A Study Guide

based on the film presented by

STEVEN SPIELBERG

and

SURVIVORS OF THE SHOAH VISUAL HISTORY FOUNDATION

THE LAST DAYS

A FILM BY JAMES MOLL

OCTOBER FILMS

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KZ – Gedenskstätte Dachau
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FILMS

AN OCTOBER FILMS RELEASE

The printing of this study guide was underwritten by a grant from the GTE Foundation.

STEVEN SPIELBERG

SURVIVORS OF THE SHOAH VISUAL HISTORY FOUNDATION

and

OCTOBER FILMS

present

A STUDY GUIDE

to

THE LAST DAYS

A FILM BY JAMES MOLL

This publication was generously supported by the

Fisher Brothers Foundation

STEVEN SPIELBERG AND THE SHOAH FOUNDATION PRESENT A KEN LIPPER/JUNE BEALLOR PRODUCTION
"THE LAST DAYS" A FILM BY JAMES MOLL MUSIC BY HANS ZIMMER DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY HARRIS DONE
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THE LAST DAYS FILM WAS MADE POSSIBLE BY A GENEROUS GRANT FROM THE KENNETH AND EVELYN LIPPER FOUNDATION

USING *The Last Days* IN THE CLASSROOM

The Last Days is a 90-minute historical documentary about the final year of the Holocaust. The film is based on the personal accounts of five people, now all U.S. citizens, who lived in Hungary, the last country to be invaded and plundered by German forces in World War II. The film chronicles their journeys to the places of their pasts: from homes unseen for 50 years to the ghettos and concentration camps where they were incarcerated by the Nazis and their collaborators.

Trains carried Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz-Birkenau over these rails in 1944.

Their stories provide accessible, challenging, and remarkably human insight into the destruction of the Jewish population of Hungary. But the film is not just about the tragedy of the Hungarian Jews, just as the Holocaust is not only about Germans or Jews or people who specifically lived in Europe during the 1930s and 1940s. The lessons of the Holocaust are universal, but too few students are exposed to them.

The Holocaust was an extreme result of everyday social and cultural forces – destructive societal elements such as prejudice, racism, stereotyping, and scapegoating – that continue to be present today. Thoughtful study of the Holocaust, especially through such a personal film as *The Last Days*, provides invaluable aid in the process of recognizing and combatting these elements and their destructive effects on each of our lives.

This study guide is intended to enhance the classroom experience of *The Last Days* by engaging students in dialogues about the Holocaust, tolerance, personal responsibility, and human nature in a high-school classroom setting.The explanations, resources, and exercises are divided into three parts.

More than 50 years after his liberation, Bill Basch returns to the Dachau concentration camp accompanied by his son, Martin.

The first part should be studied before viewing the film. It contains short reviews that will provide historical background for the film.

Part two contains introductions to the film and the featured survivors and witnesses. This section is intended to be a companion to the film, to provide clarifications and context for the survivors' personal recollections.

The third section should be explored after viewing the film or parts of the film. It investigates the film in depth, and contains exercises and discussion points to help generate thought and conversation about the themes of the film. This section divides the film into four parts in order to facilitate discussions that will fit into a typical class period.

A film such as *The Last Days* is not painless to watch or easy to discuss, but the process is rewarding for the individual and the entire class alike. The film and this study guide are appropriate for most students in grade 9 and above.

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Jews are marched to the ghetto at Körmend, Hungary. Spring 1944.

Dr. Hans Münch is shown in German uniform. *(See pages 10 and 13.)*

U.S. soldiers from the 42nd Division take German SS troopers prisoner near the Dachau concentration camp. *(See page 10.)*

I. BEFORE VIEWING THE FILM

This section provides introductions to many important historical concepts and themes contained in *The Last Days*. Please see page 17 for further resources.

Prisoners stand at roll call in the Auschwitz-Birkenau women's camp, 1944.

A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE HOLOCAUST

The Holocaust was the state-sponsored campaign of genocide perpetrated by the Nazi government of Germany and its collaborators before and during World War II. Though the Germans targeted Gypsies, Slavs, and others they considered "enemies of the state," the primary target of this murderous racial campaign was the Jewish population of Europe. In all, approximately six million Jewish men, women, and children – around one third of the world's Jews –were killed in one of the most systematic and lethal campaigns of hatred in history.

THE NAZIS TRANSFORM GERMANY INTO A "RACIAL STATE"

In 1933, the Nazi Party took control of the German government and began to establish a "racial state." The Nazis were convinced that "Aryans," an idealized, northern-European "race" of people, were the only "true" Germans. They believed that Aryans had a natural superiority over other races, and that Aryan genetic stock was vulnerable to corruption by other races – particularly by the Jews. The Nazi-controlled German government passed laws that determined who was to be considered a Jew and revoked the Jews' citizenship and rights, and confiscated much of their property. During the first years of Nazi power, German policy was intended to coerce Jews to emigrate. Many Jews, who suddenly found themselves considered foreigners in their own homeland, did choose to emigrate from Germany. But most of those who tried to leave discovered that the world's borders were, for the most part, closed to refugees.

EXPANDING THE RACIAL CAMPAIGNS

In the late 1930s, Adolf Hitler and the German government began to take over more and more of Europe. The German Army occupied Austria in March 1938 and Czechoslovakia in March 1939, and its September 1939 invasion and occupation of Poland sparked the outbreak of World War II. By the beginning of 1940, the Germans had begun the process of concentrating the Jews of Poland into small sections of towns and cities in Poland that were known as ghettos. As the German war effort gathered momentum, the Germans began to rely on Jews and other prisoners for forced labor to help fuel their massive military campaigns. As a result, countless thousands of Jews died of starvation, exhaustion, and disease.

The loss of life escalated with the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. German mobile killing squads moved into newly conquered Soviet territory to murder Jews and others in cold blood by the hundreds of thousands. The German government had settled on its "Final Solution of the Jewish Question": Genocide. In the last four years of World War II, the German government and its military partners systematically murdered millions of innocent people.

WHAT IS "RACE?"

Before the mid-1800s, "race" signified one of many different things. It referred, for instance, to species, as in the "human race," or nationality, as in "the Chinese race." In the mid-1800s, some scientists began using the term to describe groups of people who shared a genetic heritage. These scientists were attempting to explain human behavior by categorizing people, and many of them shared a desire to prove that their own category, or "race," was genetically superior to others. Though their findings were either distorted or unproven, their ideas gained popularity. They continue to influence our thoughts on human differences today.

The Nazis deeply believed in the racist, pseudo-scientific idea of a racial hierarchy. According to the Nazis, their "race," a northern European idealization they called the "Aryans," was at the top of the hierarchy. They felt their racial "purity" was endangered by other inferior peoples, such as Jews, Gypsies, Africans, and Slavs. They used this theory to justify their racial campaigns and ultimately the murder of millions of innocent people.

