Europe Remembers

Holocaust Remembrance at the European Parliament

Cover: Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp

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Introduction

For over 70 years, the European Union has been the institutional and cultural defence of a Europe built on peace and the protection of its citizens.

It was born, however, of a Europe that was the antithesis of today's Union. 2025 marks 80 years since the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the largest Nazi concentration camp. The Holocaust (1933-1945) saw the persecution and murder of approximately six million Jews in Europe by the Nazi German regime and its allies and collaborators, as well as millions of people from other groups considered to be a social or racial 'problem' by the Nazis. These included Sinti and Roma people, political opponents and trade unionists, Slavic people, black people, members of the LGBT+ community, persons with disabilities, those whose religious beliefs conflicted with Nazi ideology, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, and other 'asocials'.

It is a history that has come to shape how Europe sees itself, politicians and citizens alike. Over the years, the European Parliament has worked to ensure that we remember this history – and that we do not repeat it.

In this exhibition, we look at how Parliament engages with this history, through political actions and through commemoration, sharing the stories of survivors and their families who have come to Parliament to deliver their messages to MEPs and citizens so that we may never forget.

» *President of the European Parliament Jerzy Buzek at the Hall of Remembrance at the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, 2011*

Foreword

The European Parliament remembers. At a time when antisemitism is again on the rise, commemorating the victims of the Holocaust has never been more important. This House is not – and will never be – a place of indifference. History has shown that silence and inaction was what once enabled the machinery of Nazi terror to operate. That is why the European Parliament is firmly committed to standing against antisemitism, and hatred in all forms.

Every year on 27 January, the European Parliament comes together to mark the anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp, as part of International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

On this day, we honour the memory of the six million Jewish men, women and children who were murdered by the Nazi regime. We also honour the memory of all those from the Roma and Sinti communities, and the many others who were massacred because of their faith, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability or political views.

Ours is the last generation with the privilege of meeting Holocaust survivors and hearing their testimonies first-hand. Their voices, their courage and their memories are a gateway to a past that must never be forgotten. Simone Veil, the first directly elected President of the European Parliament, was one of the few survivors of the Auschwitz camp. She was deeply convinced that teaching people about the Holocaust is an absolute necessity to ensuring it never happens again. I am proud that the space in front of Parliament's central building in Brussels bears her name. It is a physical reminder of the responsibility we carry – to remember, to educate. Because even after the horrors of the Holocaust, antisemitism has not gone away.

The Treaty on European Union states that our Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality and human rights, including those of minorities. The fact this is enshrined in the second article is certainly no coincidence.

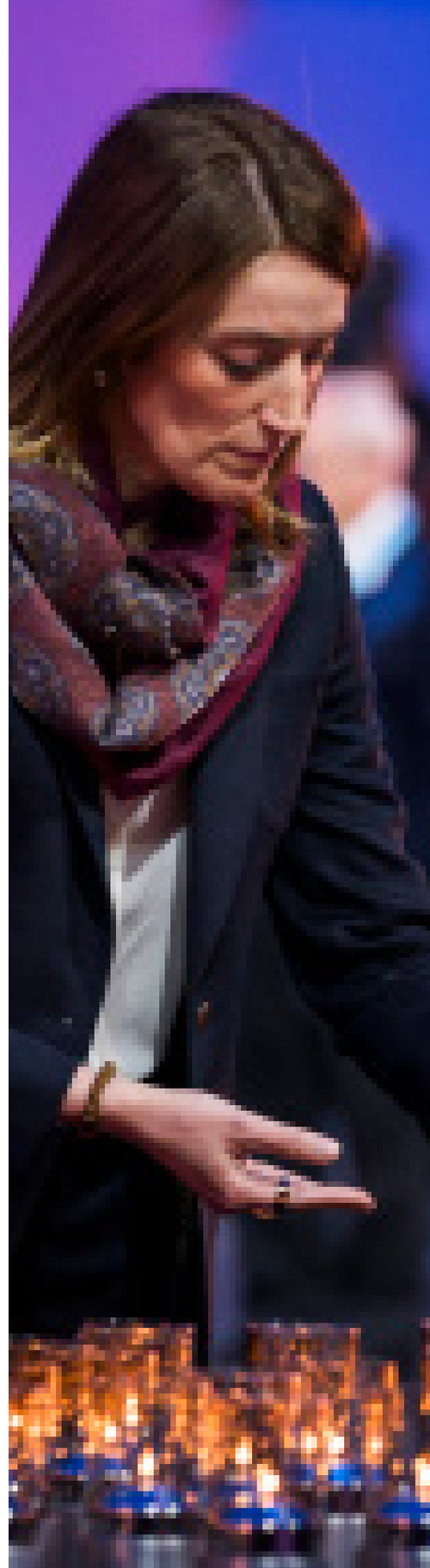
As a living symbol of European democracy, the European Parliament is itself a powerful forum for defending and promoting human rights in Europe and around the world. We adopt resolutions on Holocaust remembrance and combatting the rise of antisemitism. We recall our common duty to remember not only through commemorations, but also through education. We work together – and with Member States – to combat Holocaust denial and trivialisation.

