

## *Intro to Nechama Tec*

Thousands survived – hidden with identities, disguised, and often physically concealed from the outside world. These youngsters faced constant fear, dilemmas, and danger. There was a life in the shadows, where a careless remark, a denunciation, or the murmurings of inquisitive neighbors could lead to destruction. Why did people rescue? Were all their motives pure? What was necessary to hide or ‘pass’? What was the cost of life in the shadows? Are the shadows still there?

The Final Solution was introduced to different countries at different times with different degrees of ruthlessness. Gender shaped interpretations of events, level of threat, and framework for survival or normalcy. It was not gender, but “Jew” which marked one for death.

4 steps:

1. Identification
2. Expropriation
3. Concentration
4. Extermination

Children:

- In Nazi-occupied Europe, the prewar Jewish child population was approx 1.6 million. Of the 6 million Jews killed, approx 1.5 million were children, leaving only 6-7% alive at the end.
- Their survival rate lags far behind adults (33 %). July 1942: French police roundup of 9000 Jews, 4000 of whom were children. After the war only 30 returned, none were children.
- Prewar Poland: est 1 million Jewish children (infant – 14). Est 5000, or half a percent, made it to the end of the war.
- Survival depended on actions of parents or guardians. Very few of the hidden children, from 10 and up, had themselves decided to move to the Christian world. Becoming a hidden child meant separation.
- Most countries had special sections of the underground devoted to saving Jewish children. Zegota.
- Great deal of cooperation amongst teenagers. Also fewer inhibitions taking on gender roles.

### **Dangers/Difficulties in Hiding or “Passing”**

- Being recognized/ chance encounters
- Physical appearance (**Show clip: *Europa, Europa***)
- Roving bands of thugs (Nazi and Poles) looking for Jews
- Inquisitive neighbors (**Show clip: *The Pianist***)
- Daily contacts
- “All My life revolved around hiding...” - Nechama Tec
- Deportations to the Reich
  - Pre-transport inspections
  - Passengers are non-Jewish Poles

### *Factors in Decision to Hide*

- Few choose to
  - Leave behind relatives, risk immediate punishment?
  - Must lose hope or perceive the future
- Gender
  - Men seen as more dangerous, less accommodating
  - Circumcision
  - Exposure to secular culture and language
  - Perception of imminent danger
- Appearance – Could you ‘pass’?
  - External look and physical habits
  - Ability to blend socially
- Fluency in native language
- Knowledge of facts and Christian prayers (**Show clip: *Almost Strangers***)
- Age
- Rescuers (“It took ten Poles to save one Jew.”)
  - Anti-Nazism did not necessarily translate into aid for Jews
  - Antisemitism (Jews as Bolsheviks, Christ-killers, carriers of plague, subverting society...)
  - Nazi policies discouraging rescue
- ID and other documents
- Traumatic decision to separate

Show: “Secret Lives - Hidden Children”

*Nechama: (see timeline)*

Overview history of Jews in Poland:

<http://www.adl.org/education/dimensions/background.asp>

Lublin (200,000 people) had a Jewish population of 40,000.

Her family – religious orthodox and assimilative currents. Mother kept a kosher home, both parents discouraged her from speaking Yiddish. (When they wanted to keep secrets they spoke Yiddish.)

Father – insisted that religion was an historical accident. You should neither be proud nor ashamed of what group you were born into.

Before Nazis she had witnessed Polish antisemitism. Vandals breaking windows. But she was protected as she looked typically Polish with blue eyes and blond hair.

Poland:

- Antisemitism
- Danger of being recognized/identified (esp in Aryan sections with roving gangs)
- German army
- Geography

Gender Themes: We need to have our students see the story through gender. Why is gender so important in Nechama's story? What actions could she do because of it?)

- Role reversal
- Confrontation with identity – mirror moment (Nechama: I became the person)
- Choices – baby carriages in ghetto
- Women lied – able to deceive (having lived in false circumstances). Able to hide and smuggle food, fix clothing, keep clean (how to look fit and healthy – irony).
- Women as heroic (Tom Weisshaus story or Kitty's mom) Sex as a weapon (Sex today – girls: to fit in, to find love, women sell themselves. Perversity of power and violence among male. Ruth Kluger: 'Were you raped?' Not, 'they just tried to kill me!')
- Women able to share and abase themselves – starve selves to ration food for children. Women with babies – able to leave behind. Somehow resilient?
- Bonding and nurturing (Men on Bataan death march – they all partnered up – those who didn't, died. Other men became like a mother (closer than I have ever been, even with my wife.)
- Why women more likely to be in ghetto  
60% were women. Men had contacts, skills. But, orthodox males more visible. Women not employed, more dependent on welfare = more likely to be deported...A profession was the ticket to food.
- Writing as therapy (get story out to get the self back – otherwise, the self will never come back) Shape it, control it, system of hysteria fades when put in words
- Sexism and racism are joined at the hip. All racist ideologies have a sexual component. (Women get 'possessed' white women vs. black men...)
- New habits: children and wives eager to ease the sense of powerlessness of fathers and husbands. Conviction that only men were particularly threatened – despite growing evidence. Some leaders sought women's help. Nechama's mother helps others. Women answered knock at door (as men hid), went shopping, found food, earned \$...

In a shaky environment, without guidelines or predictable directives, it is difficult to live. People look for patterns – depend on rumors, bits of info...and make predictions for the future. Once used to new idea, difficult to change – even when confronted with new info. There is comfort in habits (which suggests continuity).

One child survivor: We were "old people with children's faces, without a trace of joy, happiness or childish innocence."

***Difficulties/Personal Impact***

- Playing a part
- Giving up childhood and growing up quickly
  - Becoming unobtrusive, invisible, silent
  - Becoming flexible, obedient, never antagonizing those hiding you
  - Never cry
  - Fear and caution
  - Strict conformists
  - Give up Jewish identity, lose your past, and give up your family and all your parents cherished
  - Sense of loss, abandonment
  - Guilt
  - Facing pain, torment, boredom
  - Giving up identity – rejecting Judaism (reinforced if raised Christian and you survive!)

***Discussion: Dry Tears***