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# Through the Eyes of Children: Social Oppression Under Nazi Rule from 1933 to 1938 Reflections of Three Holocaust Survivors

## **Abstract**

This paper discusses the experiences of three Berlin native child survivors of the Holocaust through analysis of their oral testimonies. Their unique voices help shed light on the various ways in which lives were forever changed for those who were legally identified as Jewish in Nazi Germany by way of social oppression. This paper highlights three key years that each survivor discussed at length in their testimonies: Hitler's Chancellorship in 1933, the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, and Kristallnacht in 1938. Ultimately, this paper argues for the importance of these years and labels them as being a crucial part in the events that led up to the Holocaust and carrying out of the Final Solution, in regards to the victims, perpetrators, and bystanders.

## **Keywords**

Holocaust, Survivors, Children, Nuremberg Laws, Kristallnacht, Jewish, Berlin

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By Lauren Ashley Bradford**



— Introduction —

The economic and social segregation of the Jews on all levels of German society, beginning in 1933 and continuing on for more than a decade, was the platform from which the National Socialists established and developed their antisemitic ideologies that ultimately brought about the near-extinction of an entire group of people.<sup>1</sup> This paper will show how three child survivors directly experienced the effects of the political corruption and antisemitic policies that were implemented during the Nazi era by way of social measures and constrictions. It is these forms of social segregation and persecution that directly reflect how Nazi ideology and political oppression were practiced by members of the German community, of all ages and genders, reaching across every economic and social class at various times throughout the 1930s. The buildup of these pressures enabled events such as the “Reichskristallnacht” to occur in 1938. The Nazi philosophy and system in place allowed for an atmosphere of violence and hatred that led to direct and personal attacks on the Nazi-labeled Jewish community.

The years ranging from 1930 to 1938 can be better understood if dissected into three distinct events. First, there was the ascension and initial execution of power by the Nazi party

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<sup>1</sup> Wolfgang Benz, “Exclusion as a Stage in Persecution: The Jewish Situation in Germany 1933-1941,” in *Nazi Europe and the Final Solution*, ed. David Bankier and Israel Gutman (Israel: Yad Vashem Publications, 2009), 40.

when Hitler was named Chancellor in 1933. This officially begins the mental molding and preparation for German society to accept Jewish persecution throughout the 1930s and early 40s. The second significant happening was the introduction of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, which consisted of the removal of basic rights from those now labeled Jewish by law. From this time onward, the prohibition of Jews from economic and social life through “Aryanization”<sup>2</sup> occurred.<sup>3</sup> The third and final distinct event was the “Reichskristallnacht” on November 9, 1938 that caused the most unrest amongst German Jews. November 9 marked the active destruction and socially accepted eradication of Jews in Germany that eventually spreading all throughout Europe and affected those located in what would become German-occupied territory. The overarching connection and effect of these key events are the signifiers of three separate time periods during the *Nazi Zeit*<sup>4</sup> in pre-WWII Germany. The three resulted in the constriction and extermination of Jews in society through political means.

German historian Michael Wildt’s position on the systematic Nazi persecution of the Jews - and all others who were legally deemed non-Aryan - aids in demonstrating how the effects of a politically oppressive government system is able to not only impact everyone under its control, but more importantly the way in which the persecution develops over time. According to Wildt, it has become common practice to follow political scientist and historian Paul Hilberg’s research – definition, expropriation, concentration, annihilation<sup>5</sup>– and have it stand for the clear cut

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on what the concept of Aryanization is, see “Aryanization” *Shoah Research Center*, accessed May 2, 2017, [http://www.yadvashem.org/odot\\_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%205775.pdf](http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%205775.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Wolfgang Benz, “Exclusion as a Stage in Persecution” 40.

<sup>4</sup> A German word that is used to represent the time period in which the Nazis were in power.

<sup>5</sup> Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of European Jews* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985), 54.

chronological development of the National Socialist policy on the Jews in “well-defined” and unambiguous phases.”<sup>6</sup> Wildt claims that Hilberg’s argument leads the reader to believe that the Nazi regime pursued an antisemitic policy that was clear in definition and contained a knowingly linear progression.<sup>7</sup> Most importantly, Wildt argues that Hilberg’s work reflects an “above” vantage point. Hilberg’s theory claims that the persecution of the Jews was solely a sequence of acts carried out by the state from above, therefore disregarding the involvement of others in non-government positions or rank. According to Wildt,

From this perspective, the praxis of social antisemitism, the actual practice of neighbors, colleagues, customers, acquaintances and relatives is blocked out. Third and most particularly, this approach causes the observer to lose sight of the constant ongoing antisemitic violence to which the Jewish population in Germany was exposed from the beginning of National Socialist rule.<sup>8</sup>

Wildt’s argument helps to explain and clarify the importance of showing the effects of how the actions of political and social oppressors affect people from the ground level up. One cannot look at history from a strictly top-down view. By solely focusing on the actions of the government, there is a complete lack of understanding. Knowledge about how the oppressors’ actions directly affected people on a personal level as well as the experiences of those citizens both individually and as a general

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Wildt, “The Boycott Campaign as an Arena of Collective Violence against Jews in Germany, 1933-1938,” in *Nazi Europe and the Final Solution*, ed. David Bankier and Israel Gutman (Israel: Yad Vashem Publications, 2009), 53.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Wildt, “The Boycott Campaign,” 53.

conglomerate, in Wildt's argument, is lost. When studying such a difficult and intricate time period as the Nazi era, it is especially important to look at all aspects of German society, not only as a whole, but also on an individual basis.