The majority of today's scientists dismiss "race" as a scientifically meaningless concept. Modern science has proven, through genetic research, that there are more differences between people of the same ethnicity than between people of different ethnic groups.

END OF THE WAR IN EUROPE

As the German Army lost momentum and began to lose the war, the Germans made special efforts to escalate the annihilation of the Jews. By that time, the international community, including the U.S. government, was aware of the danger that threatened the Jews who remained in Europe; but it was not until 1944 that the United States and other nations established programs that rescued thousands of Jews. Still, the horrors of the Holocaust continued up to the day of the German surrender on May 8, 1945.

HUNGARY

Modern Hungary was established in 1918 by the treaties that followed World War I. The new country's first years were politically turbulent and economically unsteady, and in an environment of poverty and public discontent, a wave of antisemitism grew.

Hungary's government was one of Nazi Germany's first and most loyal European allies. In the early 1930s, Hungary's leaders recognized that Germany was emerging as a dominant force in Europe. Not long after Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Party took control of Germany in 1933, the Hungarian government pledged its country's allegiance, and many of its resources, to the Germans. The Hungarians assisted Germany in military campaigns before and during the war, and were well rewarded for doing so. The German government gave them territory – including, in March 1939, the part of Czechoslovakia where three survivors featured in *The Last Days* lived.

The Hungarian government was officially antisemitic, and it was the first European government to officially persecute its Jewish population in the years before World War II. As early as 1920, it enacted legislation that limited educational opportunities for the Jews of Hungary. By the early 1940s, Jews faced numerous restrictions on their everyday lives, and, in 1941, a mandatory Jewish forced labor program began. In the meantime, a deeply antisemitic and violent political group called the Arrow Cross was steadily gaining power. Anti-Jewish violence became commonplace, and many Jews, particularly in the capital city of Budapest, responded by forming resistance groups.

Ironically, this state of persecution and terror was preferable to the deadly situation of Jews in countries that had fallen under German control. Unlike the Nazi German government after 1941, the Hungarian government did not explicitly intend to kill its Jewish population of more than 700,000 men, women, and children. When the Germans repeatedly insisted that the Hungarians deport the Jews to German concentration camps, the Hungarians repeatedly refused.

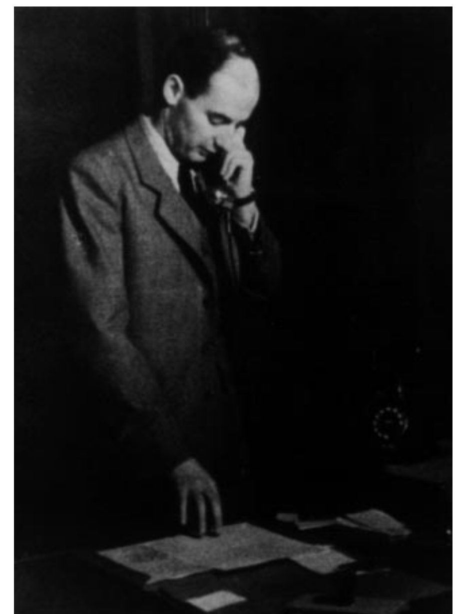
Toward the end of the war, as it became clear that Germany and its military partners would lose World War II, Hungary began to weaken its ties with Germany and make a separate peace with the Allies. In March 1944, in order to prevent this from occurring, Hitler ordered the German Army to invade his longtime partner, Hungary.

ANTISEMITISM

Antisemitism is the hatred and persecution of Jews. Historically, antisemitism was based on religion. Jews were persecuted because of differences in beliefs, rituals, and other aspects of their religion. In Christian Europe, antisemitic movements have often been based on the refusal of Jews to accept Jesus of Nazareth as the messiah, and have sometimes been fueled by the myth that the Jews were responsible for the crucifixion of Christ. Periods of widespread antisemitism typically culminated in attempts to convert the Jews to the dominant regional religion, or in mass expulsions of Jews.

In the 19th century, political leaders discovered antisemitism as a potent political weapon, and new scientific theories about "race" ***(see page 4)*** **created a belief that Jews were genetically different from people of other backgrounds. This made being Jewish a "genetic trait" – not a religious conviction that could be "fixed" by conversion.**

In Germany before World War II, Adolf Hitler capitalized on the deep-rooted antisemitism among the people, using it to make German Jews the scapegoat for economic, political, and other problems. During World War II, the Nazi leaders of Germany decided that the "Jewish problem," to use their words, could only be solved by the "Final Solution" – Nazi Germany's plan to annihilate all of Europe's Jews.



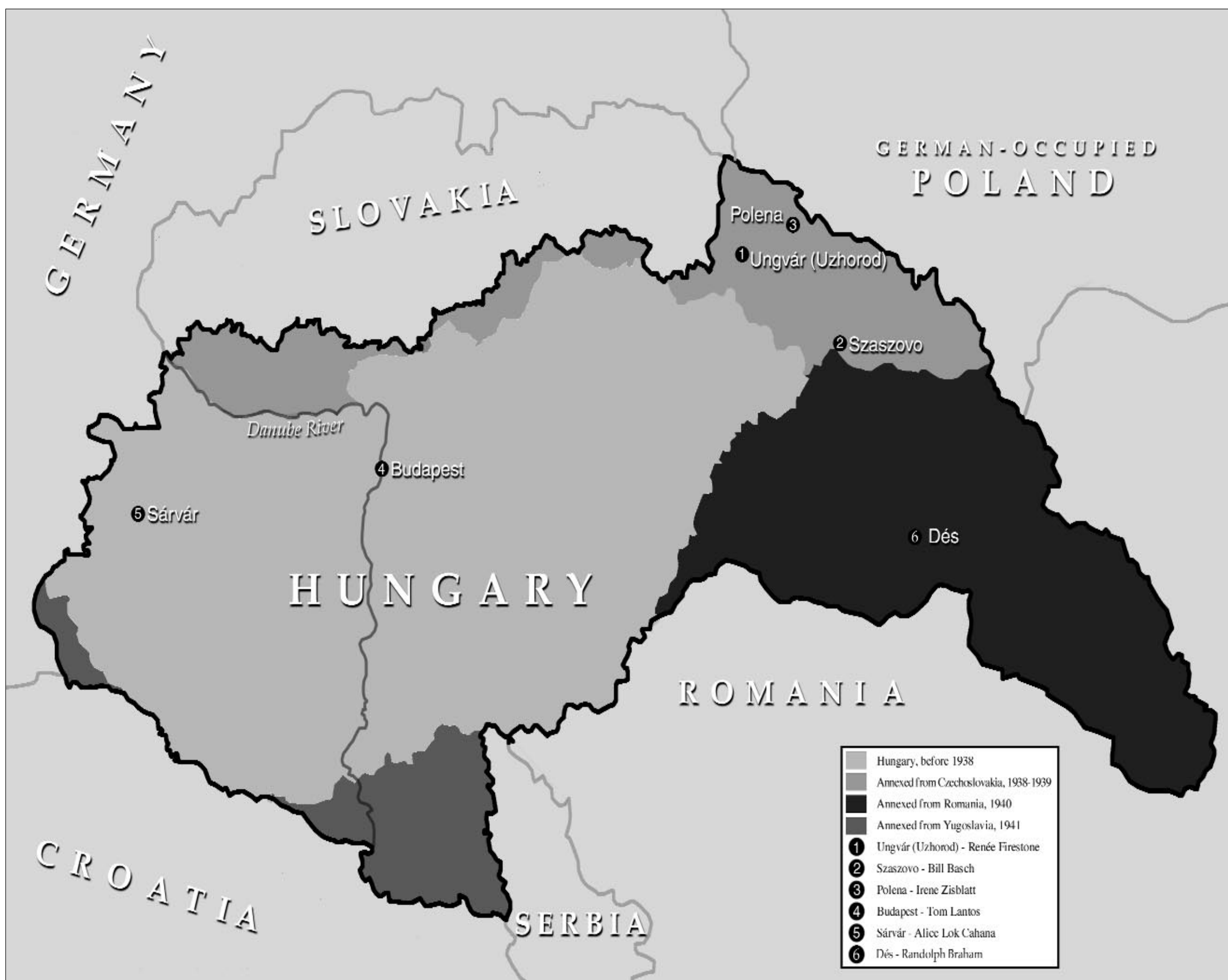
Rescuer Raoul Wallenberg saved thousands of Jews from the Nazis in Budapest. (See page 12.)

