

## A VIDEO REVIEW ESSAY

### WITNESSES TO THE HOLOCAUST

Michael Howell  
College of the Ozarks

**Witnesses to the Holocaust**—a six-part series in DVD format. Overland Park, KS: Midwest Center for Holocaust Education, Inc. Each DVD costs \$15.

*Witnesses to the Holocaust: Kristallnacht* (46 minutes running time)

*Witnesses to the Holocaust: The Ghetto* (33 minute)

*Witnesses to the Holocaust: Auschwitz* (33 minutes)

*Witnesses to the Holocaust: In Hiding* (70 minutes)

*Witnesses to the Holocaust: Liberation and After the War* (38 minutes)

*Witnesses to the Holocaust: Jewish Responses* (67 minutes)

History teachers who want their students to witness vivid, first-hand accounts of the Holocaust can now do that easily by showing them this series of DVDs. Curious adults will also find this series fascinating.<sup>1</sup>

The Midwest Center for Holocaust Education (MCHE) in Overland Park, Kansas, has released several DVDs in a series *Witnesses to the Holocaust*. The five programs under review here—*Kristallnacht*, *The Ghetto*, *Auschwitz*, *In Hiding*, and *Liberation and After the War*—cover all the major phases of the experience of millions of European Jews under Nazi rule from 1938 to 1949. One more video in the series, *Jewish Responses*, was not available when the reviewer prepared this essay. Each DVD runs about forty minutes and has minimal narration and explanation, just enough to set the scenes quickly, but not enough to distract attention from the witnesses. They are for sale online for \$15.00 each. As the number of survivors left to tell these horrible tales declines every year, eyewitness testimony is increasingly valuable. The MCHE, founded in 1993 with the support of several Jewish organizations in the Kansas City area, is a member of the Association of Holocaust Organizations. In this project, MCHE has recorded the testimony of several victims from different countries and different ghettos and camps, creating a truly remarkable experience. Each program, after a brief introduction, consists of eyewitness accounts by Jewish victims with occasional questions from an interviewer off screen.

*Kristallnacht* (The Night of Broken Glass) sets the stage by showing old photographs and introducing Adolf Hitler, his Nazi party, and their seizure of power

---

<sup>1</sup>The Midwest Center for Holocaust Education also provides a detailed introduction to the series, "Historical Context in Holocaust Education," including timelines, documents, and curriculum units. <http://www.mchekc.org/sites/www/Uploads/Files/Resources/CoreConceptsinHolocaustEducation.pdf>

in 1932 after a majority of Germans voted either for the Nazis or the Communists, who both pledged to end the democratic Weimar Republic. President Paul von Hindenburg then appointed Hitler as Chancellor in January 1933. After the mysterious burning of the Reichstag building, Hitler blamed the Communists and won emergency powers to arrest his opponents. The next year, when old President Hindenburg died, Hitler illegally added the powers of President to his own powers as Chancellor and secured dictatorial control over Germany. *Kristallnacht* defines key terms such as the “expendable enemies of the state,” including opposition authors, artists, homosexuals, Jehovah’s witnesses, Gypsies, handicapped people, and the most numerous group, anyone with a single Jewish grandparent, about one percent of the population.

Witness Ann Reisner Jacobson, daughter of a Berlin engineer and his wife, explains in *Kristallnacht* that her family lived comfortably and stayed active in the arts and culture scene in Berlin before they moved to a smaller city in 1932. Werner Hartwich describes small town life, noting that he saw no difference between his Jewish family and other Germans. Ilsa Dahl Cole was a Jewish girl whose family lived in a small town for generations. The men in the family all served in the army, and she had many non-Jewish friends. At her Catholic school, the nuns were nice to Jewish children and everyone treated them equally. Kurt Levi, whose father ran a dairy, lived near the cathedral, and Judaism was considered just another religion. He felt German, but Hitler and the Nazis said the Jews were not only inferior but threatened the racial health and culture of the Germans, so they established policies to drive them out of the country. In April 1933, when Nazis urged Germans to boycott Jewish businesses, Levi says people became afraid to associate with Jews, especially after soldiers came to his house to keep non-Jews out. Then the Nazis passed laws against the Jewish religion, prohibited Jews from civil service jobs, schools, and universities. Various witnesses report that lawyers lost their careers, engineers and managers were fired by government order, and some left the country. Even German children picked on Jews.