Hitler's rise to power in 1933, the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, and the "Reichskristallnacht" in 1938 were all discussed in the written and verbal testimonies of three children survivors whose experiences are discussed at length in this paper. Regina Steinitz, Israel Löwenstein, and Leonie Hilton have all given detailed accounts of their encounters and reactions connected to these dates without being given direct questions or outlined discussion topics. Their choosing to specifically point out these three separate events clearly demonstrates their importance. All of these key years occur before the outbreak of World War II and are crucial in understanding the development and practices of the Nazi persecution of the Jews in Germany. All are linked to the seizure of power by the National Socialists as well as the hardships faced by approximately 600,000 Jews in Germany and eventually those in German-occupied territory, due to the direct effects of antisemitic rule. Although antisemitism existed throughout all of Europe for hundreds of years, it was not until the late nineteenth century that it began to take on a new form in Germany. This new practice of antisemitism would continue to spread through German-speaking lands, resulting in the use of the Jewish population as a scapegoat for the failure of WWI. During the tumultuous times of the Weimar Republic, this negativity and hatred became connected with the rising National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP). However, it was not until the NSDAP seized full control of the German government that antisemitic ideology became law. The first hardship under the National Socialist party began in 1933, the year that marked the official start of Nazi control after Hitler was appointed as Chancellor of Germany by then German President Paul von Hindenburg. January

30, 1933 would forever be the day that marks the beginning of the cruelty faced by millions of people, including, but not limited to, political opponents, Jews, Roma Sinti, homosexuals, people with disabilities, Jehovah's Witnesses, "asocials," Poles, Soviet prisoners of war, and people of African descent from all over Europe.

The Nazis were known for their careful recording of the cruelties they inflicted on people exterminated during the Holocaust, but it was not possible for even them to record them all. Some victims are merely numbers in history books, and some will be forever lost to history - nameless and voiceless. It is difficult to grasp the scope and extent of Nazi terror, but to prevent future genocides the names and the stories of victims no matter the age, gender, or background must be recalled, acknowledged, and documented. Focusing only on numbers denies the individuality of Holocaust victims and ignores their inhumane treatment and profound experiences. Each victim and every survivor endured unique experiences, exhibited strength and adaptation, and tested their endurance at the hands of the Nazis.<sup>9</sup> Responses to severe events can be triggered and explained by any number of factors such as gender, age, or aspects of a person's upbringing, such as socio-economic status. But survival may have depended upon past experiences or a sense of identity that aided in the ability to survive.

— Oral Testimony —

Three Jewish children, all survivors, Regina Steinitz, Israel Löwenstein, and Leonie Hilton, gave oral testimonies when interviewed about their childhood and lives during Nazi Germany. Regina and Israel's oral interviews were both spoken and transcribed in their native German language. Leonie's oral

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<sup>9</sup> Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

interview however, was spoken in English and later transcribed in English. The German-to-English translations used in this paper were translated by the author by listening to the three survivor oral testimonies and reading the transcriptions. The video recordings of the oral testimonies were coordinated by two separate groups: the USC Shoah Foundation and the *Stiftung Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas: Sprechen Trotz Allem*.<sup>10</sup> Both organizations have websites with online archives and databases containing these videos. Whether recounted in German or English, their stories each have powerful tones of endurance.

The three children were born and raised in the middle of the major political hot spot and capital of the new “Third Reich”: Berlin. They were each chosen out of the many survivor tales that have been audio-recorded throughout the years for three main reasons: age, location, and self-identification. Their age plays a major role in the telling of their stories. It is through the eyes of children that one is able to see how these new rules, regulations, and societal structures brought about an increasingly volatile climate in Germany, ultimately altering their lives and the very existence of German Jews. Throughout the paper, the three survivors will be addressed using their first names in order to assist the reader in remembering their age; they are minors at the time of Nazi occupation and will be addressed as such in this paper in order to further solidify the fact that the topic is children survivors.

The process of choosing these three survivors began with choosing a central and important location. Berlin, an epicenter of political and social activity, offers a wide range of oral testimonies resulting from its population size and socio-economic environment. The city is also the location where this paper was written, which allowed for the understanding of and access to the

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<sup>10</sup> The Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe Foundation: Speak in Spite of Everything. The memorial, museum, and archives are located in Berlin Mitte, Germany.



physical geography and specific documentation needed to properly write this piece.<sup>11</sup> Leonie, Regina, and Israel were specifically chosen out of all of the Berliner accounts because of their self-identification in relation to religion. Israel embraced his Jewishness and was raised as a devout Jew. Leonie was unaware of her connection to Judaism for the majority of her childhood, but after her discovery she refused to accept the information. Regina was aware of her connection to Judaism in relation to her father, but did not fully understand the concept behind religion and what being Jewish entailed. All three children had different relationships and experiences with the term Jewish. Although they all had their own personal identity, they were amassed together and viewed as belonging to one sole group in the eyes of the Nazi government.

Documented stories and recollections of the survivors can explain factors that ultimately aided and kept them alive through unimaginable atrocities. Researching and studying survivor testimonies is important to understand each victim's background and firmly grasp their personal perspective on life. This leads to a fuller understanding of their actions and commentary. Choosing to use audio and video testimonies in the survivor's native language gives the researcher a better understanding of the survivor's story.<sup>12</sup> The video recordings of Israel, Regina, and Leonie were found through research at the *Denkmal für die emordeten Juden Europas*.<sup>13</sup> The vast archives and online database filled with survivor testimonies was the catalyst for this paper and the search for Jewish Berliner victims of Nazi persecution during the *Nazi*

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<sup>11</sup> This paper was written in Berlin, Germany during an academic semester abroad. The location is important because of the access it granted to on the ground information needed to better understand the survivor's stories.

<sup>12</sup> For further information on the science behind, benefit of, and importance of oral history see: Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson eds., *The oral history reader* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Alessandro Portelli, "The peculiarities of oral history," in *History Workshop Journal*, no. 12, p. 96. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

<sup>13</sup> The Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin Mitte, Germany.