WORLD WAR II

World War II was a military conflict fought in Europe, Asia, Africa, and parts of North America. In Europe, the war began when Adolf Hitler ordered his troops to invade Poland in September 1939. France and Great Britain formed a military alliance called the Allies and declared war against Germany and its Axis alliance. By the height of the war in 1942, Germany controlled nearly all of Europe, including Czechoslovakia, Austria, Poland, Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, France, Greece, most of Yugoslavia, and much of the Soviet Union.

The German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 and the December 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, brought the Soviet Union and the United States into the war on the Allied side. Over the next few years, the Allies gained momentum and forced the Axis armies into retreat. Soviet, U.S., and British troops slowly began to liberate German-occupied territories, discovering evidence of German war crimes in nearly every region.

In March 1944, the German leadership ordered one more occupation of a foreign land – that of Hungary (*see page 5*). Following that occupation, the Germans remained in full retreat until their unconditional surrender and defeat in May 1945. The war continued until August, when Germany's only remaining ally, Japan, also surrendered to the Allies.



HUNGARY IN WORLD WAR II, 1944

II. VIEWING THE FILM

This section provides an overview of the film and introduces the featured survivors and witnesses. It is intended to be a companion to the film, to provide clarifications and context to the survivors' actual experiences.

SUMMARY OF THE FILM

The Last Days begins with a Holocaust survivor, Bill Basch, pondering a perplexing question: In the beginning of 1944, when the Germans were losing the war against the Allies, what compelled them to devote so many essential resources to their simultaneous "war against the Jews?" The film returns to this question as each of the five featured Holocaust survivors discusses his or her experiences as a victim of the Nazis and explores the human cost of their murderous campaign. As the survivors return to Europe and to the sites connected to each of their stories, the film explores questions of morality, religion, and identity, and what it means to rebuild a life.

For the purposes of classroom use, the film can be divided into four parts:

PART 1: FROM CITIZEN TO OUTCAST (APPROXIMATELY 15 MINUTES)

The five featured survivors – Bill Basch, Renée Firestone, Tom Lantos, Alice Lok Cahana, and Irene Zisblatt – describe their hometowns and their lives in Hungary before 1944, when their towns were still untouched by battle but they were living with increasing persecution and antisemitism. Tom is shown visiting Budapest, his childhood home; and Renée arrives in Uzhorod, her hometown.

PART 2: IN A "MADMAN'S HELL" (30 MINUTES)

The survivors recall the period just after the German invasion of Hungary in 1944 when each was thrust into the horrors of the Holocaust: Alice, Irene, and Renée found themselves in ghettos and then at Auschwitz-Birkenau. At the same time, Tom and Bill joined resistance groups in Budapest. In the film, Tom returns to a Budapest "protected house" where he had stayed in 1944; Irene revisits the site of the former ghetto and Alice returns to the ruins of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Renée lights candles at the remains of Auschwitz-Birkenau crematorium #5, in memory of family members who died in the Holocaust.

PART 3: LIBERATION (11 MINUTES)

In this segment, the survivors recall the last months of captivity and the period following liberation. This portion of the film shows Alice in Auschwitz-Birkenau and Bill at Dachau. It ends with a series of highly graphic images from the liberation of concentration camps – they are presented as documentary evidence of the Nazi crimes.

PART 4: REBUILDING A LIFE (32 MINUTES)

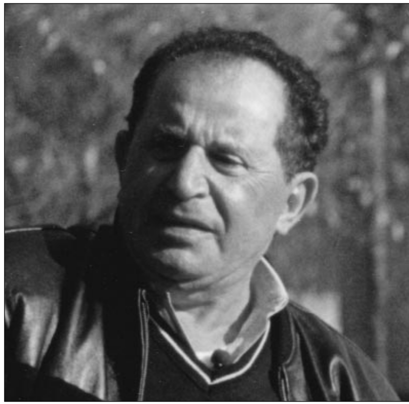
The survivors discuss their efforts to return to normal life after the Holocaust. We follow Renée to Auschwitz, where she finds information on her sister's fate, and then to a meeting with Dr. Hans Münch, a former medical officer at Auschwitz. Alice travels to Bergen-Belsen, where she pays tribute to her sister who died just after liberation. Renée returns to her hometown of Uzhorod, and Irene revisits Polena. We also see the survivors in their own homes in the United States.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER WHILE VIEWING THE FILM

The Last Days **is a documentary film that is narrated entirely by survivors and witnesses of the Holocaust – there are no conventional "narrators" or "hosts." How does this affect the way you view this film?**

When discussing the Holocaust, it is tempting to think in simple terms of "perpetrator" and "victim." In watching the film, think also about the roles of bystanders, resisters, and rescuers. What do these figures contribute to your assumptions about the Holocaust?

NOTES ON THE FIVE FEATURED SURVIVORS



Bill Basch

BILL BASCH

Bill Basch was born in Szaszovo, Czechoslovakia in 1927, and was one of five children in his family. In March 1939, his region of Czechoslovakia became part of Hungary, and in the years that followed, his family suffered from antisemitic legislation and growing persecution from his non-Jewish neighbors.

In Fall 1942, he moved to the Hungarian capital city of Budapest to work as an apprentice. But soon he was working in the resistance, helping to smuggle Jewish refugees to safety in Palestine. In July 1944, when Raoul Wallenberg arrived in Hungary *(see page 12)*, Bill participated in his efforts to distribute diplomatic passes to Jews in Budapest. However, in November 1944, he was captured and transported to the Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany. He became a slave laborer.

