Days of Remembrance

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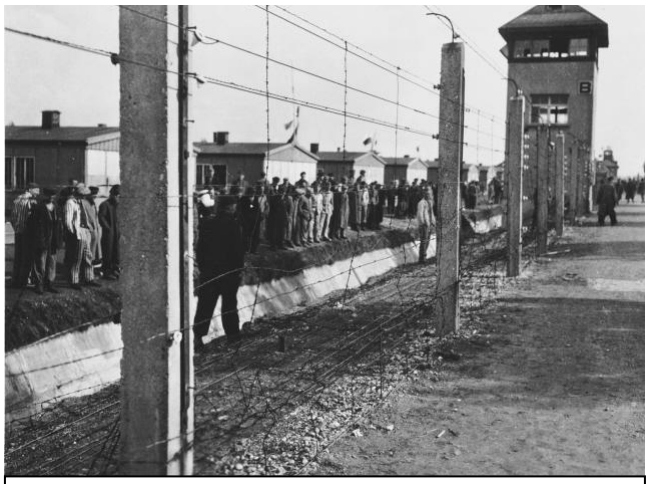
In 1933, the Jewish population of Europe stood at over nine million. When we talk about numbers this large, it is often hard to imagine exactly what nine million looks like. If you combined the entire populations of Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Maine, Hawaii, Idaho, and Nebraska you would have roughly nine million people. By 1945, the Germans and their collaborators killed nearly two out of every three European Jews as part of the *Final Solution.* Nearly six million people brutally killed, simply for being Jewish. Six million people, more people than the population of Alabama or Colorado. It is for this reason our Nation commemorates the Holocaust with the Days of Remembrance.

The actual Holocaust Day is Thursday, April 19, 2012 but observances and remembrance activities often occur during the week of Remembrance that runs from the Sunday before Holocaust Remembrance Day (*Yom Hashoah*) through the following Sunday. State and local governments, military bases, workplaces, schools, churches, synagogues, and civic centers observe Days of Remembrance. For many, unless you are old enough to remember WWII you may be completely unaware of the horrific suffering that took place during the Holocaust. This brings to mind a famous quote by Madame Chiang Kai-Shek who once said, "We live in the present, we dream of the future and we learn eternal truths from the past".



Survivors stand behind the barbed wire fence in Dachau. Credit: National Archives and Records Administration, College Park United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Copy right: Public Domain

According to information obtained from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Web-site, *holocaust* is a word of Greek origin meaning *sacrifice by fire*. The Nazis, who came to power in Germany in January 1933, believed that Germans were racially superior and that the Jews, deemed inferior, were an alien threat to the so-called German racial community. The Nazis embarked on a Holocaust or the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of approximately six million Jews.

Margit Meissner, a holocaust survivor said, "A strong man came to power in Germany whose ideas were that Germany has to create a national community, which would include only the Aryan race, which he considered superior, and all the people who did not belong to the Aryan race could be eliminated. With planning and propaganda, he was able to convince most of the German people to go along with him, insensitive to what happened to the Jews who had basically been their former neighbors. And he managed to build concentration camps and killing centers and finally gas chambers to annihilate six million Jews and at the same time also millions of others, murdered in a systematic, government-sponsored way."

Emaciated Jewish survivors pose in a barracks in the newly liberated Ampfing concentration camp, a sub-camp of Dachau. Credit: National Archives and Records Administration, College Park Museum of Jewish Heritage/Center for Holocaust Studies. Copyright: Public Domain.

Near the end of WWII, as Allied troops moved across Europe they began to encounter tens of thousands of concentration camp prisoners. They confronted unspeakable conditions and

piles of corpses. Only after the liberation of these camps was the full scope of Nazi horrors exposed to the world.

Had the Nazis succeeded in their barbaric plan, the world would not have benefited from accomplishments of men such Elie Wiesel (1952 Nobel Laureate in Literature and recipient of the 1986 Nobel Peace Prize), Imre Kertész (2002 Nobel Prize in Literature), French film director and Academy Award winner Roman Polanski, or Viktor Frankl whose observations became the foundational assumption for logotherapy, a psychotherapeutic method of finding meaning to life even in the midst of extraordinary pain and sufferings, all survivors of the Holocaust. Their success and the successes of the other 200,000 survivors of the holocaust is a testimony to the strength of human spirit to rebound and achieve the extraordinary.