In 1935, the Nuremberg laws not only forbade Jews from being citizens and flying the German flag, but also prohibited German-Jewish marriages and sexual relationships. Nazis put up signs saying “Jews not Wanted.” Government officials stamped a large “J” on Jewish passports to control their movements. Jewish men had to add Israel to their names and women Sarah for easier identification and humiliation. New laws restricted Germans from doing business with Jews. Witnesses say they no longer could visit theaters and parks or even have telephones. Jews were prohibited from non-Jewish cultural events and from using non-Jewish butchers and barbers. When Nazis closed Jewish schools, the children went to work in factories and there were many arrests. This first DVD in the series vividly clarifies the context in which Nazis launched the massive pogrom in Berlin on November 9, 1938, that came to be called Crystal Night (*Kristallnacht*) or the Night of Broken Glass to which we shall soon return.

Before *Kristallnacht*, in the spring of 1938, Germany’s annexation of Austria, known as the *Anschluss*, had extended the Nazis’ policies to Jews in that country through threats and intimidation. Witnesses tell of Hitler Youth persecuting Jews in

public and no one daring to come to their aid, of park benches that bore signs saying "Not for Jews," of Jewish families forced out of their apartments again and again, of parents summoned to the Secret State Police (*Gestapo*) every three months with their return uncertain. Many Jews tried to flee only to have their hopes dashed when the United States and other countries refused to raise immigration quotas.

Nazi restrictions spread to part of Czechoslovakia after the Munich Conference handed the Sudetenland to Germany to appease Hitler. Witnesses report that Jews from Poland tried to return there, but when that country refused to admit them, Germany arrested them and deported them to the Polish border, only to have Poland refuse them entry again. It was in Paris that a seventeen-year-old Polish Jew named Herschel Grynszpan, whose parents were stuck at the border, assassinated a Nazi diplomat at the German embassy, Ernst vom Rath, providing the pretext of *Kristallnacht* when Nazis organized attacks on Jews and their property in Berlin. With police under orders not to interfere, ninety Jews died, many were raped, the synagogues burned, and graves desecrated. Witnesses tell about some Jews roused from their homes just before they were burned and of fleeing to the railroad station with other Jews, mostly old people, before the area around the station was also destroyed. Another witness reports being sent home from school to find his mother beside herself because his father was in the hospital and three Nazis had taken their jewelry and money.

In the wake of these events, the MCHS video explains, Nazis sent thirty thousand Jewish men to concentration camps. Witnesses tell of the arrest of family members and of dead relatives they had no way to bury. No one dared to help Jews at this point. One witness was allowed to leave a camp after two months when her parents secured passage to Shanghai. Other witnesses report how the Nazis then blamed the Jews for all the damage on *Kristallnacht* and required them to pay for it. Afterward, witnesses said life got worse for the Jews, who no longer could own businesses, work in professions, or even use public transportation. Hitler Youth threw stones at Jews and imprisoned them in cellars. As Hitler's speeches grew even more anti-Semitic and threatened the destruction of Jews, the SS (*Schutzstaffel*) elite guard gained more power over them. Other countries allowed only small numbers of Jewish children refuge. While there is nothing really new in this first DVD for scholars beyond interesting personal details, these eyewitness accounts will enrich the understanding of students and horrify those who are unfamiliar with these events. Some of these witnesses apparently have told their stories many times over the years because they tell them now with very little emotion, though others shed tears.

The second DVD in the series, *The Ghettos*, examines Jewish experiences after Germany conquered Poland at the beginning of World War II in 1939. Germans began arresting and killing Jewish intellectuals and leaders and forced all Jews into areas of cities called ghettos. This fine program has excellent, if depressing, testimony from witnesses who were children trying to support their families as well as a skillful mix of explanatory narrative. Bronia Roslawowski describes a Nazi coming into her childhood home and starting to burn the beard from her father's face with a candle, until she

interrupted him and he left. Other Jews lost jobs and property as Germans forced them into labor. Some Jews were made to build the ten-foot walls topped with barbed wire and broken glass that imprisoned them inside their ghetto. Sam Nussbaum tells of neighboring Poles and Ukrainians fighting over his family's furniture when they were forced from their home. The Nazis killed those who resisted or fled the ghettos. Forcing the Jews themselves to administer each ghetto, the Germans appointed Jewish Councils that had to set up Jewish police forces to enforce German orders. The councils had to provide a specified number of workers daily for jobs like building roads or shoveling snow. When young June Feinsilver was caught trying to smuggle a pound of butter into one ghetto, she received twenty-five blows from a leather whip on her bare bottom from a Jewish policeman supervised by a German, but she refused to cry. As regulations were tightened over time, Ida Loeffler's brother-in-law was told that he could save his family if he joined the Jewish police, but when he learned what he would have to do while supervising deportations to concentration camps, he quit. Soon he was deported to a "gas camp" where Jews were exterminated.