In March 1945, the German guards sent their prisoners on a "death march" away from the advancing Allied soldiers. Despite his exhaustion after months of brutal slave labor, Bill survived to reach the Dachau concentration camp. U.S. soldiers liberated him there on April 29.

Bill, one sister, and one brother were the only members of their family to survive the Holocaust. After the war, he moved to the United States, got married, and worked in the fashion industry. He has three children and five grandchildren.

Renée Firestone

Renée and her mother, Johanna, circa 1934.

RENÉE FIRESTONE

Renée Firestone was born in Uzhorod, Czechoslovakia in 1924. Her father owned a textile and tailoring business, and she had one brother and one sister. Renée's town became part of Hungary in 1938, and in the years that followed, the family fell victim to one antisemitic restriction after another.

In March 1944, when Renée was 19 years old, the German Army occupied Hungary. Renée and her family lost everything they had. Within a few weeks, all members of Renée's family, except her brother, were forced into a temporary ghetto. From there, they were loaded aboard a cattle car that arrived days later at the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp. Renée's mother was murdered immediately upon arrival at the camp, but Renée and her sister managed to stay together until September, when her sister was probably killed. In November, Renée was evacuated to a labor camp near the northern German town of Leibau that produced ammunition for the German Army. She was liberated there on May 8, 1945.

Renée returned to Budapest and was reunited with two family members who had survived the war. She married another Holocaust survivor, and in 1948 emigrated to the United States where she built a successful career in the fashion industry. She has one daughter and one granddaughter, and in recent years has devoted herself to teaching about the Holocaust.

Tom Lantos

TOM LANTOS

Tom Lantos was born in 1928 in Budapest, Hungary, the only child of an upper-middle-class Jewish couple. His family was highly assimilated into Hungarian culture, but he remembers living in constant fear of what would happen to them and other Jews if the Germans invaded Hungary.

When the Germans invaded Hungary in March 1944, Tom was 16 years old. He joined the underground, but was captured and forced into hard labor, repairing a bridge that was frequently bombed by Allied airplanes. He escaped and began to work in the underground with Raoul Wallenberg's group, distributing diplomatic papers and supplies to Jews in Budapest. In January 1945, he was liberated by Soviet troops. His father also survived the Holocaust, but his mother did not.

Tom moved to the United States where he married his childhood friend, Annette. In 1980, after spending three decades teaching economics, he was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. He is now in his tenth term of office, and he and Annette have two daughters and 17 grandchildren.

Tom with friend (and future wife) Annette, as young children.

ALICE LOK CAHANA

Alice Lok Cahana was born in 1929 in a Hungarian town called Sárvár. She was the second of four children, and her family owned a carpet factory. In the early 1940s, Alice and her family began to suffer from antisemitic persecution and restrictions by the Hungarian government.

In March 1944, when the German Army invaded Hungary, Alice was 15 years old. Her family and other Jews in the town were forced from their homes, and confined for several days in a Jewish school. Alice's father escaped to Budapest, but the rest of the family was forced aboard a freight train bound for Auschwitz-Birkenau. Only Alice and her sister survived to be admitted into the camp.

Alice with family in 1942.

Alice Lok Cahana

Alice and her sister were together for much of their time in Auschwitz, and were sent to a labor camp in Guben, Germany. In January 1945, they were sent to Bergen-Belsen, an overcrowded, disease-ravaged Nazi camp. The British Army liberated this camp on April 15, but Alice's sister died six weeks later.

Alice settled in the United States, where she and her husband had three children. Today she is an artist, and her paintings about the Holocaust have brought her international acclaim.

IRENE ZISBLATT

Irene Zisblatt was born in 1930, one of six children of an Orthodox Jewish family. They lived in Polena, a Czechoslovakian resort town that became part of Hungary in March 1939. Under the Hungarian government, anti-Jewish laws and violence escalated in Polena. When the German Army occupied Hungary in March 1944, Irene and her family attempted to hide. They were swiftly caught and sent to a ghetto with the rest of the Jews of their region. When the guards announced a call for laborers to work in a famous Hungarian vineyard, Irene's family was among those who volunteered to go. They boarded a cattle car of a freight train that took them to Auschwitz-Birkenau instead of a winery.

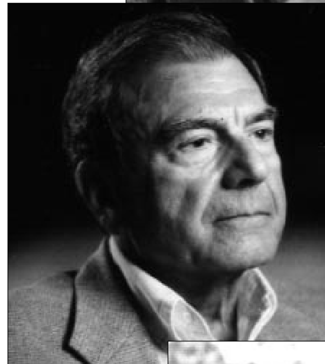
Irene, circa 1937.

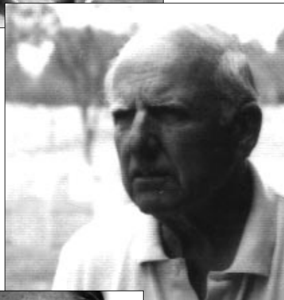
Irene Zisblatt

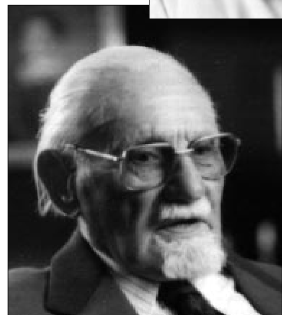
Irene was separated from her family and admitted into the camp. Just 13 years old, she survived medical experiments and narrowly avoided death in a gas chamber. She was then transported to a labor camp to work as a mechanic.

In the beginning of 1945, the German guards sent Irene and other prisoners on a brutal "death march" toward the center of Germany. After several weeks, with only a fraction of the prisoners remaining alive, Irene fled into the woods. U.S. soldiers found her that night and brought her to safety.

Irene was the only member of her family to survive. After living in a refugee camp for two years, she moved to the United States. She was married in the years that followed, and she and her husband had two children and four grandchildren.







NOTES ON THE ADDITIONAL SURVIVORS AND WITNESSES

DR. RANDOLPH BRAHAM was born in 1922 and grew up in Dés, a town in Transylvania, Romania, that became part of Hungary in August 1940. Randy was drafted into a Hungarian labor camp a few years later, but he escaped after 15 months. He was liberated by the Soviet Army, which then incarcerated him as a prisoner of war. He returned home, only to discover that his parents had been killed at Auschwitz. Today he is the world's foremost expert on the Holocaust in Hungary. He has written or edited dozens of books on the subject and is currently a distinguished professor emeritus at the City University New York.

DARIO GABBAI was born in 1922 in Thessaloniki, Greece. German officers entered his town in March 1944, and within a few weeks his family arrived at the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp. SS guards assigned Dario to work in crematorium #2, where as a Sonderkommando worker he was forced to burn the bodies of tens of thousands of prisoners who had been gassed. He had to search through ashes for valuables – rings, chains, even gold fillings. He witnessed countless murders and atrocities by the SS at Auschwitz and later at the Mauthausen concentration camp before being liberated near Ebensee, Austria. He and a brother were the only members of their immediate family to survive the war.