And yet, for as long as any European feels unsafe, we need to keep pushing in our efforts. In our Europe, everyone should be free to believe in what they want to believe in, and to be the person they want to be. This is the essence of Europe.

That is why, together, we will keep standing up against Holocaust deniers, against conspiracy theories and false narratives, against misinformation and against all forms of violence that target and isolate members of our communities. We will continue to uphold our European values and fundamental human rights to put an end to discrimination. And we will keep honouring the legacy of the victims of the Holocaust by never forgetting, by never being complacent and by making our voices heard and standing up to injustice.

This is what we mean when we say 'never again'.

Roberta Metsola



President of the European Parliament Roberta Metsola at the ceremony marking 80 years since the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, 2025

Remembering the Holocaust in Europe

The European Union is a supranational political and economic union of 27 countries that is committed to protecting the rights of its 450 million citizens. It also works against the violation of those rights.

Founded in the years immediately following the Second World War, the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) – an economic post-war cooperation organisation – consciously set itself against the backdrop of a war-devastated Europe. Its 1950 founding declaration set out to unite former enemy states, stating that, 'The contribution which an organised and living Europe can bring to civilisation is indispensable to the maintenance of peaceful relations.'

Perhaps, then, it was not an organisation best insulated from becoming a political institution: the ECSC broadened its scope in the decades after to include political activities and through years of institutional reform and citizen activism, the European Parliament began to function as a directly elected democratic body in 1979.

At the same time, Europe's reckoning with the Holocaust was just beginning. The trials of Nazi perpetrators in Nuremberg and across European nations that had been occupied during the war, the Eichmann trial in Israel and the collection of testimonies from survivors, and attempts at denazification on both sides of the Iron Curtain began to spark personal and political struggles on the continent.

With the collapse of the Soviet regime beginning in 1989, a new dimension was added to Europe's collective memory. The struggle against totalitarianism and its aftermath in Central and Eastern Europe, including the Yugoslav wars, which resulted in the largest number of refugees in Europe since the end of the Second World War, and a critical re-evaluation of the Holocaust in Central and Eastern Europe, strongly shaped understandings of European history and identity. Politically, EU Member States and candidate countries began to confront their roles in the Holocaust more directly and more thoroughly both on a national and European level.

Thus, in the 1980s and 1990s, the European Parliament, looking back on Europe's recent history of dictatorship, and in view of the enlargement of the EU to Central and Eastern Europe, led the European institutions in establishing frameworks to deal with the material and immaterial damages of this legacy, and to prevent its recurrence.