*Zeit* before the war began. By interpreting and examining the specific word usage, and noting the tone of voice used for discussing certain topics, the researcher can form a stronger connection with the survivor than is possible using only written accounts.

With the advantages come disadvantages when it comes to using video testimony as a primary source. The interviewer is relying on the memory and willingness of the person being interviewed. There are many factors that need to be addressed and taken into account when conducting or using an interview. The person's current age, in relation to how old they were when the particular event took place, as well as the language that the interview is being conducted in are two crucial pieces of information to know in order to better understand the interviewee. Regina, Leonie, and Israel's interviews were all conducted fifty to sixty years after the events in which they are discussing took place. They were also able to choose the language spoken during the interview, two of the three choosing to speak German and only Leonie choosing to speak English. The value of the information gained from these videos is heavily based on the quality of the video, the length of time since the person experienced the event which they are discussing, how detailed the speaker is when answering the questions, and what they are saying. Nonetheless, even a short video of a quiet speaker can aid in the better understanding of what the person experienced and how it has affected them since. When researching major historic events and time periods that involve horrific crimes and high mortality rates, it is possible to become numb to the number of victims. It is difficult to fully grasp or understand the severity of events or comprehend astronomical figures. By using video recordings of survivor testimonies, a piece of living and breathing history can have a profound impact.

The motivation to survive was the incentive for three young Jews living in Berlin at the start of Hitler's rise to power. Their stories reveal how the Nazis were able to indoctrinate a whole society and turn it against a minority by way of social exclusion through governmental action. Through the restrictions on their everyday lives and social settings, political changes became personal. The question of the economic conflicts that their families may have experienced throughout the 1930s, due to their legally designated labels brought about in 1933 and fully established through the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, is, although important, beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, the focus is on the way in which political policies were made personal and affected Jewish children's daily lives. The use of adolescent perspectives during the Nazi era requires special attention to be given to the social pressures and cruelties they face, as opposed to economic issues, due to their age and lack of experience with the fiscal world.

From 1933 to 1945, these children were among the millions who were persecuted and "othered" by the Nazis based on their "non-Aryan" status. Prior to the Nazi period, many German Jews were unaware of their Jewish lineage. When Hitler rose to power, the National Socialists decided who was Jewish, and the concept of Jewishness as a mindset, identity, and an irrevocable connection to one's race or ethnicity, dependent on whether or not these legally labeled Jews as individuals felt as though there could be a connection between Judaism and race or ethnicity, no longer played a role in society. Regardless of the practiced religion, conversion, or the way they lead their lives, Jewishness was determined by each individual's documentation and family tree.<sup>14</sup> Without proof of non-Jewish family lineage in documentation form

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<sup>14</sup> For further information about the categorical rules for who was considered an Aryan, Jew, or "Mischling" see the decree made in November of 1935 that gave definitions. "The Nuremberg Race Laws," *USHMM.com*, accessed April 14, 2017, <https://www.ushmm.org/outreach/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007695>.

and regardless of their personal identities, Jews were labeled and subsequently mistreated, abused, and forced to live under restrictive and cruel laws. They were increasingly separated from their German non-Jewish neighbors. Because of this growing distance between the two groups on social, economic, legal, and psychological levels, the Nazis were able to eventually “remove” almost an entire community of people with little protest from the rest of the population.<sup>15</sup>

Hearing the voices of the victims that experienced atrocities makes the history more tangible and poignant than what is merely recounted in books, articles, and journals. Historian Lawrence Langer has contrasted written and oral narratives, noting that survivor testimonies and memories by known authors, such as Primo Levi and Charlotte Delbo, create a coherent moral vision. However, it is through oral testimonies that he has found the resistance of “organizing impulses” that allows for an “unshielded truth” to be found.<sup>16</sup> Only through these personal accounts can we appreciate the scope of the Holocaust’s brutality toward certain members of the German state.

When looking at the extent of Nazi power and social oppression through political policies, it is important to understand the significance of the progression and removal of human rights that continued to accumulate over the period of 1933 to 1939. Hitler’s new role as Chancellor in 1933 marked a clear shift in the history of antisemitic acts of violence in Germany. Even though the “Decree by the Reich President on the Protection of the People and State” of February 28, 1933 revoked the key basic rights guaranteed in the Weimar constitution to the Jews, it was the introduction of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935 that more forcibly

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<sup>15</sup> Ronnie S. Landau, *The Nazi Holocaust* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 1992), 5.

<sup>16</sup> Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

demonstrated the effect of Nazi rule on Jewish life.<sup>17</sup> These new laws touched the Jewish community on a deeper and more personal level than ever before. It was from 1935 to 1938 that the antisemitic violence increased, and on November 9, 1938, the “Reichskristallnacht” was a clear indicator of the success of Nazi propaganda and indoctrination of the German *Volk*.<sup>18</sup> Although there had been some German opposition after the “Night of Broken Glass,” also called the “November Pogrom,” this event demonstrated how Nazi ideology had altered the mind of the masses. However, violence and antisemitism do not just appear from nothing. They must be created, developed, and practiced by active participants.<sup>19</sup> It was the planned barrage of antisemitic propaganda, repeated and expanding violence against Jews, and the political policies that formed the foundation for the exclusion of the Jewish community that ultimately enabled the violently antisemitic psychological and social climate of Germany to come about. The government invoked the right of any German citizen to practice psychological and physical hate, which allowed for the majority of society to accept the deportation and destruction of the Jews.<sup>20</sup> In short, if the “Reichskristallnacht” had taken place in 1935, it would not have had the same effect due to the build up and change in the social atmosphere that occurred throughout the years leading up to 1938.