A native Californian, **WARREN DUNN** was 20 years old in April 1945. A company commander of the 42nd Division of the U.S. 7th Army, Warren and his division were ordered to Dachau, Germany to secure the city and take over the nearby concentration camp. Until they reached Dachau, none of the men – not even Warren's battalion commander – had been aware of the Nazi concentration camp system.

KATSUGO MIHO was born in Maui, Hawaii. He joined the U.S. Army in 1943 as a member of the Japanese-American 442nd Regimental Combat Team, and arrived at the Dachau concentration camp in April 1945. Ironically, at the same time Katsugo was liberating Dachau, his father was being held in a U.S. internment camp for Japanese citizens and Americans of Japanese ancestry.

Originally from Indianapolis, **DR. PAUL PARKS** landed on Omaha Beach on D-Day and pressed inland with the Allied Expeditionary Force. He arrived in Dachau, Germany, as U.S. forces were liberating the Nazi concentration camp located near the town. After the war, Paul was active in the civil rights movement. He worked as an educator, and is a former Secretary of Education for the state of Massachusetts.

DR. HANS MÜNCH was one of the chiefs of the SS Hygiene Institute of Auschwitz. Working in association with Dr. Josef Mengele, Dr. Münch was directly involved with experimentation on Jewish prisoners, particularly women. Dr. Münch was prosecuted in 1946 at war crimes trials along with 40 other doctors. He was the only doctor acquitted, partially because he claimed he had performed harmless medical experiments on some Jews in order to prevent them from being sent to the gas chambers, thereby saving their lives.

III. AFTER VIEWING THE FILM

PART 1: FROM CITIZEN TO OUTCAST

(0:00-14:30)

IDENTITY

In the quotations from the film at right, Alice, Tom, Renée, and Irene describe their families and communities in relation to other Hungarians. Consider each of the quotations, and think about what each person is saying about his or her identity. All of them are Jewish, yet this aspect of their identities means something different to each of them. Think about your own sense of national identity, and the importance you give to your religious identity or ethnic background. What other aspects of your personality define your sense of your own identity? Irene expresses the confusion and sadness that came when she realized that her assumptions about her place in society were not true. What had changed in the way her neighbors looked at her family? Consider what it means to be an outcast. Why had Irene become an outcast? How would you answer the questions she poses at the end of her quotation?

HARD TO BELIEVE...

Many Hungarian Jews had difficulty believing rumors of Nazi atrocities, even when recounted by firsthand witnesses. Why was it so difficult to believe rumors of such atrocities as death camps and mass executions? Consider your own assumptions about the way people behave toward one another, and develop a definition of human nature. Does your life experience make it hard to imagine the motivation of Nazi perpetrators? How do your feelings on human nature reflect your own concept of who you are, your own identity? In Renée's quotation, how does the perspective of the "people" she refers to differ from that of her family and other Hungarian Jews? On what information is each differing perspective based? How does your location in place and time affect how you remember an event?

"WHAT DO YOU TAKE?"

Between May 15 and July 8, 1944, Hungarian and German Nazis deported 437,402 Jews from their homes in Hungarian cities, towns, and villages. Like many other survivors of the Holocaust, Alice and Renée vividly remember the experience of leaving their homes behind. Why are their belongings so important to them? What do they symbolize? If you were forced to leave your home quickly, what would you take with you? What do those specific things mean to you? What is the connection between a person's identity and his or her belongings? Why does Renée choose a swimsuit?

"Judaism was our religion, but we were Hungarians."—ALICE

"The bulk of the Jews in Budapest were utterly assimilated, deeply patriotic, and enormously proud of their Hungarian heritage."—TOM

"I had non-Jewish friends. I dated non-Jewish boys. My parents had non-Jewish friends..."—RENÉE

"Our friends, so-called, and neighbors, they were standing lined up along the side of the road and they were yelling, 'It's about time! You go on out of here' and 'we don't need any Jews in our town!' 'We need to get rid of all you Jews!' And I stood and I could not believe my eyes...We were friends, we were sharing things together. Why are they so hostile, why do they hate us all of a sudden?"
—IRENE

"There were refugees coming to Hungary, running away from Poland. They would come and tell stories, and I remember, very often, we didn't believe them." —ALICE

"There was a sort of...patriotic feeling that we Hungarians don't do things like this." —TOM

"People wonder how it is that we didn't do something; we didn't run away; we didn't hide. Well, things didn't happen at once, things happened very slowly. So each time a new law came out, or a restriction, we said, 'Well, it's just another thing. It'll blow over.'" —RENÉE

"And the next decree would be that we had to pack up 25 kilos [55 pounds]. And at first we didn't understand. What do you take?...Do you take the pillows? Do you take your covers? Do you take your dishes? Do you take–what do you take?"—ALICE

"When we were packing, I wanted to take something that would remind me of the good times. I was very depressed and worried. And so, I came across a bathing suit that my father brought me..."—RENÉE

"We are carrying all our baggage. The pillows and the covers are tightened and bundled. And we children have to carry, and I'm so ashamed..."—ALICE

PART 2: IN A "MADMAN'S HELL"
(14:30-43:50)

"I did not exist as a Jew. I would have been shot, I would have been killed."—BILL

"You were a hunted animal 24 hours every day."—TOM

"What vast landscape you are seeing here. How could people, normal people go back…after working here or planning this? Somebody had to plan it. Somebody had to be an engineer. Somebody had to really…put on a map this kind of efficiency." —ALICE

"They were trying to change the color of our eyes." —IRENE

"For every man that ran through the wire, they took 100 inmates and killed them in front of everybody as an example. They didn't even let us die when we wanted." —IRENE

"The sadism, the cruelty, the irrationality of the German and Hungarian Nazis…[The idea that] they could have gained brownie points by being more civilized…was really not present because their hatred was so blind." —TOM

DEHUMANIZATION

Author and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel has described the Nazis' process as an attempt to reduce a person to a prisoner, the prisoner to a number, and the number to an ash, which could then be dispersed. The quotations to the left illustrate elements of the process of dehumanization employed by the Nazis. In what way is the process of becoming an "outcast" *(see page 11)* a first step in the process described by Elie Wiesel? How does the language of Bill and Tom's quotations reflect the process of dehumanization? The German government, from the time the Nazi Party took power in 1933, was "officially" antisemitic—that is, anti-Jewish policy was explicitly included in its platform. Think about how these quotations illustrate the effects of institutionalized hatred. How is this related to the process of creating an "outcast" in any social environment?

