Hitler's Germany and our United States.

Among the myriad slaughtered were the Jews. Six million of them. Two out of every three in Europe. One-third of the world's Jews. Statistics. But each was a man, a woman, or a child. Each had a name. Each suffered his or her own death.

Historians now speak of Hitler's extermination of the Jews as the Holocaust. The word derives from the word *olah* in the Hebrew Bible. It had the religious meaning of a burnt sacrifice. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament the word became *holokauston*. The English definition made it "an offering wholly consumed by fire." In our century it has acquired the secular meaning of a general disaster. But what Hitler did added another meaning to the dictionary definition: "a complete or thorough sacrifice or destruction, especially by fire, as of large numbers of human beings." (The Hebrew noun the Israelis use for it is *Shoa*. In Yiddish the word is *Khurbn*.)

The Holocaust was one of innumerable crimes committed by the Nazis. Then why single out the extermination of the Jews? Is it necessary to remember? Is it good? Can it even be understood by those who have come after?

No one would claim that the Nazi extermination of the Jews was greater or more tragic than what has been done to other persecuted peoples. Such comparisons are unfeeling and fruitless. What is historically significant is its uniqueness. There is no precedent for it in Jewish history. Nor in the history of any other people.

Civilians in the past have been massacred for what men called "reasonable" goals, utilitarian goals—to extend power, to acquire wealth, to increase territory, to stamp out opposition, to force conversion. What some power conceived to be in its self-interest was the reason behind the persecution.

But Hitler and the Nazis wanted to murder all Jews because they were Jews. Not because of their faith, not despite their faith. But because of what Hitler called their "race." He did not believe this "inferior" people had any right to share the earth with their

“superiors,” the Germans. So Jews—religious and unreligious—were exterminated. They were killed even when their deaths proved harmful, militarily or economically, to the Nazis. It was a crime against all humanity, committed upon the body of the Jewish people. That the Jews were the victim this time derives from the long history of anti-Semitism.

How could it have happened?

It did not occur in a vacuum. It was the logical outcome of certain conditions of life. Given the antihuman nature of Nazi beliefs, the crime of the Holocaust could be expected. We see that now. That it happened once, unbelievable as it seems, means it could happen again. Hitler made it a possibility for anyone. Neither the Jews nor any other group on earth can feel safe from that crime in the future.

I do not believe that the world of Hitler was totally alien to the world we know. Still, before we can compare Hitler's Germany to anything else, we need to find out what it was like and how it came to be. And just as important, we need to expand our knowledge of our own human nature to understand why people were infected by Nazism, how the poison spread, and what its effects were. The question has to do with good and evil, with our inner being, with our power to make moral choices.

No one of us can know the whole truth. It is not made up merely of facts and figures. We have an abundance of that kind of evidence now, for the hell of Nazi Europe has become one of the most fully documented crimes in history. One can read the cold record for endless hours. The better path to the truth is through the eyewitness accounts—the letters, diaries, journals, and memoirs of those who experienced the terror and grief. This book will rely upon them. However inadequate words are, human language is all we have to reach across barriers to understanding.

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# BOOK ONE

## *History of Hatred*



## *Not Citizens, Only Subjects*

*Jude verrecke . . . Jew perish . . .*

How did it come to that? And why in Germany?

Germany is the country where modern anti-Semitism of the racist kind began. The term itself, "anti-Semitism," was first used only a few years before Hitler was born. But the roots of anti-Semitism go much farther back in history. The religious basis for it in the Christian world is the accusation (it appears in the Gospels) that the Jews were to blame for the crucifixion of Jesus. "Christ-killer" became a synonym for Jew. The anti-Semites took that charge as sanction for the persecution of the Jews.

In the early fourth century, Constantine the Great made Christianity the state religion of the Byzantine Empire. The Church insisted that Christianity was the true religion, the only religion, and demanded the conversion of the Jews. When the Jews would not easily give up their faith, the Church used the power of the State to make them outcasts. They were denied citizenship and its rights. By the end of the century, Jews were viewed as devils, cursed by God.

A popular and enduring hatred of the Jews built up. If Jews suffered misfortune, it was only divine punishment for Christ's crucifixion. But the punishment was not left to God alone. Both Church and State took legislative steps—later imitated in Hitler's edicts—to ensure Jewish misery. Among them were decrees that made it impossible for Jews to farm the land or to engage in the



crafts. Trade was almost the only choice left, and many Jews became merchants, working with and through other Jews scattered throughout the world.

As the economy of the medieval world developed, the Church lifted the restrictions it had placed on commercial activity, and Christians replaced Jews. The Church still forbade Christians to receive interest on loans, so the Jews provided the service of banking. But when banking profits became attractive, the Church eased its restrictions, and Christians then competed with Jews in finance, too. Yet, even as Christians took over the same financial functions, they libeled the Jews as avaricious and heartless—the image perpetuated by Shakespeare’s Shylock.