The 1986 Joint Declaration against Racism and Xenophobia, signed by the European Parliament, the Commission and the Council, provided the initial basis for the European Parliament to take action against antisemitism in Europe. In light of the Declaration, a Committee of Inquiry into Racism and Xenophobia was set up by Parliament, which, in 1990, presented its findings in an extensive report, cataloguing antisemitic and xenophobic incidents across Member States and neighbouring European countries and including a series of recommendations to the European institutions and Member States. The report was intended to generate greater awareness among the European institutions and citizens, emphasising that 'we must ensure that our Europe is an open society based on the respect of fundamental rights and the rejection of all forms of discrimination.'

In 1993, Parliament adopted a resolution on the protection of Nazi concentration camps as historical monuments. From 1995 onwards, however, the focus of resolutions shifted to addressing the impact of the Holocaust on its victims and the need for Holocaust education. Beginning with a resolution on the return of looted property to Jewish communities, successive resolutions outlined approaches and attitudes to Holocaust research and education, combating racism and remembrance of the Holocaust.

More recent resolutions have contributed to fighting antisemitism, remembering the Holocaust of Roma and Sinti communities, and tackling neo-Nazi violence and hate speech. Furthermore, Parliament's Working Group against Antisemitism, established in 2016, brings together Members of the European Parliament at a cross-party level to improve the way in which the EU combats antisemitism.

The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, to which EU Member States have been bound since 2009, declares that the 'Union is founded on the indivisible, universal values of human dignity, freedom, equality and solidarity; it is based on the principles of democracy and the rule of law'. Article 1 of the Charter states that 'Human dignity is inviolable', and Article 21 states that 'Any discrimination based on any ground such as sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation shall be prohibited.'

***

When the European Parliament held its constitutive session in 1979, President Simone Veil took leadership of the assembly. 'For this is the first time in history, a history in which we have so frequently been divided, bent on mutual destruction, that the people of Europe have together elected their delegates to a common assembly representing, in this Chamber today, more than 260 million people'. These words take on added significance when recalling that 35 years earlier, Veil and her family were arrested and she was sent to the Nazi concentration camps at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Bobrek and Bergen-Belsen.

With the intertwining of the EU's core mission and the history of the Holocaust in mind, we turn to the testimony of those who remind us: never again.

Civil rights activist Romani Rose (left) and President of the European Parliament Simone Veil (right) at the first international memorial rally in 1979 to commemorate the Sinti and Roma people murdered by the National Socialists. The event was held at the memorial site of the former Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, where President Veil had been held as a child.

Fighting antisemitism | A timeline

1993

Resolution on European and international protection for Nazi concentration camps as historical monuments

Resolution on racism and xenophobia

1994

1995

Resolution on racism, xenophobia and antisemitism

Resolution on a day to commemorate the Holocaust

Resolution on the return of plundered property to Jewish communities

Resolution on Auschwitz

1996

Resolution on racism, xenophobia and antisemitism

1998

Resolution on the restitution of the possessions of Holocaust victims

Resolution on countering racism in the European Union

2000

Resolution on combatting racism, xenophobia, antisemitism in the countries applicant for membership

Declaration on the remembrance of the Holocaust

2004

Resolution on remembrance of the Holocaust, antisemitism and racism

Resolution on the protection of minorities and anti-discrimination policies in an enlarged Europe

2005

› *Timeline continues*

Framework Decision on Combating Racism and Xenophobia by means of criminal law (European Parliament Opinion)

2008

2012 — *Declaration on support for the establishment of a European Day of Remembrance for the Righteous*

Victims Rights Directive

Resolution on strengthening the fight against racism, xenophobia and hate crime

2013

2015 — *Resolution on the occasion of International Roma Day – anti-Gypsyism in Europe and EU recognition of the memorial day of the Roma genocide during World War II*

Establishment of the European Parliament Working Group against Antisemitism

2016

2017 — *Resolution on fundamental rights aspects in Roma integration in the EU: fighting anti-Gypsyism*

Resolution on combating antisemitism

Resolution on the rise of neo-fascist violence in Europe

2018

2019 — *Resolution on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe*

Resolution on racial justice, non-discrimination and anti-racism in the EU

2022

2024 — *Resolution on extending the list of EU crimes to hate speech and hate crime*

Tip

Find the text of resolutions on EUR-Lex, your online gateway to EU Law. It provides the official and most comprehensive access to EU legal documents.

