

# HOLOCAUST:

## RESISTANCE, RESCUE AND SURVIVAL

### Holocaust and Human Rights

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A favorite park is suddenly off limits. Father comes home and announces that he has been fired from his job. Students are not welcome at school. A family is forced out of their home with only the clothes on their backs and a suitcase. All because they are Jewish.

**During the Holocaust, Jews were deprived of even the most basic rights.**

When the Nazis' crimes were revealed at the end of World War II (WWII), the world vowed, "Never again." Unfortunately, this hope has not been fulfilled. All over the world, people's rights continue to be violated. One lesson that we can learn from the Holocaust is how important it is to pay attention and to take action when a person or a group is facing discrimination.

**The first step is to understand what is meant by the term "human rights."**

Think for a moment about what every person needs to be able to live a happy and fulfilling life. A home, a family, work that pays well enough to put food on the table, and the ability to express thoughts, feelings, and opinions. These things are the basis of human rights. These rights are outlined in the U.S. Constitution's Bill of Rights and the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, written after WWII in response to the Holocaust.

One of the first rights taken away from Jews was the principle of equal rights in Germany. Jews were also restricted to what kinds of jobs they could have, whom they could marry, and where they could go.

**The most basic human right is the right to live.**

In the end, this too was taken from the Jews. Deprived of every freedom and treated like animals instead of human beings, the people who survived the ghettos and the forced labor camps were sent to the "factories of death" — six camps in Poland equipped with gas chambers and crematoria, designed to murder thousands of people each day. This was the Nazi's "Final Solution," and one of the most deadly examples of human rights violations in our history.



Barbed wire from Sobibor death camp. (On display at the Washington State Holocaust Education Resource Center)

This extreme example of people being deprived of their rights may seem very distant from our daily lives in the year 2005. However, it is important to remember that the Holocaust began with small steps that gradually led to the death camps. If there had been a public outcry or more organized, international efforts to stop the discrimination against Jews in the beginning of Hitler's reign, would the Holocaust have been possible?

Since the end of WWII, other people throughout the world have experienced discrimination and death because of serious violations of their human rights. In China today, families are punished if they have too many children. In North Korea, anyone who speaks up against the government faces imprisonment. In Sudan, the people of Darfur, a region in the southern part of the country, are being slaughtered in the

midst of an ongoing civil war. And right in your own school, there may be people who face ridicule and discrimination based on their race, sexuality, class, gender, religion or ethnicity.

The lessons of the Holocaust demand that we pay attention when someone's rights are being threatened. The best way to honor Holocaust victims is to understand that all people have the right to express their opinions, practice their religion, get an education, be part of a family, and find work that will provide food and shelter for their loved ones. When any of these rights are violated, it is important to take action. Speak up when you hear racial slurs. Stand up for someone who is being bullied. Know your rights, and know how to defend them.

# activities

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1. The author provides some everyday ways you can help ensure people's human rights are met. What are some other ways?
2. Look through today's Main section (Section A) in The Seattle Times and make a list of the countries that are discussed. Then research each country's current and historical human rights record. You may want to use the organization, Human Rights Watch ([hrw.org](http://hrw.org)) to get you started. As a class, design a media message (TV ad, newspaper ad, travel brochure, etc) that highlights those countries that are not providing human rights to its citizens and those who are. In your media message, encourage others to get involved and provide some ways they can do so.

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