To survive, Jews tried to sell their belongings, but there were few buyers. Those with money could buy food on the black market; others stole from their workplaces or begged on the street. In the Warsaw ghetto, Jews got only eight percent of the food ration for Germans and the quality was poor. They had inadequate sanitary facilities and no soap or hot water, so diseases spread unchecked. There were no replacements for worn out shoes and clothes. After deportations began, some children became the sole supporters of their families by doing forced labor for starvation wages. One such laborer was young Sam Sander who worked in the Bedzin ghetto. Another was Jack Mandelbaum who worked as an electrician in Slawkow ghetto. In some ghettos Jews received different colored cards that identified their fate: blue for work, yellow for temporary life, and pink for death. Bertha Gutovitz in Radom ghetto could not find work as a little girl, but her nine-year-old brother worked in a German hospital and shared the food he got there. When total deportation began, her mother and sisters were sent to their deaths at Treblinka extermination camp. At this point witnesses report that Jews remaining in the ghettos suffered terror and killing for the simple amusement of their captors. One child saw her father shot to death in their doorway. Though forbidden, Jews in the ghettos arranged schools and religious services, cultural events, soup kitchens, hospitals, and orphanages—all the while recording their experiences in prohibited poems, journals, diaries, and art. Some even organized armed resistance.

In the spring of 1942, Germans began to break up the ghettos and deport survivors. Some went to work camps for forced labor, but most went to extermination camps. Ida Loeffler saw children being thrown from second-story windows into open trucks as blood covered the ground. Jack Mandelbaum reported that in his ghetto the Nazis herded all the people into a walled brewery and then an officer selected their fate by sending them to the right or left, for temporary survival as slave labor or for extermination. Mandelbaum, whose valued work skills saved his life, never saw his family again.

The next DVD in the series, *Auschwitz*, explores the Final Solution, the results of Hitler's decision, soon after he invaded Russia in June 1941, to murder the 9.5 million Jews left in territory he controlled. Under the supervision of Heinrich Himmler and the SS, the Nazis set up six death camps in Polish territory. From 1942 to 1944, Jews like Bronia Roslawowski were transported by rail across Europe to be exterminated at places like the death factory at Auschwitz. Otto Stich's boxcar held eighty people jammed in tightly with little ventilation and only a bucket for sanitation. They rode sitting on the floor for three days and nights without food or water, attempting to survive the smell, starvation, crying, and dying. Many froze to death. When they arrived at Birkenau, next to Auschwitz, two thirds were dead. Beaten off the train by the SS, the living ran into a space surrounded by electrified barbed wire. The slower people were simply shot. According to witnesses like Bertha Goetz, three quarters of the survivors, including the old, weak, and the children, were selected, without knowing what was happening, for immediate death and the remainder for forced labor beforehand. Some prisoners at Auschwitz were subjected to horrific, usually fatal, medical experiments by the notorious Dr. Josef Mengele.

After being deloused and shaved, Walter Stras reports, prisoners were marched to the tattoo station where their prison numbers were permanently and painfully marked into their flesh. Then they got the characteristic striped clothing of prisoners, were beaten, and assigned by gender to barracks in long rooms with triple-layer bunks and no cover, where, according to one victim, guards stuffed them in to sleep side by side like herrings. To keep discipline in the barracks, the Nazis appointed selected prison bullies called Kapos, to beat the inmates whenever they chose. The prisoners worked long hours with little food and stood for hours on a cold, windy plain to be counted. Prisoners who moved were shot. Witnesses reported building roads to nowhere and having to jog around the camp with cement blocks on their backs. Sometimes they dug river channels or broke rocks into gravel with hand tools. Then a guard would knock off a prisoner's hat just so he could shoot him. Witnesses reported being hungry constantly and always volunteering for garbage duty for the chance to look for food. One reported finishing a bowl of soup left unfinished by a guard dog.