› *Visit EUR-Lex*

Disclaimer

This timeline highlights some of the European Parliament's key actions on antisemitism and Holocaust remembrance, but is not an exhaustive list of the European Parliament's activities or of EU legislation in this or related areas. If you have any questions about these or other European Parliament policies and actions, you can ask a question on Ask EP.

› *Visit Ask EP*

International Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremony, 2025
© European Union

Speaking to Europe

While the European Parliament has addressed Holocaust remembrance from a political perspective, the institution's chamber has also acted as a platform for spokespeople and activists on Holocaust education and awareness, as well as for expressing Parliament's standpoints.

International Holocaust Remembrance Day is observed on 27 January each year, the anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp.

The Day commemorates the murder of approximately six million Jewish victims and the millions of other victims of Nazi persecution. Numerous memorial events have been held throughout the years in the European Parliament and its Presidents have represented European citizens at commemorative events across the EU and paid visits to Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem.

Holocaust survivor Henry Elberg shows his Auschwitz identification number tattoo at a 2010 ceremony to mark the 65th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau
© European Union

› *'As we stand here, the very thought of Auschwitz sends a shiver through our souls. And it always will. Reconciliation takes on a concrete shape in our work towards European integration. The European Union is guarantor of the pledge: "Never again."'*

– President Jerzy Buzek, 70th anniversary of the arrival of the first Polish prisoners to the Auschwitz concentration and extermination camp

President Jerzy Buzek lays a wreath at a ceremony commemorating 65 years since the liberation of Auschwitz, 2010
© European Union

While Parliament has been involved in Holocaust remembrance in several ways since the 1990s, in 2012 President Martin Schulz formalised Parliament's remembrance activities. He declared that Parliament would commemorate the Holocaust on the anniversary of the Wannsee Conference, where high-ranking Nazis had decided on the 'Final Solution' for the Jews in Europe. From 2012 to 2018, annual events were held in conjunction with the European Jewish Congress, attended by Holocaust survivors, EU leaders, Members of the European Parliament, Ambassadors, and representatives from Jewish and non-Jewish organisations.

The House of European History, a museum created in 2017 as a major project of the European Parliament, hosts a permanent exhibition that among other aspects of European history reflects on the history and the memory of the Shoah through over 120 objects, images, quotes and multimedia elements. A self-guided tablet tour on the history and memory of the Shoah takes visitors through the permanent exhibition, starting with the roots of antisemitism in the 19th century and concluding with an exhibition section that explores how the Shoah was remembered across different European countries.

President Martin Schulz speaks at the 2016 Holocaust remembrance ceremony
© European Union

› *'We are historically here as an answer to the first half of the 20th century. Because the experiences of Europeans, the experience of the Holocaust showed ... to which point people are prepared to go. Evil still exists every day, every moment. And therefore we have to be visible and prudent every day and every moment. Mutual respect, respect for individual rights, respect for the right of everybody to be treated decently, to be respected as an individual – wherever they come from, whatever their political tendencies, whatever their religion.'*

– President Martin Schulz, 2013

Screening of 'Shoah: Four Sisters' (French: Les quatre soeurs) at the 2019 ceremony co-organised with the European Jewish Congress

Romani violinist Roby Lakatos & Ensemble play the 'Papirossen Suite', a composition drawing inspiration from Yiddish and Klezmer repertoire

Mr László Fekete, Chief Cantor of the Great Synagogue of Budapest at the 2014 Holocaust remembrance ceremony, co-organised with the European Jewish Congress

Since 2019, formal ceremonies have been held during the plenary session of the European Parliament to commemorate International Holocaust Remembrance Day. Here, speakers – usually Holocaust survivors and their families – share their stories with Members of the European Parliament, and with European citizens.