"Suddenly I recognized my father, and my first thought was to hide. It was terribly painful seeing him with his shaved head in this uniform like a prisoner. This man who was helping everybody, who was the kindest human being. I just couldn't imagine how would he feel if he saw us with the shaved heads in this rag. So I really just wanted to hide so he can't see me. And at that moment, our eyes locked. And I could see his tears rolling down his cheek. That was the last time I saw my father." —RENÉE

"And then I thought of something. They took away my parents, they took away my identity, they took away my siblings, they took away my possessions. There is something that they want from me. And then I, I thought of my soul. And I said, 'They're not going to take my soul.'" —IRENE

"Edith whispers to me and says, 'It's almost Shabbat.' …How we used to celebrate Shabbat in our house. With food and with singing and with praying and, you know, lighting the candles. And I told her, 'Why don't we celebrate inside, in the latrine?'" —ALICE

"I held on to the diamonds for dear life because that was to buy bread..." —IRENE

SURVIVAL

As the prisoners entered the camps, the German authorities stripped them of as much of their identity as they could; but the prisoners brought their memories and their sense of self with them. Consider Renée's words. Why does she react to seeing her father in the way she does? Where does her sense of shame come from? In the face of absolute totalitarian control by their guards, in what ways do the words of Irene and Alice illustrate acts of resistance? People often speak of "spiritual resistance." How does Irene's experience with her diamonds reflect that concept? Why do you think she kept the diamonds despite the risk? Note that she never traded them for bread. When identity is forbidden, even memory can be a form of resistance. What does this say about the relationship between memory and identity?

COUNTERPOINT: RAOUL WALLENBERG

Raoul Wallenberg, a diplomat from a prominent Swedish family, was asked by the U.S. and other governments to travel to Budapest in 1944. His mission was to rescue as many Jews as possible, using any means he could obtain or invent. There were several prominent diplomats working in Budapest at the time, but Wallenberg is the best known and has been credited with rescuing tens of thousands of Jews from the Nazis through methods that were unorthodox, daring, and enormously resourceful. Tom Lantos has called Raoul Wallenberg the "central figure" in his life. Indeed, Wallenberg has remained a lasting hero for people around the world. Research the life of Raoul Wallenberg. How can you explain his extraordinary bravery? Compare and contrast his actions to the behavior of other diplomats in Hungary.

PART 3: DIFFICULT DECISIONS
(43:50-54:30)

CHOICELESS CHOICES

Some of the choices made by Jews during the Holocaust were so alien to our normal expectations of life that Professor Lawrence Langer has coined a term for them: "Choiceless choices." These are decisions made "in the absence of humanly significant alternatives" that are based on each individual's assumptions of responsibility and morality. To what extent do the three quotations at right describe "choiceless choices"? How are these choices different than other decisions? Who should bear the responsibility for decisions made under the conditions described in *The Last Days*?

REVENGE AND JUSTICE

After the Nazi camps were liberated and the guards lost their power, a few survivors and liberators exacted violent revenge on their oppressors. These actions were an emotional response to the extreme environment in which the actions took place. Did they constitute justice? Why or why not? After the Holocaust, prosecutors were faced with war crimes that defied all previously established limits of crime and punishment. Can you think of appropriate methods to punish perpetrators of such crimes? Is it possible to "right the wrongs" of a collective crime as heinous as the Holocaust?

Many survivors rejected violent revenge as an appropriate response to the inhumanity of the Nazis. Some found revenge in the simple fact that they had survived; others found that rebuilding their lives was an acceptable form of retribution. Think about the survivors' experiences and actions during the second half of the film. Which of them can be considered forms of non-violent retribution? Is this a"better"form of revenge? What other responses were possible?

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

The quotation at right is taken from Dr. Hans Münch's testimony, excerpts from which appear in the film. His comments address his own history as an SS doctor at Auschwitz and his involvement in a certain case of medical experimentation at the camp. In small discussion groups, consider Dr. Münch's case. As a doctor who ran a clinic for forced medical experiments at Auschwitz, can he be considered"innocent?"Although he did not personally murder the "secret-bearers," do you think he shares in the responsibility for their deaths by his admitted participation and knowledge of their fates? Drawing from your own experiences, discuss the meaning of personal responsibility. Based on what you have read and seen, where does Dr. Münch's own personal responsibility begin? Where does it end?

Think about how Dr. Münch portrays himself in the Film. How would you characterize his descriptions of the events he witnessed or participated in at Auschwitz? After Renée questions him, how does she portray him? There has recently been debate over Münch's potential criminal responsibility for events at Auschwitz. Try to develop an argument in his defense, and another that implicates him. How is his position different than the one Dario describes at the top of this page?

"A lot of people think that we, working in the Sonderkommando, were guilty of something, you know. Because we were doing such kind of work. But ourselves, you know, we couldn't get out of it. If you don't do whatever they're asking you to do, they kill you right away." —DARIO

"There were three of us friends that were together up to that point. And we swore that we would sacrifice each others' life for each other. That we would never let each other down. Kids, you know, we had this sort of a dream, that will be possible. One of the three had an injury in his knee and had gangrene. And one of the soldiers noticed him limping so he comes up and he wants…to shoot him, but we step in front of him. He pulls out his Luger and he says, 'I give you three seconds. Count to three, either you let him go or all the three of you die.' Can you imagine?"—BILL

"I never knew anybody's name, never wanted to know anybody. I never wanted to know just in case someday, someone will know this person whose shoes…I've taken off when he died."—BILL

"For all those who wanted to conduct experiments on humans, this was a thankful workplace. Many experiments were done in Auschwitz to find ways to sterilize women, specifically Jewish women, in order to diminish the race without going through too much trouble. I was in contact with block 10, that was true. The saliva we used for our work came from there. We were looking for a way to determine blood group from saliva and got the saliva from the women in block 10 ... who were being sterilized. They performed tests, then sent them back to Birkenau and gassed them because ...they were so-called 'secret-bearers.' One day, a prisoner acquaintance came to me and asked me if I could try to gain some influence, if anything could be done not to send them to the gas chamber. The only way to do that was to make them undergo more tests. To save them, we had to keep conducting harmless tests on them. That is what we planned to do, and somehow it worked. And that is why I was acquitted in Auschwitz."

—DR. HANS MÜNCH

Part 4: Constructing a Life
(54:30-end)

> ***"Returning to freedom was very difficult. We didn't know how we were going to make peace with the outside world which didn't want us. And we didn't know who we're going to find or not find."*** —Renée
>
> ***"Now, why did I survive? Why did God spare me?"*** —Bill
>
> ***"But there are a lot of people like me out there who are still looking. Because for us, liberation was not the last day."*** —Alice

"Peace with the Outside World"

After liberation, Holocaust survivors emerged from the camps with complex feelings of confusion, anger, depression, and guilt. Many took years to reintegrate into society; others have never reached that level of comfort. Consider Renée's experiences and her quotation at left. Why is it the "outside world" that she felt she had to make peace with? How do Bill's questions illustrate another struggle faced by the survivors? Consider Alice's efforts to discover the fate of her sister. Why was liberation"not the last day?"

