



ILLINOIS HOLOCAUST MUSEUM
& EDUCATION CENTER

Gallery Guide: Zev & Shifra Karkomi Holocaust Exhibition



GALLERY GUIDE : ZEV & SHIFRA KARKOMI HOLOCAUST EXHIBITION

Since the late 1970s, the Museum has grown, moved, and evolved into the place where you are now standing: a place that tells the history of the Holocaust and honors its Survivors and victims, and the people who stood up against injustice. The Museum encourages all people to be Upstanders instead of bystanders, to speak up for our shared humanity, and against hatred and indifference.

Before you start exploring the *Karkomi Holocaust Exhibition*, here is what you can expect.

This tour takes you on a journey back through time. You will see how the seeds of hatred and antisemitism were sown by the Nazis and their collaborators. You will see how, step by step, the Nazis dismantled Jewish people's rights and freedoms, passed laws to ban Jews from every aspect of life, and finally, how the Nazis perpetrated genocide.

Along the tour you will see personal artifacts, documents, and photographs from some of the few who survived, and learn about their stories of hope, courage, luck, resistance, loss, and ultimately, survival.

KARKOMI HOLOCAUST EXHIBITION: KEY QUESTIONS AND THEMES BY GALLERY

Jewish Life Before World War II

Jewish life and community before the war was diverse. Notice **the walls on your right** depicting photos of family, educational, and cultural life, while **the walls on your left** reflect religious life.

Look at the photographs and artifacts on the walls. What can you find that tells us how Jewish communities lived before the Holocaust?

Germany: A Fragile Democracy

After losing World War I, Germany suffered an economic and social depression in the late 1920s that set the stage for the rise of Nazism and Hitler's ascent.

Hitler offered answers to a country filled with turmoil, marked by mass unrest and violent attempts to take over the government, which further destabilized the country's self-confidence. Hitler's answer was to look for scapegoats to blame for Germany's problems.

After viewing the large photographs on the wall, what can you tell us about the political and economic environment in Germany following WWI? How were conditions ideal for someone like Hitler and the Nazi Party to rise to power?

Jewish Community Responds to Nazism, 1933-1938

The Nazi-led German government began passing the first anti-Jewish laws designed to rob Jews of their livelihood, including encouraging boycotts of Jewish stores.

In the five years between 1933 and 1938, Germany enacted 444 discriminatory laws and decrees against the Jews and other targets of Nazism. Some were harsh, others, hardly noticeable. They reflected and instituted Nazi ideology, such as the Nuremburg laws that defined who was Jewish and stripped Jews of their German citizenship.

These laws were designed to ostracize Jews from public and civic life, like expelling Jewish children from schools. Their goal? To make life so uncomfortable that Jews would voluntarily leave Germany.

On **the jagged walls to your right** is the first wave of Nazi anti-Jewish laws used to isolate Jews. **The curved walls on your left** show the Jewish response, bending but refusing to break. Many still believed that life would return to normal.

Explore the artifacts, and photos on the curved wall to the left. Find examples of how Jews resisted and responded to what was happening during this time. What are the types of choices Jews had to make during this time? Why did some leave? Why did others choose to stay? On the jagged wall to the right, find examples of how Nazis excluded Jews from German society.

See the far wall ahead. These are passports issued after 1938, when the Nazi government ordered all Jews in Germany to turn in their passports. The following January, new passports were issued, embedded with new information. If you look closely, you'll see Jewish men were given the middle name, "Israel", and Jewish women the middle name "Sara."

This was another effort to both dehumanize Jewish people and make them easily identifiable. It was another step in robbing Jews of their personal identity.

The November Pogrom/"Kristallnacht"

For two days, the Nazis unleashed an unprecedented assault on the Jewish communities of

Germany, Austria, and the Sudetenland. These attacks became known as *Kristallnacht*—the “Night of Broken Glass.” With cooperation from the local population, police, and fire brigades, Nazis smashed windows, vandalized storefronts, burned down over 1,000 synagogues, and arrested 30,000 Jewish men and sent them to concentration camps. Panic-stricken, Jews searched for countries of refuge, but many had already closed their borders.