Each survivor who has addressed Parliament has had a unique experience of the Holocaust. Yet common themes still thread their messages together: concerns about rising antisemitism in Europe, the duty of Europeans to act in full awareness of their past, and for MEPs and citizens alike to fight discrimination whenever they see it.

As time passes, the community of living survivors is shrinking. In the weeks before this exhibition opened, two of the people whose stories we share here passed away: Walter Frankenstein and Margot Friedländer. Just 245 000 survivors were estimated to still be alive in 2024 – most of whom were children during the war. Listening to, sharing and preserving their memories continue to be of utmost importance.

President of Israel Isaac Herzog, who spoke at the 2023 ceremony, summed up the purpose of the day – and of Parliament – as follows:

› *'As we stand here today in the beating heart of the European Union, we understand very well the mission of memory that we all share. We recognise the fact that at the memorial site to which we make pilgrimage, we must remember not only the Holocaust and the destruction, but also the sacred alliance forged alongside this horrific disaster.*

We need to sanctify the memory of the victims.

We need to ensure the welfare of the survivors who are still amongst us.

We need to teach and educate about the lessons of the historic catastrophe that was the Holocaust, and we need to prevent any repetition of these ghastly crimes.'

President of Israel Isaac Herzog and President of the European Parliament Roberta Metsola inaugurate Parliament's first Holocaust memorial, 'The Refugee' by Felix Nussbaum, 2023

«

Memorial and Museum of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration and extermination camp in Poland

Stories of survivors

Charlotte Knobloch

‘I’ve unpacked my bags’

Charlotte Knobloch is a well-known leader and representative of the Jewish community in Germany, Europe and around the world. A slew of titles attest to her deep involvement in Jewish life and heritage: President of the Central Council of Jews in Germany (2006–2010), Vice-President of the European Jewish Congress (2003–2011) and of the World Jewish Congress (2005–2013), and President of the Jewish Community of Munich and Upper Bavaria (since 1985).

Yet beneath these prestigious roles, Charlotte carried the weight of uncertainty for many years.

When the war ended, twelve-year-old Charlotte was reluctant to return to Munich from the farm in Franconia where she had gone into hiding. She would have preferred to stay with the only friends she had during the final three years of the war: the farm animals, and her beloved cat – a black-and-white stray kitten who had come to Charlotte’s window soon after her father had left her at the farm, and who never left her side again. This kitten was her only companion with whom she could speak openly.

Returning to Munich meant leaving them, and facing an extremely difficult situation. Charlotte remembered clearly both the hatred shown to her family and her neighbours’ complacency during the Nazi persecution, and was loathe to meet them again. During her years in hiding, she had also picked up a Franconian dialect, and it was distressing enough that her own father often couldn’t understand her – let alone when others in Munich couldn’t either. But Charlotte’s father was determined: he had regained his licence to practice law and wanted to go back to help rebuild the Jewish community. She had no choice but to follow.

»

Charlotte Knobloch speaks at the 2019 International Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremony

Wedding of Charlotte and Samuel Knobloch, January 1951

A few years later, in 1951, Charlotte married Samuel Knobloch, and, both eager to leave Germany, they made plans to resettle in the United States. Samuel's family had all been killed: his mother and five of his siblings had been murdered in the Kraków ghetto, and his father shot before his very eyes at the Kraków–Płaszów concentration camp. They began training with the ORT (Organisation–Reconstruction–Training), an organisation that trained prospective Jewish immigrants as skilled workers for Israel. Charlotte trained as a dressmaker, Samuel as a mirror maker. The pair also began to learn English, in the hope of being able to move to the US.

Every few days, they checked the lists of people approved for emigration at the Resettlement Centre, anticipating when they would be named. As they prepared to leave, however, Charlotte became pregnant with their first child, followed by their second and third. Rather than trying to uproot themselves with young children, they stayed in Germany.

Charlotte examines models for the new Ohel Jakob Synagogue

Her father committed himself to the Jewish community in Munich, helping survivors piece together their shattered lives after losing loved ones in a catastrophe they had barely escaped themselves.

