**AT HOME (BEFORE 1933)**

During the years following World War I—from 1919 to 1933—Germany had a democratic form of government. Even though Germany had lost the war, many former soldiers, called veterans, who fought during World War I were proud of being German. They were loyal to Germany and they cherished the medals they won fighting for their country. At that time, people of different backgrounds with varied sets of beliefs lived side by side, though not always peacefully. Adults worked and children went to school and played. People attended cultural events and social gatherings, went skiing and swimming, read newspapers, listened to the radio, and traveled.

**SCARY CHANGES (1933–41)**

In January 1933, Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party came to power in Germany. The Nazi government discriminated against Jewish people and Gypsies (Roma), passing many laws to take away their civil rights and freedoms. People who had different political beliefs were in danger from the Nazi government too. The Nazis put these people in prison and sometimes killed them.

The Nazi government made Jewish people wear symbols so that they could always be recognized as Jews. Jewish people were not allowed in certain public places and Jewish children could not attend public schools. Most Jews eventually lost their jobs. The Nazi government took away many of the belongings of Jewish families, including their radios. One night, in November 1938, members of the Nazi party attacked and destroyed the homes, stores, and synagogues of many Jews throughout Germany. This night was called the “The Night of Broken Glass” or *Kristallnacht* in German.

On September 1, 1939, Germany attacked Poland and World War II began.

**FORCED TO LEAVE HOME (1941)**

Beginning in October 1941, the Nazis began taking Jewish people from their homes in Germany and sending them by train to Poland. Jews from southern Germany went to a city called Lodz, Poland, hundreds of miles away from where they lived.

**HISTORICAL OVERVIEW**



Leaving home was difficult and painful for most people. They were forced to give up their houses, stores, furniture, toys, pets, and belongings. They could only bring with them what they could carry by hand. The trains that carried the Jews away from Germany were overcrowded with people and suitcases. The Nazis did not tell the Jews where they were being sent. Most people felt very sad because they were being forced to leave their homes and afraid because they did not know where they were going.

**IN THE GHETTO (1941–44)**

A ghetto was an area in a city or town where Jews were forced to live. The Jews from southern Germany were sent to the Lodz ghetto, which was surrounded by a fence and guarded by police with guns. The Jews were not allowed to leave. There were no telephones and people inside the ghetto rarely got letters. The living conditions in the ghetto were terrible. Many people were crowded into small rooms, which were dirty and cold. There was very little food in the ghetto and many people died of starvation and disease. Children and adults were forced to work in factories for little or no pay. Sometimes people were rounded up and taken by train away from the ghetto. This was called a deportation. At first, the Nazis did not deport people who had fought on the side of Germany during World War I. Some former soldiers, called veterans, used their honorary medals as proof they had fought in the war.

The people who were deported from the Lodz ghetto were taken by the Germans to a killing center in Poland, called Chelmno. A killing center was a place where people were murdered shortly after their arrival.

**TO THE CAMP (1944)**

In 1944, the Nazis emptied the Lodz ghetto, removing those people who had not been deported earlier. Some people had been there for as long as four years. No one was allowed to stay, not even those who had been protected from deportation because they fought in World War I.

The Jews were gathered at the central prison, which was surrounded by a chain link fence. Family members were sometimes separated from each other and had to wait in the prison yard until it was their turn to board the train. Thousands of people were forced to leave the ghetto with very few belongings.

This time the Jews were not sent to Chelmno. But, as before, the Nazis did not tell the Jews where they were going.

**HISTORICAL OVERVIEW**



**IN THE CAMP (1944–45)**

After a long journey, the last remaining Jews from the Lodz ghetto arrived in a place called Auschwitz-Birkenau, in eastern Poland. Auschwitz-Birkenau was a killing center, like Chelmno, but also a labor camp where Jews and other prisoners were kept alive so they could build weapons that would help Germany fight in World War II.

When the Jews arrived in Auschwitz-Birkenau, the Nazis took away all their belongings. The Nazis took away and murdered mothers with young children, older people, and some men. Older children and men and women who seemed strong enough to work began a new, harsh life inside the camp. They became prisoners of the Nazis. They had their heads shaved, their arms tattooed with numbers, and were made to wear prison uniforms.

The Jews worked for the Nazis as slave laborers and lived in even worse conditions than in the ghetto. They were given barely enough food to eat and every day people died of hunger, exhaustion, and disease. They worked all day, often outside, and slept at night in crowded barracks.

**FREEDOM (1945)**

As Germany began to lose the war, the Nazis moved toward safer territory, taking their prisoners with them from one camp to another. In each place, the Jews were forced to work and became more sick and exhausted. Some prisoners from Auschwitz-Birkenau were moved to a concentration camp called Buchenwald in Germany.

In April 1945, the United States Army freed the prisoners in the concentration camps in central and southern Germany, including those in Buchenwald. The prisoners were allowed to leave the camp. Many of the people who survived had lost their families, friends, and communities. They had to start their lives over again.

More than one million children and millions of adults were killed in the Holocaust.

**DIARY OF YITSKHOK RUDASHEVSKI**

8th of July [1941]

The decree was issued that the Vilna Jewish population must put on badges front and back — a yellow circle and inside it the letter J. It is daybreak. I am looking through the window and see before me the first Vilna Jews with badges. It was painful to see how people were staring at them. The large piece of yellow material on their shoulders seemed to be burning me and for a long time I could not put on the badge. I felt a hump, as though I had two frogs on me. I was ashamed to appear in them on the street not because it would be noticed that I am a Jew but because I was ashamed of what [the Nazis were] doing to us. I was ashamed of our helplessness. We will be hung from head to foot with badges and we cannot help each other in any way. It hurt me that I saw absolutely no way out.