This night is often considered the end of the beginning, and the beginning of the end, as it marked a new phase in the Nazis’ assault against European Jewry. *Kristallnacht* was the first time overt violent action was taken against Jews based solely on religion, starting the genocide that is the Holocaust. **Step onto the cracked glass floor** and watch the synagogue doors as projections of synagogues before and after *Kristallnacht* are shown.

The November Pogrom is often identified as a turning point in the history of the Holocaust. From what you read and observed in the gallery, what do you see that supports this idea? Where do you find examples of changing attitudes and treatment toward Jews?

World’s Response 1933-1939

Newspapers, headlines, and dates are displayed in this area highlighting the coverage of Nazi violence. *Kristallnacht* convinced Jews of the need to emigrate. Look at the wall of papers behind you. Restrictions from many countries, financial roadblocks, and German bureaucracy created obstacles to get out of Germany.

Explore the gallery and find evidence that the world knew about the environment and events in Germany. What examples can you find of the obstacles to both emigration and immigration that Jews faced?

Germany Invades and Occupies Europe

On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland. Two days later, France and Britain declared war on Germany. World War II had begun. The Nazis conquered neighboring countries with two objectives: Lebensraum—living space for the “superior” Aryan population—and racial domination of non-Aryans. **The video on the wall** illustrates how rapidly the Nazis advanced and occupied Europe. **The lower right screen** shows the number of Jews living in Nazi-controlled areas.

Watch the video map. What significant challenge does the occupation of Europe present for the Nazis?

Mosaic of Victims

The Nazis targeted millions of individuals belonging to communities who were categorized within an array of real and perceived social, biological, racial, ethnic, religious, and political groups.

Targeted groups included, but were not limited to: Jewish people, people with intellectual, physical, or emotional disabilities; Sinti and Roma; Black people; Jehovah's Witnesses; political dissidents; LGBTQ+ people; Slavs, including Poles and Soviet prisoners of war; people with criminal records; and other marginalized communities the Nazis pejoratively called "asocials." For some individuals targeted by Nazi policy, these real or perceived identities overlapped.

The tiled wall shows a sanatorium, where the Nazis' first victims—German people with disabilities—were killed. You can see the smoke billowing from one of the building's chimneys. The Nazis claimed that those who were disabled were a drain on the state. Calling it euthanasia, or 'mercy death,' rather than murder, helped them justify these atrocities.

Who were some of the groups of people targeted during the Holocaust? How did the Nazis misuse science to justify the killing of people with disabilities?

Nazi Ideology Spreads West

By occupying Western Europe, the Nazis used both military force and the cooperation of local populations to rapidly implement anti-Jewish laws that had taken years to establish within Germany. In the spring of 1942, the Nazis forced Jews in Western European countries like Belgium and the Netherlands to wear yellow Stars of David on their clothing as identification. **Note the yellow Stars of David** and look behind the bookcase that replicates the secret entrance to where Anne Frank's family and others hid.

Find examples of the measures Nazis took to increase the isolation of the Jewish population in the West. Where do you see examples of resistance or response Jewish people took to defy Nazi policies?

The Ghettos

More than two million Jews came under German control after the invasion of Poland. Realizing that "voluntary emigration" was impossible with so vast a population, the Germans adopted a policy of isolation and containment. For the Jews, ghetto life was one of squalor, hunger, disease, and despair. Yet even in the darkness of the ghettos, with the most limited resources, many Jews actively strove to maintain their dignity and humanity through cultural and spiritual resistance.

Notice the sloping cobblestone floor as you descend further into the exhibition.

What do the artifacts and photographs tell you about the conditions in the ghettos? What measures did the Nazis take to isolate the Jewish community from the rest of the population? Explore the gallery and look for examples of resistance.

Holocaust in the Soviet Union

Germany's invasion of the territories of the Soviet Union added more than five million Jews to those under Nazi control. The Nazis were no longer satisfied with their policy of ghettoization and implemented a plan that called for the mass murder of all Jews, which became known as the "Final Solution." Three thousand members of the *Einsatzgruppen* (mobile killing squads) were sent from town to town to confiscate property and then systematically murder Jews, Roma, and others in mass shootings.

Look at the illustrated maps on the wall showing the invasion of the Soviet Union and the killing sites. Why do you think this looked different than the invasion of Western countries? Look for artifacts that tell the stories of Jewish people who lived in the Soviet Union. What stories do they tell?