The launching of the Crusades in 1096 marked the beginning of an oppression that for duration and intensity would be unmatched until Hitler’s time. The hordes of nobles, knights, monks, and peasants who set off to free the Holy Land from the Moslem infidels began their bloody work with “the infidels at home”—the Jews. Offering the choice of baptism or death, the Crusaders slaughtered Jews on a stunning scale. Those Jews who refused baptism and sacrificed themselves “to sanctify the Name of God” became martyrs who set an example of heroism for centuries to come. What had been done in the name of Christianity made very few in the Church feel regret when the fury ended. Nested in the popular mind was the conviction that such atrocities must have been deserved. Piety became a convenient excuse for plunder.

To make the Jew an ever easier target for mobs hunting down the “Christ-killer,” the Church’s Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 required Jews to wear a distinctive badge on their clothing. Now no Jews could escape humiliation. As public pariahs, they were blamed for everything that went wrong. “The guilty Jews”—the words were inseparable. Expulsion or extermination seemed to be the Jews’ fate. What delayed their elimination was their usefulness. While their money could be diverted into the treasuries of king and noble, they were tolerated. When that value was gone, they were expelled. In England it happened in 1290, in France in 1306, in Spain in 1492.

It was in these centuries that Europe began moving from the medieval into the modern world. Epochal changes were taking place in economic, political, cultural, and religious life. But the mass of Jews remained cut off from the mainstream and isolated. They were compelled to live behind ghetto walls. A new humanism induced more tolerance, but not for the Jews. Persecution continued, followed often by expulsion.

The Jews of Spain and Portugal fled into Turkey, the Balkans, Palestine, northern Italy, and Holland. Some migrated to the New World, settling in Brazil and the West Indies, and soon in North America, too. The Jews of Germany made new homes in Eastern Europe. The Polish rulers welcomed them because they needed Jewish enterprise. Jews were allowed to become traders and financiers.

The flow east was heightened by the founding of Martin Luther's new faith in the sixteenth century. In his youth, Luther had been a champion of the Jews. When he failed to win them to Protestantism, he raged at them in a language that exceeded even Hitler's for violence. He renewed all the old charges—the Jews were poisoners, ritual murderers, usurers, parasites, devils. He called for the burning of their synagogues, the seizure of their books, and their expulsion from all of Germany. (Centuries later, Hitler would find it helpful to circulate Luther's anti-Jewish writings in mass editions.)

Even as Catholics warred with Protestants, a few brave souls dared to argue for toleration. The Dutch scholar Erasmus suggested that toleration among all Christians would mean a more humane faith. He could even conceive of being a friend to a Jew. New ideas about the rights of the common man emerged later, as the Industrial Revolution developed in Western Europe. A struggle for civil emancipation began. By then there were numbers of middle-class Jews eager to break free of the ghetto and to share in the civil rights promised by the movement for Enlightenment.

It was Germany's Jews who were the first to be touched by the Enlightenment. Frederick the Great, a despotic ruler and no lover of the Jews, realized that his Prussia could prosper by encouraging

enterprising Jews to found new industries and build up commerce. Many Jews seized the opportunity offered and rose to prominence as manufacturers, merchants, and bankers. In dealing with Prussia's chief customer, France, the German Jews absorbed the ideas of the French Enlightenment and circulated them at home.

Young Jews, especially, responded to the promise of liberty, equality, and fraternity. But their elders feared that Christian Enlightenment would lead to the desertion of Judaism. Moses Mendelssohn sought to work out a compromise between loyalty to his Jewish faith and participation in the broader culture. A brilliant thinker, he had left the poverty of the Dessau ghetto at fourteen and gone to Berlin to master secular learning. While working as a bookkeeper in the silk business of a wealthy Jew, he won acclaim in Berlin society for his critical essays in philosophy. Soon he was Europe's most celebrated Jew. Through the printed word and the founding of Jewish schools combining religious and secular education, he and his disciples spread the Enlightenment to the Jews of Europe.

Inspired by his example, young Jews devoted themselves to modern education so that they could make a mark in Western culture. Cracks appeared in the ghetto walls even before the French Revolution of 1789, and Napoleon's armies finished the job, bearing the banners of freedom wherever they marched. They defeated the Prussians in 1806; and in 1812 Prussia issued the Edict of Emancipation, which made Jews citizens. Jews were to have all the rights of the dominant majority. But not for long. Napoleon's downfall brought powerful reaction in its wake. Emancipation was undone in many places. The ideals of the Enlightenment were drowned in a wave of German nationalism. To be a patriot now meant to be a product of German culture and a Christian. Again the Jew was defined as an outsider. He was viewed as a parasite feeding upon the German body, which could never absorb him. His political rights were cut down or taken away altogether. An endless stream of anti-Semitic books and pamphlets polluted the culture of Germany. Some of the most distinguished intellectuals contributed to it. Feeling against the