In time, Charlotte too became active in international Jewish organisations operating in Europe and worldwide, putting her energy and determination into preserving the heritage of Jewish communities, supporting their social and cultural development, giving Jewish people a voice in international forums and fighting against antisemitism. When Jewish immigrants from the former USSR arrived in Munich in the 1990s, she played an active role in their integration.

On 9 November 2006, in her capacity as President of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, Charlotte inaugurated the new Ohel Jakob Synagogue. This was the very same synagogue she had seen engulfed in flames 68 years earlier on Kristallnacht (the Night of Broken Glass), a six-year-old girl fleeing through Munich with her father, on the run.

As she looked at the synagogue, she finally said to herself:

'I have unpacked my bags.'

Childhood in Munich

Charlotte was born in 1932 to Margarethe and Siegfried 'Fritz' Neuland. Fritz Neuland was a lawyer and Bavarian senator; Margarethe was born a Christian and converted to Judaism when she married Fritz.

Amid the growing pressure from the Nuremberg Race Laws that, among other measures, targeted mixed marriages, her mother Margarethe left the family in 1936. Charlotte had no contact with her after that. She still grapples with her mother's decision. 'Perhaps it was fear and weakness, which are always poor advisors,' she said in an interview years later. 'I'd rather not speculate on this and make accusations against my mother [...] but there is no question that it was incomprehensible to me at the time – and remains so today.' After her parents divorced, Charlotte was raised by her grandmother Albertine Neuland.

The rising antisemitism in 1930s Germany encroached upon Charlotte's life through simple cruelties. Her piano teacher turned up at her home one day, distraught, to tell the family that the Gestapo had informed her if she continued to teach a Jewish child she would receive the same treatment as the Jews. She couldn't play with her friends any more – their caretaker told her that the children were not allowed to play with a Jewish child. Charlotte was devastated. She ran home to her grandmother, who explained to her for the first time that she was Jewish: 'I didn't know that word. For me it wasn't a concept. I think I had believed we were all the same and that there were no differences. That was the first time I realised that we were different, that people could perceive us as different.'

Albertine Neuland

Identity card of Siegfried 'Fritz' Neuland, 1939

Her father also suffered. In 1933, the German government issued a mandate that ordered the disbarment of non-'Aryan' lawyers by 30 September 1933. Initially, he was exempted as a veteran of the First World War. However, in 1938, the Fifth Ordinance to the Reich Citizenship Act was passed, and he lost his licence to practice law. He was only permitted to work as a legal advisor, and only for Jewish clients. He also had to change his name from Fritz to Siegfried, and add the middle name 'Israel' to indicate that he was Jewish. Her grandmother had to add the middle name 'Sara' for the same reason.

› *'My grandmother moved in with us. She wanted to ensure that I could have a reasonably normal life. We would play, sing and laugh. She taught me the fundamentals of our faith. But no efforts could obscure the fact that life was becoming ever more difficult for us Jews: edicts, prohibitions and vilification were making our daily lives unbearable.'*

Speech at the German Bundestag, 27 January 2021

She spent Kristallnacht – the Night of Broken Glass – on the burning streets, clutching her father's hand. Realising (correctly) that he would be targeted because of his prominence, Fritz hurried with his daughter to find refuge. 'Why aren't the fire fighters coming?' she remembers thinking amid the fire and smoke.

Deportations of Jewish people from Munich began in 1941, and intensified in spring and summer of 1942.

At home, other people from the community came to get legal advice from her father, who was no longer allowed to have an office. Charlotte listened to their desperate voices as they worried about what they could do for their deported and displaced relatives, and for themselves. Though her grandmother had wanted to give her as normal a life as possible, there was no way to shield Charlotte from the worsening situation for them in Munich.