The Wannsee Conference

On January 20th, 1942, in a villa on the outskirts of Berlin, the Wannsee Conference convened to work out the logistics of the "Final Solution to the Jewish Question." Nazis believed that a more industrialized and efficient method of killing was needed-- the work of the *Einsatzgruppen* proved to be inefficient. It took too long, required too many bullets, and took a psychological toll on the killers.

The minutes of the Wannsee Conference recorded that: "Due to the war, the emigration plan has been replaced with deportation of the Jews to the east, in accordance with the Führer's will." As a result of the meeting, plans were solidified for the network of killing centers where millions of European Jews were deported to their deaths.

Nearby you can read about the 15 men who attended the conference. Pay special attention to their professions – many were trained to help people before the war.

The chart on the wall traces the number of Jews (11 million total) who were targeted in occupied Europe and in countries yet to be conquered.

What does the chart on the wall suggest about the Nazi's plans? Why is this important to note?

Deception

Deception was a major tool used by the Nazis and their collaborators to mislead victims and the world. **The glass wall** features several different euphemisms used by the Nazis to mask their intentions.

How could deception play an important role in the Holocaust? In what ways do you think the Nazis wanted to mislead people?

Deportation to Killing Centers

This circular area marks the transition between the two buildings of the Museum. Here, **Survivors share their personal accounts** of deportation.

Jews would be rounded up from the ghettos and made to prepare for their 'resettlement' taking with them a few of their most valuable possessions if they were able.

Freight and passenger trains were used for the deportations – prisoners were sealed inside with little or no room to sit or lay down. No food or water was provided for those on the trains, which were intensely hot during the summer and freezing cold during the winter. Aside from a bucket, there were no sanitary facilities, adding to the indignity faced by those being deported. Journeys often lasted several days, and sometimes they took a few weeks. Many of those packed onto these trains died during the journey to the camps through starvation or overcrowding.

Railcar

This railcar is similar to the tens of thousands of rail cars the Nazis and their collaborators used to transport Jews to ghettos and camps throughout occupied- Europe. The railcar might hold between 80 to 100 people for days. Take a few moments to look at the railcar.

You may choose to go up the ramp to rail car or use the smaller ramp to the left to continue your tour.

Camps

Between 1933 and 1945, more than 40,000 camps and internment sites were established in Nazi-occupied Europe. To facilitate the "Final Solution", specialized camps were developed with a goal of mass murder. Many of these killing centers used gas chambers and crematoria, like the model in the middle of this room. Families were separated after arrival, and individuals were selected to work or die. **Look at the display of shoes** from the camps, a stark reminder of the millions of people murdered during the Holocaust, and realize that each shoe belonged to a unique individual.

Find the striped uniform in the case. This is an authentic uniform from a concentration camp. In the camps, prisoners didn't have a name, just a number on their uniform. The chart nearby outlines the complex system of badges the SS used to identify why each prisoner is incarcerated.

Explore the gallery. Why do you think the Museum chose to display one of each item, e.g.: shoe, bowl, spoon, rather than a large pile of objects?

Jewish Armed Resistance

As deportations and rumors of death camps increased, Jews realized survival was almost impossible. They began to organize for an ultimate armed struggle against the Nazis, despite unequal resources, strength, and opportunities. Resistance in the ghettos, forests, and killing centers was meant to exact vengeance from the Nazis, and for Resisters to die fighting with honor. The ghetto uprising space, comprised of brick walls and archways, evokes an underground bunker occupied by resistance fighters. The last letter written by a young Jewish Commander inside the Warsaw Ghetto is projected on the wall. **Notice the immersive forest of architectural trees** as you enter the Bielski partisan camp and read excerpts from the diary of a young partisan fighter. The third gallery on resistance is quiet and stark, focusing on the revolts at Sobibor, Treblinka, and Auschwitz-Birkenau killing centers.

Examine the photos throughout the gallery. What forms of resistance do they show? What choices did some individuals make? Why is it important to learn about Jewish armed resistance?