> ***"I took the diamonds and I mounted them into a teardrop-shaped pendant—because every time I had to save them, I had to cry so much. So, I found that the tears are appropriate for that. And I told my children that these diamonds should go down from generation to generation to the first-born girl in the family until ...forever. ...And they're the only thing that I'm holding that my mother ever held."***—Irene
>
> ***"... And we have two daughters who early on came to us and said that, uh, they plan a special gift for their parents. Since our families were wiped out, they will give us a large family. And we have been blessed with ... 17 wonderful grandchildren and it's really the focus of our life."***—Tom
>
> ***"So, when we get together, we are quite a large group. And the joy of sitting with my family and looking around and seeing that ... I was so close to death, and here I am, sitting at a table, and there are 11,12 of us rejoicing life. The pleasure of living is wonderful."*** —Bill
>
> ***"My art today is about the Holocaust because I have no memorial for my people."*** —Alice

Going Home

Consider Irene's trip to Polena, her childhood home, and Renée's return to her hometown, Uzhorod. What do Irene and Renée hope to achieve on their journeys? What are the difficulties in going home? After the Holocaust, was Hungary "home" to them at all? Based on your answer to that question, what does "home" mean?

Generations

At the end of the war, each Holocaust survivor had before him or her the monumental task of rebuilding a life. As they embarked upon this process, what did they lack that many of the rest of us take for granted? What is the value of continuity? Many Holocaust survivors, like most people who have experienced great loss in their lives, have created memorials to those they have lost. How does Irene's experience show how particularly difficult this is for Holocaust survivors who were forced to leave their homes and their belongings? If her diamond teardrop is a memorial, whom does it memorialize? What are Renée's, Tom's, Bill's, Alice's, and Randolph's memorials? In what ways does the process of raising a family pay tribute to one's memories?

Responsibility

The Holocaust, in its entirety, is often considered to be too excessive a crime to be a matter of individual responsibility. As humans, in what ways do we share a collective responsibility for what happened? Considering the indignities and injustice that continue up to this day, is it enough to say that specific individuals were responsible for the Holocaust? What can each of us, as individuals, do to try to "right these wrongs?" Consider Randolph's words, below, in your answer.

> ***"I don't think that God created the Holocaust. I think that God gave us a mind and a heart and free will. And it is up to Man what he is going to do with his life. And I blame Man, not God."***—Renée
>
> ***"I cannot rationally explain, emotionally explain, intellectually explain the Holocaust. I cannot, I cannot find a place for a higher authority in this nightmare."***—Tom
>
> ***"The Holocaust has to be taught as a chapter in the long history of man's inhumanity to man. One cannot ignore the discrimination inflicted on many people because of race, color, or creed. One cannot ignore slavery. One cannot ignore the burning of witches. One cannot ignore the killing of Christians in the Roman period. The Holocaust, perhaps, is the culmination of the kind of horror that can occur when man loses his integrity, his belief in the sanctity of human life."***—Randolph

Glossary

Allies — Military alliance that opposed the Axis in World War II. The principal Allies were Great Britain, the Soviet Union, the United States, and China.

Arrow Cross — Fascist, antisemitic Hungarian organization with ties to Germany's Nazi government.

Assimilation — The process by which a distinct ethnic or cultural group adopts the customs of a dominant local culture.

Auschwitz — Nazi concentration camp complex in German-occupied Poland consisting of a concentration camp (Auschwitz I), a labor camp (Buna-Monowitz or Auschwitz III), and the largest Nazi death camp (Auschwitz-Birkenau or Auschwitz II). Between 1.1 and 1.3 million people were killed there, 90% of them Jews.

Axis — Military coalition, led by Germany, Japan, Italy, Hungary, and others, that opposed the Allies in World War II.

Bergen-Belsen — Nazi camp located in central Germany, mainly remembered for the graphic films taken by the liberating British Army. Conditions were so lethal in the camp that in addition to the many thousands who died in its final week from typhoid, starvation, and despair, more than 13,000 people died in the weeks after liberation.

Buchenwald — Nazi concentration camp in Germany. Established in 1937, it was a principal slave labor center.

Concentration camps — Facilities where people are confined because of their identities, behavior, or beliefs. Most Nazi concentration camps served as centers for forced labor and mass murder of civilian populations.

Dachau — The first of the Nazi concentration camps, established in March 1933. It was one of the last to be liberated, on April 28 and 29, 1945. Originally for political prisoners, it was a slave labor center.

Death camps — Nazi facilities in which prisoners were killed and their bodies burned or buried in mass graves. Some, like Auschwitz-Birkenau, also served as holding facilities for prisoners en route to slave labor assignments.

Death marches — Means by which the Germans forcibly evacuated prisoners into the German interior to prevent them from falling into Allied hands. The major death marches occurred in the winter of 1944 to 1945, when tens of thousands of prisoners were marched hundreds of miles without provisions for food, shelter, sanitation, or rest.

"Final Solution" — The Nazis' code phrase for their effort to murder every Jewish man, woman, and child in Europe. It was meant to solve their so-called "Jewish Question."

Ghettos — During World War II, sections of towns that the German authorities used to concentrate, exploit, and starve regional Jewish populations. For the Germans, the ghetto was a holding facility, pending the "Final Solution." For the Jews, living conditions were increasingly miserable and the duration of their stay was unknown.

Hitler, Adolf — (1889-1945) Leader of the Nazi Party and of Germany from 1933 to 1945. The principal architect of the Holocaust.

Labor camps — Internment facilities operated to exploit prisoners for industrial gain.

Medical experiments — In the context of the Holocaust, pseudo-scientific procedures performed by German doctors on thousands of inmates at Nazi concentration camps.

Mengele, Josef — (1911-1979?) Medical officer of Auschwitz from 1943 to 1945. He oversaw brutal medical experimentation on inmates and often helped select who would die in Birkenau's gas chambers.

Nazi Party — A German political party that advocated conquest and German racial superiority. Under its leader, Adolf Hitler, it ruled Germany from 1933 to 1945.

Sonderkommando — Special unit of inmates who were forced to work in the vicinity of the gas chambers, and who worked to dispose of the bodies of prisoners who had been killed in the gas chambers of Auschwitz-Birkenau and other Nazi camps.

Underground — Any resistance organization devoted to undermining or overthrowing a government in power. To be underground is to be in hiding, clandestine, or in disguise.