With ages ranging from three to seventeen in 1933, all three of the survivors, Regina, Leonie, and Israel, indicated that there had been a major shift in society that did not become fully tangible until 1935. For each of the three, 1933 is a date that would forever symbolize their introduction to antisemitic prejudice. As they remember their experiences during this dark

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<sup>17</sup> Wolfgang Benz, “Exclusion as a Stage in Persecution,” 42.

<sup>18</sup> A German word, frequently used by the Nazi party that means “People.”

<sup>19</sup> Michael Wildt, “The Boycott Campaign,” 53.

<sup>20</sup> Wolfgang Benz, “Exclusion as a Stage in Persecution,” 44.

time in German history, 1933 stood out. It was the beginning of an era of hate, brought about and enforced by political action. In their testimonies, each of the speaker's memories follows a chronological and linear flow of events, each date correlating with their different experiences. It is clear that they were acutely aware of the years 1933, 1935, and 1938 as being major turning points, but what is unclear is how they experienced these benchmark years at their different stages of childhood. However, according to historian Chaim Kaplan, it is impossible for these victims to "know all the facts."<sup>21</sup> With ages ranging from three to seventeen in 1933, all indicated that there had been a major shift in society that did not become fully tangible until 1935.

As soon as they came to power, the Nazis were able to launch a program of subtle conditioning and indoctrination of their own people, leading to the harsh treatment and segregation of the Jewish community.<sup>22</sup> It was in 1933 that the three survivors saw SA men, the first paramilitary group created by the Nazis, marching in the streets and were first introduced to antisemitic propaganda, but the real changes occurred when their day-to-day lives were constricted by the new laws and actions of those around them. Regina, similar to the other two survivors, recalls hearing the voices of Hitler and Goebbels on the radio, while the SA men marched through Berlin holding both flags and fire. At only four years old, the brutal words from their speeches, such as *Judensau* and *Judendreck* filled her ears, exposed her to a world of hatred. By her personal account, "So we grew up in an environment where we were discriminated against and therefore came to our consciousness, we were led to believe that we are not actually wanted here, second-class human minority, and in this atmosphere

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<sup>21</sup> Marion A. Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 16.

<sup>22</sup> Landau, *The Nazi Holocaust*, 5.

I grew up despite all of this.”<sup>23</sup> Regina grew up surrounded by animosity and hostility that stemmed from concepts she had yet to understand. All three oral testimonies given by the victims contain a wealth of information about the different forms of persecution that occurred throughout daily life of Jewish victims from varying back grounds, all with a very noticeable trend and perception of the three main events taking place. Their experiences of exclusion and segregation are present throughout their interviews and centered around three major years: 1933, 1935, and 1938.

—Survivor Profiles—

Leonie lived a drastically different life from Regina. She did not have the same closeness with her family members as Regina did and she refused to accept any connection to Judaism. Her family’s upper-class status allowed her to live comfortably, but could not completely shield her from the effects of Nazi anti-Semitism. Regina greatly benefited from her family’s strong bond and upper middle-class status, whereas Leonie, who was a teenager during the Nazi period, relied on her peers for acceptance and affirmation. Both of these young women, of similar upper-middle-class statuses and backgrounds, went through the tumultuous 1930s living in Berlin, but both would experience each passing year in a drastically different way.

The youngest of the three victims, Regina Steinitz, and her twin sister Ruth, began life in an environment where they were not

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<sup>23</sup> Regina Steinitz, Interview by Barbara Kurowska and Daniel Baranowski, Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe Foundation: *Sprechen Trotz Allem*, November 28, 2011. (Time 00:11:36 ) *“Also damit wuchsen wir auf in einer Umgebung, die uns diskriminierte rassistisch war und also zu unserem Bewusstsein kam also uns verstehen ließ dass wir eigentlich hier nicht erwünscht sind zweiter Klasse Menschen Minderheit und in dieser Atmosphäre bin ich aufgewachsen trotzdem.”*

considered second class. Regina was born on October 24, 1930 in Berlin to a Christian mother, Martha Raifeld, and a self-identified Jewish father, Simon Welner. Martha's former husband, Jewish photographer Moritz Raifel, fathered her two sons, and then died of tuberculosis. Before his death, Moritz asked his friend, Simon Welner, to look after his family. Although Simon never married Martha, they had Regina and Ruth, who were allowed to use their mother's maiden name of Anders. This caused confusion and problems throughout their childhood, but it ultimately secured their safety.

A major factor that aided in Regina's survival was her strong bond with her family and community members. On multiple occasions throughout the 1930s, Regina experienced the sting of anti-Semitism, but was able to persevere because of her social connections. Her parents attempted to make childhood as enjoyable and normal as possible, given the circumstances of the time period. Regina and her family members were practicing Jews and she felt as though it was an important part of her identity and social life. Although the family was persecuted under Nazi rule, they managed to maintain a comfortable upper-middle-class lifestyle. The family endured experiences similar to other Jews in Berlin, but Regina's level of understanding and adjustment to traumatic events allowed her to rise above most situations, which is remarkable given that she was only three years old in 1933.<sup>24</sup>

Leonie (Hirschberg) Hilton, born in Berlin on April 13, 1916 and the oldest of the three survivors discussed in this paper, was independent and pampered, a very different child from Regina. She enjoyed a carefree and wealthy childhood, but was starved for affection from her family members. Her non-practicing Jewish father, Erich Hirschberg, remarried a Christian woman

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<sup>24</sup> Regina Steinitz, Interview by Barbara Kurowska and Daniel Baranowski, Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe Foundation: *Sprechen Trotz Allem*, November 28, 2011.



when Leonie was too young to remember her birth mother. The relationship of stepmother and child was strained. She was “not her step-mother’s type.”<sup>25</sup> Their large and extravagant ten-room apartment, a mansion, also included a three-room office dedicated to her father’s business as a lawyer. She loved her father, but he was always busy in his office. Cleverly, she avoided her stepmother by spending her days at the tennis courts, in parks, or biking through the streets of Berlin.