Prisoners were not expected to last for more than two or three months, and those who looked sick or too thin were selected for death. Nevertheless, on October 7, 1944, a revolt by prisoners erupted in area K4 at Auschwitz. Most were killed. But the war was turning against the Nazis and, in November 1944, Himmler ordered the SS to stop the gassings and disable the crematoria where the Nazis burned the dead. As the Russian army approached in January 1945, the SS destroyed the crematoria and forced prisoners to begin a long march west in the snow carrying a blanket, a bit of bread, and some horse meat. Death was common on the way. One witness reported that seventy-five percent of his group died in five days. When they were far enough west, prisoners were sent to various concentration camps. When Russian soldiers liberated Auschwitz on January 27, 1945, only seven thousand prisoners remained alive, and many of those were ill or dying. The Nazis killed about 1.1 million people at Auschwitz, ninety

percent of them Jews, including 200,000 children. Not discussed in this video series are the 500,000 Roma (Gypsies) and thousands from other groups the Nazis killed, such as Jehovah's witnesses, homosexuals, the disabled, the mentally retarded, and others.

The fourth DVD in the Holocaust series, *In Hiding*, tells the stories of the Jews who survived the Holocaust by doing just that, even though the DVD states that less than 0.5 percent of the population ran the great risk to help or hide Jews. Jews in the Netherlands comprised less than one percent of the population and were well integrated into society. When the Germans invaded in May 1940, they removed Jews from their professions, schools, homes, and public places. Then the Nazis required Jews to wear the Star of David on their clothing, and from 1942 to 1944 rounded them up and sent them to transit camps like Westerbork, where they awaited the rail journey to concentration camps and death camps. A very high percentage of Dutch Jews, seventy-five percent, were killed.

Some 24,000 Jews in the Netherlands hid from the Nazis. Families like that of the well known Anne Frank were actively involved in their own hiding by creating a secret annex in their building. Another was the family of Ralph Berets, who was then a toddler. They got help from the Dutch underground, and they were lucky to have money, which proved helpful. His father had made plans to go into hiding and followed guidelines from their synagogue. For six months they stayed in a Christian friend's cottage until the family told them to leave because the Germans were coming. They fled in a storm and survived in a ditch because the weather was so bad. The Germans burned down the cottage and left. The next morning they found that one of the sons of the host family had betrayed them and the others had killed him. Then the family separated and moved to the next hiding place. Ralph's mother bleached his hair and carried him on the back of a bicycle as they searched for food and shelter. For a while they hid on top of an ice cream store and ate there every day. When Germans came to look for them, the family had advanced warning and hid in the rafters. They were almost discovered when his mother could not stop releasing some urine, but when the Germans found a cat to blame, they left. Some of their hiders wanted to buy the children, but the parents refused. For the last three years, the family hid in a small chicken coop with other people. It was so crowded that they had to sleep in shifts, and when planes flew over they hid in a bunker with fifty other people. After one attack they found a hand grenade that had not exploded on the floor.

Margalith Clarenberg was in Utrecht. She was about to be sent to Poland when a surgeon told her how to fake appendicitis, and she went to a hospital to have her appendix removed instead. After another notice of impending deportation, her family went into hiding in the home of an English woman whose husband and son were already in a concentration camp. Margalith worked long hours in a boarding house for potato peelings to eat. The Germans took away her aunt and uncle. Later she hid in another house and cared for the child there. After she was reunited with her parents, the underground warned them to hide again, so they hid under the straw with the mice in a barn. During the infamous Hunger Winter, when many Dutch citizens subsisted on

tulip bulbs, her family was told they had to move again. A black marketeer hid them in a tiny space where they ate from the pigs' trough as well as a few garden vegetables and twenty-five beans a day.

Poland had the largest Jewish community, but most Poles would not help them. Ann Walters's family had to convert to Catholicism before anyone in their village would help them, so they did and split up among the villagers. When threatened with removal to the ghetto, they went into full hiding in the attics, cellars, and bunkers of Poles willing to help them. Life was very tense. Once they had to hide in a small space under a threshing stone, living on food provided by the owners after dark. While she was in hiding, Ann learned about her Jewish heritage from her mother. When the Russian army approached, the locals fled, but the Jews hid in a pig sty, fed by a local farmer who risked his life to help them. Every illness or infection threatened death, and they had to move 52 times.