**DIARY OF YITSKHOK RUDASHEVSKI**

It is the 6th of September [1941]

People are packing in the house. The women go back and forth. They wring their hands when they see the house looking as if after a pogrom.\* I go around with bleary eyes among the bundles, see how we are being uprooted from our home. Soon we have our first view of the move to the ghetto.... We understand that soon our time will come. I look at the house in disarray, at the bundles, at the perplexed, desperate people. I see things scattered which were dear to me, which I was accustomed to use.

We carry the bundles to the courtyard.... A woman stands in despair among her bundles and does not know how to cope with them, weeps and wrings her hands. Suddenly everything around me begins to weep. Everything weeps.

People are harnessed to bundles which they drag across the pavement. People fall, bundles scatter.... I walk burdened and irritated. The Lithuanians drive us on, do not let us rest. I think of nothing: not what I am losing, not what I have just lost, not what is in store for me. I do not see the streets before me, the people passing by. I only feel that I am terribly weary. I feel that an insult, a hurt is burning inside me. Here is the ghetto gate.

I feel that I have been robbed, my freedom is being robbed from me, my home and the familiar Vilna streets I love so much.

*\*Pogrom refers to an act of mob violence*

Yitskhok Rudashevski’s diary opens in June 1941, in Vilnius, Lithuania, at the time that the Germans invaded Lithuania. In his diary, he called the city by its Russian name, Vilna. He was fifteen when he wrote his last entry on April 6, 1943. Five months later, in September 1943, he and his family went into hiding, but they were caught the following month. All of the inhabitants of the hiding place were taken away and killed except Yitskhok’s cousin, who managed to escape.

His cousin survived the Holocaust and returned to their hiding place after the war, where she found Yitskhok’s diary. The original diary is now in an archive in New York City.

**DIARY OF AN UNKNOWN GIRL**

Wednesday, 11 March 1942

In the street, I heard about the next ration.... We’re supposed to start consuming this ration on the 16th. How my heart beat when I read the posters, our life for the coming two weeks depends on this ration. . . .

It is much worse than the last one.... There is nothing to eat, we are going to die of hunger. My teeth ache and I am very hungry, my left leg is frostbitten. I almost finished all the honey. What have I done, how selfish I am, what are they going to say, what will they spread on their bread now?... My mother looks terrible, a shadow of herself. She works very hard. Whenever I wake up at 12:00, at 1:00 in the night, she is bent over the sewing machine, and she gets up at 6:00 in the morning.

I have no heart or pity, I eat everything I can lay my hands on. Today I had an argument with my father, I insulted and even cursed him. And this was because yesterday I weighed 20 [decagrams] of noodles but this morning took a spoonful for myself. When father came back at night, he weighed the noodles again. Of course there was less.

He started yelling at me. He was right, of course; I had no right to take for myself the few precious decagrams of noodles.... I was upset and I cursed him. Father just stood at the window and cried like a child. No stranger ever abused him like I did. Everybody was at home. I went to bed quickly without touching supper. I thought I would die of hunger.... I fell asleep but woke up at 12:00. Mother was still working at the machine. I felt gnawing hunger, so I got up and ate....

Friday, 13 March, 1942

Father told me to come and have some soup. Despite everything a father is still a father. He is working now at 32 Mlynarska. He gets two soups there and he gives one to me. Would another father do that?

QUESTION: What facts about ghetto life can you identify by studying this diary entry? For example, what are some of the things they had to eat? What did they do during the day?

**INTERVIEW WITH ALICE LOK CAHANA**

And when the train stopped again, we arrived. This horrible place. Everybody in strange uniforms. I told Edith: “It looks that they took us to the wrong place. Somehow, somebody will come and apologize. Somebody will say, ‘It’s totally wrong. You don’t belong here.’” This looks like an insane asylum. People [have] shaved heads and striped clothes.... It was like...like in a mirage because first your eye was not even used to the light after this darkness in the cattle train, and then this sunlight...this strong sunlight and the shouting. So you [weren’t] really pulled together.... And, I stepped aside, realizing in a few minutes that

I don’t see Mother. I don’t see my brothers. I don’t see Edith. I’m totally alone. And I am marching, marching, marching with the people.

QUESTION: In her interview, Alice says, “It looks that they took us to the wrong place. Somehow, somebody will come and apologize. Somebody will say, ‘It’s totally wrong. You don’t belong here.’” How do you interpret this statement? Does it suggest anything to you about what Alice knew or expected from the train journey?

**INTERVIEW WITH FRITZIE FRITSHALL**

They would line us up every morning and they would take us outside; and we would carry huge rocks from one side to another. One day we would come, and we would take these huge rocks from this side and we would carry them to that side. The next day, they would bring us back; and we would take these same huge rocks, and we would carry them from that side back to this side.... We were all weak. And to carry a big rock like that was a lot of weight and a lot of work. By the time they take us back to the barracks at night we could barely crawl. But we needed to show that we could still walk and we were strong enough to give one more day.

QUESTIONS:

1. The Nazis forced prisoners to work at hard physical labor in the concentration camps. What does Fritzie’s interview reveal about the nature of the work she was forced to do? What was the purpose of this work?
2. Many people define resistance as actively fighting against the Nazis. However, in the concentration camps, prisoners were weakened by hard physical labor, illness, and hunger, making it difficult, if not impossible to fight. Do you find anything in this interview excerpt that suggests another way of thinking about what constituted resistance?