To outsiders, Leonie’s life must have seemed perfect, and she appeared to be happy, but the only times her family was together outside of the house were for a few holidays and events. Her family—including biological sister Vera, a stepsibling, and stepmother—took frequent holiday trips to the Baltic Sea, but her father often stayed behind to work. At Christmas, the family would attend a Christian Mass and she described her family’s religious practices as “old fashioned Church of England, easy style religion.”<sup>26</sup> Her father had been baptized, but she was unsure of her own baptismal records and was unaware of her biological mother’s life or childhood. Leonie believed her childhood to be normal, although in lacking affection and attention, and had no reason to think about Judaism or being Jewish. Before Hitler, children at her school were treated the same, regardless of their religious practices. None of them really knew what being Jewish meant, and before National Socialism, people more commonly discussed and argued about politics rather than race and religion. Leonie, like many others, led a life completely absent of all things spiritual and religious aside from the annual Christmas Day Mass.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Leonie Hilton, Interview by Jacqueline Ruchmond-Wade, *USC Shoah Foundation*, February 7, 1996 (Time 00:14:50).

<sup>26</sup> Leonie Hilton, Interview by Jacqueline Ruchmond-Wade, *USC Shoah Foundation*, February 7, 1996 (Time 00:05:43).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, (Time 00:05:43).

The third survivor had a background radically different from Regina and Leonie. Jürgen Rolf Sochaczewer, who later chose to be known as Israel Löwenstein, was born in Berlin on March 28, 1925 to a poor Jewish mother who worked as a maid and lived with her retired parents. The midwife at the Jewish convent where he was born said that he would be a lucky child, but it would be a decade before that prophecy would come true. Abandoned by his father soon after his birth, Israel and the family lived on Gipsstraße in the northern middle section of Berlin.<sup>28</sup> He attended school, but by age ten, Israel was sent to work. All family members had to work or do something productive to support the household, which just barely managed avoiding the need of government assistance. He wanted to play with the other children and be able to bike or ride a scooter, but most of all to enjoy ice cream on a hot day. Too poor for even those few luxuries, his grandparents would tell him, “Ice cream is nice, but we don’t have any money...”<sup>29</sup> Even though his family was part of the lower class, there was still a strong connection amongst the members of Israel’s family and throughout their community. Although his family was aware of its Jewish heritage, they only loosely practiced the religion. Unlike Regina and Leonie, Israel’s family lacked the money needed to allow for easy and comfortable living. However, like Regina, his life was filled with love and support from family and friends. He felt fortunate enough to have those that he loved surrounding him.

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<sup>28</sup> The three survivors whose stories are discussed in the paper come from three very different backgrounds. However, regardless of their socioeconomic status, they all lived within close proximity to one another in an area with a high volume of Jewish people in the Mitte neighborhood of Berlin. Their confined location and living space demonstrates just one way in which the Jewish community was segregated from the rest of German society during the Nazi Period.

<sup>29</sup> Israel Löwenstein, Interview by Daniel Baranowski, Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe Foundation: *Sprechen Trotz Allem*, August 15, 2010 (Time 00:09:30 ) “*Es ist ja schön aber wir haben kein Geld dazu und verdienen das selber.*“

Compared to the other two victims, his lower-class status and single-parent household change the lens in which he viewed life under Hitler. Although the three children grew up living within a close radius of each other, his home, unlike the two girls', is located in the poor and disproportionately Jewish area of Berlin Mitte. Regardless of the deprivations that Israel experienced in his youth, to this day he believes the midwife's words, "Yes, a lucky child, I needed a lot of luck in my life because I have gone through a lot and I need luck to survive and to understand what has happened with me."<sup>30</sup> According to Israel, without his luck he would not have survived under Nazi rule. However, his lower-class-status alongside his supportive Jewish and Christian community aided him in his survival and allowed him to avoid severe persecution into the late 1930s.

—The Nuremberg Laws of 1935—

In September of 1935, the Nuremberg racial laws were introduced and established a new and noticeable radicalization in the levels of persecution.<sup>31</sup> Jews had officially and legally been demoted to second-class citizens, for the new laws carefully defined who was a Jew, and forced those who had never identified with or were unaware of their Jewish lineage to be categorized as Jewish. Marriage and sexual relations between Jews and Germans were prohibited, resulting in countless divorces. Additionally, criminal prosecutions against Jews were easily possible due to their "defiling of the German race."<sup>32</sup> It was around this time that

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<sup>30</sup> Israel Löwenstein, Interview by Daniel Baranowski, Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe Foundation: *Sprechen Trotz Allem*, August 15, 2010 (Time 00:00:26) "*ja ein Glückskind ich brauchte sehr viel Glück in meinem Leben, denn ich habe viel urchgemacht und äh ich brauchte Glück um zu überleben, und alles das zu verstehen was mit mir passiertist.*"

<sup>31</sup> Landau, *The Nazi Holocaust*, 5.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

emigration began to rise and Jews were becoming more aware of the severity of Nazi rule. Signs placed at the entrances to towns and public squares, as well as restaurants and stores, contained threatening and insulting anti-Jewish messages and were a part of every day life from 1935 onward. The underlying murderous and violent implications were still not completely apparent, even to those affected the most, but would increasingly come to light within the coming years.