Rescuers

Look at the left wall and observe several rescuers - including a diplomat, a business person, and a young teenage girl – who represent the exceptional few throughout occupied Europe who risked their lives to save Jews. One rescuer, Chiune-Sempo Sugihara, Acting Consul for Japan in Kovno, Lithuania, issued over 2,100 visas to Polish refugees, most of them Jews, despite cables from the Japanese foreign ministry that requested he follow stricter procedures.

Who were rescuers? Who were collaborators? Why do you think rescuers did what they did?

Death Marches

As the Allied armies advanced and Nazi defeat was inevitable, thousands of prisoners were forced to evacuate camps in the East on death marches toward the interior of the German Reich. Thousands died of exhaustion and exposure. **Note the map on the wall ahead.** It's easy to forget that the artifacts and photos you have been seeing are from the few people who survived the Holocaust. This map puts this into focus. Take a moment to look at it. It shows the Jewish population of European countries in 1939, at the start of the war, compared to the number of Jews killed in those countries by the end of the war in 1945. Two out of every three Jewish people in Europe are dead.

What do you think was the Nazis' goal(s) in carrying out the death marches?

Liberation

Allied forces who had come to defeat the Nazis did not expect to liberate prisoners. These battle-

wearied soldiers could not begin to imagine the horror of the camps nor the condition of those imprisoned in them. **The floor below** contains authentic artifacts and replicas of Nazi paraphernalia; walking on it represents the “stomping out” of Nazism.

What do you think “liberation” meant to the survivors? How do you think they felt? What do you think were some of the hardships of liberation? How did the Allies react when liberating the camps?

Rebuilding Family and Community

The joy of liberation was mixed with the heartbreaking realization that many had not survived. Many lost their homes and have nowhere to go. Millions of Jews were put into DP, or Displaced Persons, camps.

Explore the artifacts and photos. What are some of the struggles survivors had after the war? What was life like in the DP camps? What choices did they have to rebuild their lives?

Seeking Justice

The Allies put on trial 22 of the top living Nazi officials. The trial lasted nearly a year. Find the large black and white photo of the trial on **the wall to your right**.

Trials of other perpetrators, including doctors, judges, business leaders, and members of the *Einsatzgruppen*, followed.

Many of those found guilty received short prison sentences or no penalty at all. But for many, justice was never served. Tens of thousands of perpetrators and collaborators returned to their homes after the war to lead normal lives and never faced prosecution.

Explore the gallery. Who do you think justice serves? Can justice be possible in the aftermath of atrocity? How can you achieve justice when only the leaders are convicted of the crimes?

Departure and Arrival

The right wall contains artifacts of Jews immigrating to Israel, which was British-controlled Palestine at the time. **The left wall** shows Jews sailing to and arriving in America. Continue around the corner to the next two galleries. Survivors were an integral part in the birth of the State of Israel, and contributed to mainstream American culture. View the walls of naturalization certificates and pull out the drawers to see items from four Survivors’ new lives in America.

Open up the drawers of items. Who stands out to you and why? How did the survivors’ lives change after immigration?

We Are Ready

An American neo-Nazi group requested a permit to march through Skokie, Illinois, home to one of the largest populations of Holocaust survivors in the world.

A long and now-famous legal battle followed, putting the First Amendment and the right to assemble at center stage, which went all the way to the United States Supreme Court. The march did happen two years later, in Chicago, not Skokie.

For survivors, the threat of the march became a call to action. Many began to speak out against the threatened march, resisting the prospect of hatred coming to their new home. And this time, they were supported by community members from all backgrounds and religions. These actions sowed the seeds of an idea to establish a Holocaust Museum in Skokie, to use education to combat hatred and bigotry. **Look above to see posters** from the marches in 1977-78.

Why did the attempted neo-Nazi march motivate survivors to speak about their experiences? Why is it important to study the Holocaust today? Why do survivors share their stories?

American Awakening/Freedom of Speech

In the decades following World War II, American awareness of the Holocaust grew steadily. **View the wall** of key events that brought the Holocaust to the forefront of political and ethical consciousness, nurturing Holocaust museums and memorials worldwide and preserving eyewitness testimony.

Pritzker Theatre Closing Film

The exhibit **closes with a short film** emphasizing the importance of learning from history and continuing to work towards the promise of “never again.”

What can lessons can we learn from the Holocaust and contemporary genocides? What can you do to make a positive change in the world or community?