

PERSONAL HISTORIES OF SURVIVORS AND VICTIMS OF THE HOLOCAUST

Visitors to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Permanent Exhibition receive identification cards chronicling the experiences of men, women, and children who lived in Europe during the Holocaust. These cards are designed to help personalize the historical events of the time.

The accompanying personal histories are a sample of the Museum's collection and offer a glimpse into the ways the Holocaust affected individuals. Each identification card has four sections: The first provides a biographical sketch of the person. The second describes the individual's experiences from 1933 to 1938, while the third describes events during the war years. The final section describes the fate of the individual and explains the circumstances—to the extent that they are known—in which the individual either died or survived. In addition to revealing details of the history of the Holocaust, the personal accounts reinforce the reality that no two people experienced the events in exactly the same way.



PERSONAL HISTORY

Ezra BenGershom

1922

Wurzburg, Germany

Ezra was born to a Jewish family in the Bavarian city of Wurzburg. In the summer of 1929, his father, a third-generation rabbi, accepted a position as a district rabbi, guiding 12 congregations in Upper Silesia. In primary school, Ezra, who showed a keen interest in chemistry, was often harassed by his schoolmates for being Jewish.

1933-39: Because of my “Nordic” features, I was able to frequent places where Jews couldn’t go. In 1938, one year after I entered a Jewish secondary school in Berlin, the Nazis began deporting Jews to concentration camps. Seeking a way to get out of Germany, I joined a Zionist training cooperative near Berlin where city youth were being prepared to emigrate to Palestine to found agricultural settlements.

1940-44: In 1941 I fled to Berlin when the Nazis stepped up deportations of German Jews. To elude Gestapo patrols I constantly moved about the city and I fashioned a Hitler Youth uniform. With the swastikas and my blond appearance, I passed as an Aryan. In April 1943 I escaped to Vienna using false documents stating I worked in the armaments industry. Then I made my way to Budapest, where I went underground until the Germans invaded Hungary. I fled to Romania where, in November 1944, I boarded a Turkish vessel to Palestine [the Yishuv].

In Palestine Ezra realized his dream to study biochemistry. For 25 years he headed the Clinical Chemistry Division of the Academic Children’s Hospital in Rotterdam.



PERSONAL HISTORY

Gideon Boissevain

June 5, 1921

Amsterdam, Netherlands

Gideon was known affectionately as “Gi” by his family and friends. His parents were descended from the Huguenots, French Protestants who came to the Netherlands in the 16th and 17th centuries. Gi had two brothers and two sisters, and his father worked in the insurance business.

1933–39: Gi had a large circle of friends, both Christians and Jews, and after school they all liked to get together. He and his friends enjoyed taking bike trips, having parties, and playing records. In the mid-1930s his parents joined the Dutch Nazi party because it appeared to them, at first, to offer a good, orderly political system. They quickly abandoned the party, however, when they saw how brutally its members behaved.

1940–42: Gi completed a training course to be an actuary, and was working at an insurance company. Then on May 10, 1940, the Germans invaded the Netherlands, and by the 18th German troops had occupied Amsterdam. Gi and his brother began to work for the Dutch resistance. His parents helped to hide Jews. On Sunday, August 2, 1942, Gi and his brother were arrested and imprisoned.

Gi was executed by the Nazis on October 1, 1942, along with his brother and 18 other resistance fighters. He was 20 years old.



PERSONAL HISTORY

Irene Freund

October 15, 1930

Mannheim, Germany

The younger of two children, Irene was born to Jewish parents in the industrial city of Mannheim. Her father, a wounded German army veteran of World War I, was an interior decorator. Her mother was a housewife. When the Nazis came to power in 1933, Irene's older brother, Berthold, was attending public school. Three-year-old Irene was at home with her mother.

1933–39: Celebrating Jewish holidays with all my aunts and uncles was really nice. One of my favorite places was the zoo; I especially liked the monkeys. When the Nazis forced Jewish children out of public school, I began attending a Jewish school. I was a 'daddy's girl,' and my father would take me home from school on his bike. After the Nazis burned our school, my older brother left for safety in Britain—I was too young to go with him.

1940–44: In 1940, when I was ten, our family was sent to Gurs and then Rivesaltes, terrible camps in southern France. The food was awful. The Jewish Children's Aid Society took me away and placed me in a Catholic convent along with 13 other Jewish girls. I became Irene Fanchet and studied under Sister Theresa. One day the SS came to our convent looking for hidden German Jewish children. One of our girls, who was fluent in French, did the talking for us. It worked. The Germans left, and we were safe.

Thirteen-year-old Irene was freed by Allied troops in July 1944. After being transferred to several children's homes in France, she immigrated to the United States in 1947.



PERSONAL HISTORY

Pinchas Gerszonowicz

January 21, 1921

Miechow, Poland

Pinchas was born into a large family living in the town of Miechow in south-central Poland. His father was a machinist and locksmith. Pinchas spent long days studying, either learning Hebrew in the Jewish school or taking general subjects at the public school. He belonged to the Zionist youth organization Ha Shomer ha-Tsa'ir and played left wing for a Jewish soccer team.

1933–39: At 13 I finished school and started work as an apprentice machinist and blacksmith in a building contractor's shop. When the German army invaded Poland in 1939, my parents decided that my older brother, Herschel, and I should flee to the Soviet-occupied part of Poland. We were on foot and no match for the motorized German division that overtook us about 150 miles east of Miechow. We had no choice but to return home.

1940–44: I repaired vehicles for the Germans in Miechow and later at their Krakow airbase. In July 1943, I was deported to Krakow's suburb of Plaszow, where the Nazis had established a labor camp over a very old Jewish cemetery. There, I worked as a machinist and blacksmith with my father. Every day I saw Jews being shot by the SS guards or torn to death by dogs. The camp's commander, Goeth, always had two large dogs with him. All he had to say was, 'Get somebody!' I never knew if my last minute was approaching.

Pinchas was deported to Auschwitz in early 1945. One of the few survivors of a two-week death march, he was liberated near the Dachau camp in April. He immigrated to the United States in 1948.