With the introduction of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, the three children noticed a major change in their daily lives as they were forced to adapt to the new rules. This was the second of the three main years that each individual speaker discussed at length in his or her oral testimony. They all claimed it was a critical juncture in their lives and experiences under Nazi control in the 1930s. Regina and Israel both remember the influx of new students to their gender-segregated Jewish schools because although they were allowed an education, Jews were no longer permitted to attend non-Jewish schools. It was during this time that Regina noticed that “unexplainable” differences were apparent. She states, “then something would have happened to you, so it was what nobody can imagine, it is not at all explicable what differences suddenly appeared which friendships were destroyed, as love suddenly ceased to be among people, and in this case how children were raised to hate.”<sup>33</sup> Regina was growing up in a politically charged environment. She was surrounded by hate and cruelty for reasons she could not fully comprehend.

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<sup>33</sup> Regina Steinitz, Interview by Barbara Kurowska and Daniel Baranowski, Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe: *Sprechen Trotz Allem*, November 28, 2011. (Time 1:00:25 ) “dann wäre dir schon etwas passiert, also es ist es war das kann sich niemand vorstellen, es ist überhaupt unerklärbar welche Unterschiede plötzlich erschienen, welche Freundschaften zerrissen wurden, wie die Liebe plötzlich aufhörte unter den Menschen und in diesem Falle und wie Kinder zum Hass erzogen wurden.”

Regina began to experience hatred from non-Jewish people, specifically the Hitler Youth. Jews were assaulted both verbally and physically, but could not retaliate. She would go home from school in tears, but her parents were unable to provide Regina with any comfort aside from a warm embrace. After Hitler was elected Chancellor, contacting the authorities about assaults on Jews was useless because police turned a ‘blind eye’ to the violence. The introduction of the new laws made the Jews open targets for hatred and violence, and their social circles were limited by their inability to participate in leisurely and public events.

For Leonie, it was not until these laws were implemented that she discovered her true lineage and Jewishness. Her non-denominational school requested documented proof of her status, and although she was told by her father to keep information a secret, word spread of her discovery and school became torturous. She stated that her, “entire class beat me up more or less, I could not go on.”<sup>34</sup> Her best friend and all of her other friends, except one, abandoned her. Leonie’s rejection and experiences of antisemitism were directly linked to Hitler’s rule and newly passed laws. As a teenager she had relied on her peers and friends for comfort due to lack of affection at home, but after 1935 Leonie became almost completely socially excommunicated. One of her only other comforts in life was her ability to bike around the streets of Berlin and play tennis in nearby parks, but even those luxuries were taken away from her once her peers and community learned of her newly established Jewish identity.

In contrast to both Regina and Leonie’s experiences, Israel initially experienced the laws as more of a bystander than a victim. Before the laws were enacted, he identified as a Jew. The main immediate effect that the laws had on him was his forced relocation to a different area of Berlin Mitte. However, he

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<sup>34</sup> Leonie Hilton, Interview by Jacqueline Ruchmond-Wade, *USC Shoah Foundation*, February 7, 1996. (Time 0:9:23).

benefited from the move given that his school was now only a five-minute walk away. Israel had attended a Jewish school so he avoided the major confusion and disruption felt among many wealthy Jews his age whose families could afford the non-denominational or Christian private schools before they were forced to attend Jewish schools. Although he did not feel the direct effects of the new law right away, he took note of the constant changes around him. To this day he clearly remembers the removal of Jewish men from his small social circle, as well as the entirety of the Jewish community around him, after they were accused of violating the Nuremberg Laws. The victims of such convictions were often re-arrested by the Gestapo after their sentence had been served and sent to political prisoner or work camps.

All three of these survivors experienced the immediate effects of the Nuremberg Laws differently, but all on a social level. They witnessed firsthand how these political changes affected their individual lives and the lives of their fellow Jews. From changing schools and relocating, to losing friends and experiencing antisemitic violence, the laws only narrowed their ability and opportunity for social interactions. Despite all of this, 1935 was still relatively toward the beginning stages of Jewish persecution. The events of 1935 were not alarming enough to warrant an exodus of a large amount of the Jewish population residing throughout Germany. This meant that the majority of the Jewish population still resided in Germany by 1938. The next three years would only prove to be increasingly disheartening. It was this gradual progression of disparity and hardship due to the continuous restrictions on the everyday lives of the Jews that would allow the events of 1938 to be possible.

By 1938, the relationships that had once bonded friends and neighbors, both Germans and those who had been labeled Jewish by law, were becoming increasingly less common. Whether it was to ensure one’s personal safety or due to outright anti-Semitism, there were relatively few non-Jews who were willing to maintain personal or cordial relations with a Jew. Though there had been no agreement amongst the Nazi leaders about an open, mass physical attack against the Jews in Germany, high-ranking Nazi officials, such as Reich Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels, had devised a multipronged plan for a major attack.

After the assassination in Paris of Nazi German diplomat and Third Secretary Ernst vom Rath on November 7, 1938 by Polish Jewish teenager Herschel Grynszpan, Goebbels found his opening and moved quickly. He decided to use this event to “punish” the Jews by condemning Grynszpan’s actions as another example of the worldwide Jewish conspiracy of evil intent directed at Germany.<sup>35</sup> On the night of November 9, 1938, all across Germany and in parts of Austria, swarms of SA men, party members, and regular non-Jewish citizens wandered the streets and participated in what many have deemed an “orgy of violence.”<sup>36</sup> What started late in the evening carried on well into the early hours of the morning of November 10. The mass violence that took place was in the form of looting Jewish shops and property, destroying and burning synagogues, and intimidating, assaulting, and murdering Jewish individuals. According to Nazi reports, “91 Jews were killed, more than 7,000 Jewish-owned shops destroyed, and approximately 300 synagogues razed to the ground.”<sup>37</sup> It was after the destruction had ended, due to the amount of broken glass from

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<sup>35</sup> Landau, *The Nazi Holocaust*, 5.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

the synagogue windows, the Nazis named the violent night the "Reichskristallnacht."<sup>38</sup> Today, this event is often referred to as the November Pogrom.