CHRONOLOGY

Date	Event
1933	
January 30	Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party take power in Germany and begin dismantling its democratic systems.
1935	
September 15	The Nazi government passes its landmark anti-Jewish Nuremberg Laws.
1938	
March 13	Adolf Hitler orders the German Army to occupy Austria, Hungary's neighbor to the west.
July 6-15	The 32-nation Evian Conference on refugees produces little help for Jews trying to escape German rule.
November 9-10	On "Kristallnacht," the Nazi government incites mobs to riot against Jews and burn their synagogues.
1939	
March 11	Hungary passes a law that requires Jewish men of military age to perform mandatory forced labor.
March 14	Germany occupies Czechoslovakia, violating its treaties with Great Britain and France.
March 14	The Germans cede to Hungary a southern region of Czechoslovakia called Carpatho-Ruthenia.
September 1	The German Army invades Poland.
September 3	Great Britain and France declare war on Germany, officially beginning World War II.
1940	
April-June	The German Army conquers Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France.
August 30	Germany and Italy force Romania to cede northern Transylvania to neighboring Hungary.
1941	
June 22	The German Army invades the Soviet Union.
June 22	German killing squads begin murdering Jews and other "enemies of the state" in Soviet territory.
August 2	The Hungarian government passes anti-Jewish legislation based on Germany's Nuremberg Laws.
1942	
January 20	The Wannsee Conference delegates adjourn with a plan to systematically murder the Jews of Europe.
February 15	Auschwitz-Birkenau officially opens. By October, all six Nazi death camps will be in full operation.
July-December	Millions of Jews, most of them from Poland, are murdered in the six Nazi death camps.
1943	
February	The Soviet Army defeats Germany in the Battle of Stalingrad. The German Army begins its retreat.
1944	
March 19	The German Army occupies Hungary.
April 5	Jews in Hungary are required to wear yellow emblems known as Jewish Badges.
April-May	German forces and Hungarian collaborators confine Hungarian Jews to ghettos.
May15-July 8	437,402 Jews are deported from Hungary on 148 trains.
July 9	Deportations cease. All of Hungary is without Jews except around 200,000 who remain in Budapest.
July 9	Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg arrives in Budapest, intent on saving Jewish lives.
October 15	The fascist Arrow Cross party takes control of Hungary, unleashing new anti-Jewish terror in Budapest.
Winter 1944-45	German guards force tens of thousands of Jews on "death marches" away from advancing Allied liberators.
1945	
January 11	Raoul Wallenberg prevents Hungarian fascists from blowing up the city's central Jewish ghetto.
January 17	Soviet troops occupy Budapest and begin liberating the city's 120,000 surviving Jews.
January 17	The Soviet Army arrests Raoul Wallenberg on charges of espionage.
January 27	The Soviet Army liberates the Auschwitz camp complex in German-occupied Poland.
April 11	U.S. troops liberate the Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany.
April 15	British troops liberate around 58,000 prisoners at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany.
April 29	The U.S. Army liberates the Dachau concentration camp in Germany.
May 8	World War II ends in Europe as the German Army surrenders unconditionally to Allied forces.

Bibliography

General Holocaust Histories

A History of the Holocaust, by Yehuda Bauer and Nili Keren. This comprehensive book explores the origins of the Holocaust, and documents the events of the Holocaust by individual country. [Franklin Watts, 1982.]

The World Must Know: The History of the Holocaust as Told in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, by Michael Berenbaum. This highly accessible book draws from firsthand testimonies of survivors, and is illustrated with photographs from the USHMM's archives. [Little Brown, 1993.]

Hungary

The Nazis' Last Victims: The Holocaust in Hungary, edited by Randolph Braham and Scott Miller. This book is one of many by Dr. Braham, who appears in *The Last Days*. Many consider his **The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary** to be the authoritative work on the subject. [Wayne State University Press, 1998; East European Monographs, 1994.]

Seed of Sarah, by Judith Isaacson. In this memoir, the author recounts the years in which she, a young Hungarian girl, gradually lost her rights and freedom and was ultimately sent to Auschwitz. [University of Illinois Press, 1991.]

Raoul Wallenberg

Raoul Wallenberg: The Man Who Stopped Death, by Sharon Linnea. This compelling biography is a good introduction to Wallenberg and his mission as a rescuer and humanitarian. [Jewish Publication Society, 1993.]

Wallenberg: Missing Hero, by Kati Marton. This is one of the most comprehensively researched resources on Wallenberg written to date. [Arcade Publishers, 1995.]

Auschwitz and Other Concentration Camps

Fragments of Isabella: A Memoir of Auschwitz, by Isabella Leitner. Leitner's memoir reflects the themes and ideas that are raised by the experiences of Renée, Alice, and Irene during deportation and at Auschwitz. [Crowell, 1978.]

Inside the Vicious Heart: Americans and the Liberation of Nazi Concentration Camps, by Robert H. Abzug. Through diaries, letters, photographs, and oral testimonies of U.S. soldiers, this book explores the Holocaust from the perspective of liberators like those featured in *The Last Days*. [Oxford University Press, 1985.]

Night, by Elie Wiesel. Holocaust survivor and Nobel prizewinner Elie Wiesel's autobiographical memoir explores his memories of incarceration, his relationship with his father, and the years after liberation. [Hill and Wang, 1960.]

Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity, by Primo Levi. Holocaust survivor Primo Levi's best-known book is one of the most readable and profound books available on the Holocaust. [Macmillan, 1987.]

The Last Days is a 240-page book that expands upon the materials presented in the film. It includes a preface by Steven Spielberg, a concise introduction by David Cesarani on the history of the Holocaust in Hungary, testimonies of survivors and liberators, images from the film production, and archival photographs.

[Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999.]

Other resources from

Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation:

***Survivors: Testimonies of the Holocaust*, an interactive CD-ROM, features four Holocaust survivors who give their firsthand accounts of their experiences during the Holocaust. Their stories are narrated by Leonardo DiCaprio and Winona Ryder, and linked to maps, comprehensive definitions, an extensive timeline, and historical overviews. For ordering information, please call (800) 545-7677.**

***Survivors of the Holocaust* is an award-winning documentary that chronicles the events of the Holocaust as witnessed by those who survived. Call (800) 672-6202 for ordering information.**

***The Lost Children of Berlin* is a documentary film about the last Jewish school in Berlin, which was closed by the Gestapo in 1942. A 50-year reunion of survivors creates the backdrop for this documentary. Call (800) 423-1212 or visit www.vhf.org for more information.**

For further information:

Facing History and Ourselves is a national educational organization whose mission is to engage students in an examination of racism, prejudice, and antisemitism in order to promote the development of a more humane and informed citizenry. The *Facing History and Ourselves Resource Book: Holocaust and Human Behavior* explores many of the themes and topics that are introduced in this study guide. Call (617) 232-1595 or visit www.facing.org for further information.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., has created a resource guide for educators titled *Teaching about the Holocaust*, which includes helpful guidelines, bibliographies, and other materials. To order or for further information on the Museum and its programs, please call (202) 488-2661 or visit www.ushmm.org.

"…and with that bathing suit, I left behind not only my memories, but also my family and all the friends I would never see again. I feel it is my duty as a survivor to make the world aware of the Holocaust, because the six million who were murdered have no voice."

— Renée Firestone

Renée, right, 1943
19 years old

Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation

In 1994, after filming *Schindler's List*, Steven Spielberg established Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation to gather and archive interviews with survivors and other witnesses of the Holocaust. The Shoah Foundation has videotaped more than 50,000 testimonies in 57 countries and 31 languages, and is currently in the process of making its Archive available worldwide as a resource for teaching tolerance.

For further information, please contact the Shoah Foundation:
818.777.4673 / www.vhf.org