Another Polish Jew, Maria Devinki, went into hiding with her family in a small bunker in January of 1943. Her husband paid the farmer to hide them. She says that it was very crowded, with little air for them to breathe or for their oil lamp to burn. They got water from the well, and, if their hiders were in a good mood, they received a few potatoes in the middle of the night. After this went on for several months and they got sick, they did not think they would survive. But they kept fighting for survival. Soldiers were always asking about any Jews in hiding, and they killed many. When the farmer heard that he was suspected of hiding Jews because he had extra money, they had to move. Dressed as women, the family walked for seven miles, before they were stopped by a Polish soldier. Because Maria went to school with his brother, he decided to help them hide with another farmer till the end of the war. When her brother went to the city to try to sell clothes, he was robbed and killed.

*Liberation and After the War* is the last DVD in the series included in this review essay. Since the concentration camps were located often in Poland, it was the Russian army that liberated them from the Germans. Bertha Gutovitz at Auschwitz heard a rumor that the Russians were approaching, and she knew that something was up when no one came to get the prisoners to go to work. Hours passed, which was very rare indeed. It was often American soldiers who liberated other camps in Germany. Abe Gutovitz saw U.S. tanks enter Buchenwald, but he could not move because he was inside a pile of corpses. Finally, he was able to move one hand, and a soldier pulled him out. British and Canadian troops liberated Bergen-Belsen, where Isak Federman was ill with typhus and they saved his life. Sonia Warshawski noticed few guards around and heard whispers of liberation before she heard the earth rumble from the approaching tanks. Hungry, she went to the kitchen, where she was shot. But a prisoner carried her to the window to witness the liberation. U.S. General Dwight Eisenhower came to Ohrdruf, near Buchenwald, and said what he saw was beyond description. The Germans had tried to hide evidence of the Holocaust, but the liberators found too many prisoners and corpses and Stars of David. On April 29, 1945, the first Jewish American officer to enter Dachau, Chester Kaplan, found

hundreds of trains filled with corpses. Witness Omar Whitsell saw bodies in railcars filled with people who were just skin and bones jammed in like sardines. Most were dead, but a few were alive, including many children, though they looked like skeletons. American soldiers gave them what food they had. One prisoner, who weighed eighty pounds, woke up with an IV in his arm in a British hospital. Another liberated prisoner stayed with an American officer and ate lots of pancakes and his first fried chicken to rebuild his strength. Unfortunately, many of his fellow prisoners were too weak to survive, and others wondered about their futures in a chaotic Europe.

Liberation was confusing for prisoners. With many others, mostly non-Jews, Clara Grossman began walking to Warsaw, where, still wearing her filthy camp uniform, she got a train to Krakov and on to Budapest. Jack Mandelbaum and other survivors soon discovered that only a few from their large families had survived the Holocaust. Many liberated Jewish prisoners did not know what to do. Transportation was difficult for them, and they did not know where to go. Why should they go back to Poland? Some wanted to go to the United States. Many Jews were classified as Displaced Persons, but they called themselves the Surviving Remnant for the future. Some who returned to Eastern Europe met a hostile reception from those to whom they had given their property when they left. Soon Eastern Europe was governed by Communists anyway, and many Jews fled west to DP camps run by the UN and later refugee and Jewish organizations.

Many of the Jewish DPs were young people from Eastern Europe between eighteen and twenty-five and without families. After all they had been through, they were eager to start their lives over again with education and jobs, with new friends and new families. One witness reports that three brothers all got married at the same time. The birthrate among these Jews was high. The largest number of these people wanted to settle in Britain or Palestine. According to the DVD, two-thirds of them moved to the new country of Israel after its founding in 1948. Many others wanted to go to the U.S., which tried to stop DP immigrants until President Harry Truman asked Congress to relent. Some 400,000 arrived in the U.S., including 137,000 Jews, many landing in New York. They made new lives in the U.S. Some, like the survivors who told their stories in this series of DVDs, decided to go to the very middle of the U.S., to Kansas City. One couple of camp survivors had five hundred people arrive unexpectedly at their wedding. All these new arrivals were pleased to be free and to become citizens.

We history teachers should thank these survivors and MCHS for sharing their terrible stories with those of us who did not experience the suffering they did. In doing so, they have assured that future generations will learn what happened to them and never forget. I urge history teachers to show this series to their students, and I urge community groups to share them with their members. Making their stories more widely known is the best way to respond to those who deny that the Holocaust ever happened.