For all three of the survivors, their families had similar moments of horror and realizations in early November, 1938. Approximately 550 to 600,000 Jews were affected by the events that took place on November 9, and for many it was a sign that residing in Germany was no longer an option. The initial reactions of the three children were of shock and apprehension, and none of the three could understand how such events were possible. For Leonie and Regina, their experiences of confusion and fear left them stunned. However, it was after this event that steps were taken to ensure their future safety.

For Regina, the end of the decade brought misery and hardship as her mother's health increasingly worsened and the laws became stricter. It was on November 9, 1938, that it all reached a climax for her and many others. She describes, "and then it was somehow ever more dangerous, there were more and more laws, more and more people were arrested, and the worst that happened then was Kristallnacht..<sup>39</sup> After a neighbor told Regina's family that Jewish synagogues were being burned, the four children ran to their synagogue to save the Torah and other holy books. By the time they reached the synagogue, the Torah had been taken and very few books that remained were uncharred. They fled the burning building, saving some books and other escaping worshippers. Regina separated from her siblings and ran to Alexanderplatz to see if a large Jewish-owned store had been

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Regina Steinitz, Interview by Barbara Kurowska and Daniel Baranowski, Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe: *Sprechen Trotz Allem*, November 28, 2011(Time 1:05:10 ) "*und dann wurde es irgendwie immer gefährlicher, also es gab immer mehr und mehr Gesetze mehr und mehr Menschen wurden abgeholt, und das Schlimmste was geschah war dann die Kristallnacht.*"



burned as well.<sup>40</sup> Weaving through hundreds of looters and rioters, her curiosity spurred her on through the dangers. Before she made it to the shopping center, her brother Theo stopped her. She recalls: “Yes, he was so amazed that I was not even eight years old when it happened. I remember these situations so well, but these are the things that remain. They accompany you all your life. I have never forgotten Kristallnacht.”<sup>41</sup> Regina clearly recalls the events of that night in detail. She had seen more violence and hatred than the typical eight-year-old should. She believes she will never forget.

After the November Pogrom ended, Regina’s mother, Martha, though very ill, knew that she must find safety for her children. Her two sons received a notice that they had only twenty-four hours to leave Berlin, and she arranged their transport to England with 5,000 other Jewish children of Berlin. Soon after, Regina’s mother died of tuberculosis and the sisters were forced to rely upon the good will of others to survive. It took only one night to disturb and alarm the majority of the remaining Jews into action, but it took a span of five years, from 1933 to 1938, for this night to be possible.

Regardless of all of the hate Leonie regularly experienced, it was not until November 9, 1938 that she would be pushed to the point of fleeing the country. “You would not believe that it was

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<sup>40</sup> The store she is referring to in her recollections of November 9, 1938 is the Tietz department store, which was owned by a German merchant of Jewish descent. The store received a new owner during the Nazi period and was further “Aryanized” with the less “Jewish-sounding” name of “Hertie Department Stores.” For more information on Jews and department stores, see: Paul Lerner, *The Consuming Temple: Jews, Department Stores, and the Consumer Revolution in Germany 1880-1940* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

<sup>41</sup> Regina Steinitz, Interview by Barbara Kurowska and Daniel Baranowski, Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe: *Sprechen Trotz Allem*, November 28, 2011 (Time 1:11:26) “*Ja da war er ganz erstaunt dass ich nicht mal acht Jahre. Mich so gut an diese Situation erinnere aber das sind Dinge die einem bleiben. Die begleiten einen das ganze Leben. Ich habe die Kristallnacht niemals vergessen.*”

possible,”<sup>42</sup> were the words Leonie stated about the night that would be forever known for the glass that littered the roads, the "Reichskristallnacht." After experiencing the hordes of people flooding through the streets, lighting fires, chanting antisemitic phrases, and ransacking Jewish shops, synagogues, and homes, she knew she had to leave immediately. It was no longer safe for her. After the events of November 9 were over, her only remaining non-Jewish friend, Bronia, stated to Leonie, "I don't want you to stay another minute, as soon as you can get out you have to go."<sup>43</sup> Packing only what she could carry, she joined the few remaining friends at the train station. Without telling her family goodbye, she, like many Jewish victims, fled her home, leaving Berlin and Germany behind in search of a better life.

On November 9, 1938, Israel's world was once more shaken. He remembers being sent home from school due to the aftermath of the "Reichskristallnacht." He heard reports of approximately thirty thousand Jews being sent to concentration camps within a twenty-four hour time period. He walked by shops that had been destroyed and synagogues that were burned. Torahs that had been lit on fire were still smoking and tossed onto the street. As he went down Münzstraße, he specifically noticed that all of the Jewish shops had been vandalized with goods stolen, while the police were standing there doing nothing. Still, he was not afraid because he had Christian friends and he had been otherwise unharmed. He remembers,

I went through Münzstraße and the Jewish businesses, one of them a Brandmann a Jeweler, all had broken windowpanes. The people had stolen what was possible from it and the police stood there and smiled. They failed to intervene for us, it was a blow indeed, who

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<sup>42</sup> Leonie Hilton, Interview by Jacqueline Ruchmond-Wade, *USC Shoah Foundation*, February 7, 1996 (Time 0:15:26).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, (Time 0:15:37).

would have had believed that it could happen? But I had no fear, because it was clear as I said, we had very many friends yes and also very many Christian friends. Who, even in the time of National Socialism, did not say ‘yes, we have no connection with the Jews.’<sup>44</sup>

Israel survived many horrors under the Nazi rule in the 1930s, but with few violent affairs, unlike many Berlin Jews. He was a poor, young boy, so when the Nazis confiscated the wealthier Jews’ homes, businesses, and possessions, and displaced them from their schools and social supports, Israel and his family were only marginally disturbed. They had few possessions, no social status, and lived frugally on whatever income they could gather. Israel kept his friends because, like him, they were poor, lower class children who were overlooked by the Nazis in control. Even his reaction to “Reichskristallnacht” was tempered by his fascination with the crowds and the lights, as well as his sense of security because of his strong connection to people in the Christian community. Israel had an ability to avoid direct Nazi confrontation due to his low class status, which left generally unharmed by the continued pressures of National Socialist control.

The “Reichskristallnacht” marked the beginning of the final and most horrific phase of Jewish persecution. After years of

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<sup>44</sup> Israel Löwenstein, Interview by Daniel Baranowski, Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe: *Sprechen Trotz Allem*, August 15, 2010. (Time 00:32:10 ) “Ich durch die Münzstraße und die jüdischen Geschäfte unter anderem Brandmann ein Juwelierladen waren die ganzen Fensterscheiben kaputt geschlagen die Leute haben davor gestanden geklaut was nur möglich war die Polizei hat dabei gestanden und gelächelt und ist nicht ein-und hat nicht eingeschritten für uns war das ein Schlag ja denn wer hatte das geglaubt dass es dazu kommen kann? Aber Angst hatte ich keine. Ja denn es war klar wie ich gesagt habe wir hatten sehr viele Freunde ja und auch sehr viele christliche Freunde. Die auch in der Zeit von dem Nationalsozialismus mit uns zusammen. Ja, die nicht gesagt haben ‘ja wir haben keine Verbindung mehr mit den Juden ja’”

torment and social unrest, the remaining Jews in Germany would face the true hatred that the Nazi party provoked. By this time, families were separated, jobs were lost, and property was damaged. All social aspects of Jewish life had been depleted. Regina, Leonie, and Israel all experienced the events that took place on November 9, 1938 differently. However, the overall outcome and conclusion shared by their families, themselves, and countless others were clear: survival would come at the cost of fleeing their homeland.

### —CONCLUSION—

The political changes made by the Nazis opened up a social space for the German society at large to be antisemitic or act on existing prejudices. Within five years, the Nazis were able to infuse antisemitic propaganda into aspects of everyday life in Germany. Over time, German society as a whole felt empowered with hate. These antisemitic policies resulted in the manifestation of a feeling of power in all recognized Germans, those whose identities did not legally change after the installation of the Nuremberg Laws, and the beginning of the National Socialist government. The new ideals were to be spread and shared with all Germans, regardless of their social class or socio-economic status. From the powerful upper class to the impoverished factory workers, all German citizens were given a newfound sense of authority. What had begun as a few directed verbal and physical attacks from a smaller circle of perpetrators targeting individual Jews, regardless of their self-identification, would ultimately turn into full-scale attacks on millions of people, both in and outside of Germany.

Regina, Leonie, and Israel's stories all demonstrate the ways in which the Nuremberg Laws and the gradual implementation of Nazi policy by non-Jewish members, both with

and outside of their surrounding communities, became personal and led to the elimination of their social lives outside of Jewish circles. According to Historian Wolfgang Benz, “the exclusion of the Jews was a successive process, the product of the interplay between government measures and social interactions.”<sup>45</sup> Various associations, groups, and individuals in Germany over the entirety of Nazi rule voluntarily practiced the exclusion of Jews from social life.

Social segregation and sanctioned persecution of the Jews formed the core of Nazi ideology that influenced the action and beliefs of Germans of all economic and social classes. Protected by laws, the work to demonize the Jews escalated. By their own accounts, Regina, Leonie, and Israel chose three distinct periods of time to explain not only the rise of this ideology and persecution, but also how the years 1933, 1935, and 1938 brought progressive and volatile changes that altered their lives and the existence of German Jews. The first wave of change under Nazi rule in 1933, the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, and the “Reichskristallnacht” in 1938 were vividly recounted in their testimonies. With each passing year, their freedoms became increasingly limited as shown in the documentation of their experiences, which provide a deeper understanding of how the antisemitic Nazi policies gave way to life altering social changes. The changes affected not only these three children, but all persons labeled Jewish by law, regardless of social class, economic status, or gender. In hindsight, the progression of evil allowed for an identifiable escalation of the plan to eradicate the Jewish community.

These three children survivors were specifically selected because of the wide breadth of knowledge that can be gained after analyzing each of their stories. It is important to look at their experiences, not only individually, but also together to form a

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<sup>45</sup> Wolfgang Benz, “Exclusion as a Stage in Persecution,” in *Nazi Europe and the Final Solution*, ed. Bankier and Gutman, 42.

larger and more detailed narrative. The comparison between the three stories clearly demonstrates the progression of Nazi control in relation to societal constraints and how it influenced the lives of Jewish children. Regina, Leonie, and Israel's contrasting backgrounds and varied reactions to their experiences allows one to gain an unequivocal understanding of the major events that took place between 1933 and 1938 through the personal accounts of children survivors.

The year 1933 was the match that the National Socialists needed in order to light the fuse of Nazi ideology and the build-up to antisemitism and hate. The fuse sizzled from 1933 to 1935 when the Nuremberg Laws would add increased hatred and heat to the explosion of 1938. The "Reichskristallnacht" brought what was left of the semblance of Jewish public and cultural life to an end. Without the progression of social aspects and actions, events such as the "Reichskristallnacht" would not have been possible. Without the testimony of survivors, the story of the Nazi atrocities and the indoctrination of the German people may never have been told.

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