The Nazi administration issued lists targeting children, the elderly and the disabled for deportation to Theresienstadt, a ghetto-labour camp built in Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia. Either one elderly person or a child from Charlotte's family had to be deported. Soon Albertine left, telling Charlotte that she was going to a health spa for treatment, but with everything Charlotte had learned, she knew that she would never see her again. She was absolutely heartbroken.

› *'I ask my grandmother if we can travel together tomorrow, if she can also go where I am being taken. My grandmother shakes her head … She tells me she also has to leave soon: "It'll only be a short trip" … I say nothing. Because I know that my grandmother has just lied to me for the first time. Tears begin to well up in my eyes. I cling to my grandmother. I know that, in this moment, love, affection and security have been banished from my life. I'm not even ten years old. My childhood is over.'*

'In Deutschland angekommen', Charlotte Knobloch and Rafael Seligmann (2012)

Posters bearing the word 'Jew' stuck to the company signs of law firms at Karlsplatz 8 in Munich, 1933
© Stadtarchiv München

Deportation of Munich Jews in November 1941 at Milbertshofen station
© Stadtarchiv München

By now, it had become far too dangerous to continue living in Munich. Fritz brought Charlotte to a hiding place: the home of farmers in Franconia, where Charlotte would pose as 'Lotte Hummel', daughter of a Catholic woman, Kreszentia Hummel, for the next three years. Kreszentia had been the maid of Charlotte's uncle Willi, who had been a paediatrician in Nuremberg. Though now safe, Charlotte, having just said goodbye to her grandmother forever, was distraught at parting ways with her father, believing that it was the last time she would ever see him.

Kreszentia took in young Charlotte, but without any explanation as to how she came to be in her care, she was deeply worried for her safety, and the feasibility of keeping her on the farm. An excuse to keep her appeared unexpectedly. With all the men gone to war, women had taken over the farm work in the countryside, and a strong network had sprung up between them. Gossip quickly spread about Kreszentia's 'Bankert' – an illegitimate child. When confronted with this rumour, Kreszentia realised she had been given an excellent excuse to keep Charlotte with her, and admitted to being her mother.
The neighbours leaped on the opportunity to disparage Kreszentia's pious reputation, ultimately saving Charlotte with their penchant for gossip. The parish priest was let in on Kreszentia and Charlotte's secret, and gave her some basic instructions to blend into church masses.

› *'For years, I lived in hiding, under a false name and a false identity. If I had been myself, it would have meant my certain death.'*

Speech at the European Parliament,
30 January 2019

Miraculously, Charlotte and her father were reunited at the end of the war. He had survived years as a forced labourer. 'At the end of May 1945, I was on a cart behind Alte, the alpha cow, heading towards the farmyard, when a car stopped. It was no lighthearted reunion,' she said. 'Even today I can only guess what ordeals they had inflicted on him. Acid had almost entirely robbed him of his sight. But he was alive and so was I!'.

› *Relive Charlotte's experiences of Kristallnacht and hiding*

Charlotte at the farmhouse in Arberg

Young Charlotte
© Private collection

Charlotte with her father
© Private collection

Charlotte Knobloch's message to Europe

› *'The freedom and democracy we enjoy today are only as strong as democrats' commitment to them, as well as the readiness of the majority to defend them from a hate-filled minority... The EU will only be able to remain "united in diversity" if it's aware of its values and, of course, defends them.'*

Speech at the European Parliament, 30 January 2019

› *Watch Charlotte Knobloch's speech*

'Always reach beyond the light': this neon light installation, created by artist Jan Kuck in cooperation with Charlotte Knobloch, encourages viewers to never be satisfied with appearances, to always strive for improvement, to think ahead constantly and to grow beyond themselves.

Liliana Segre

‘I guess we are all afraid of death, I can say I definitely prefer life’

Looking back on the Holocaust, what seems very hard to understand, for both survivors and later generations, is how integrated many Jewish communities across Europe were, and how these normal lives could be so completely destroyed in a matter of years.

Liliana Segre, for example, lived happily in Milan with her father Alberto and his parents. She went to a public Italian school where she liked to hang out with her friends, enjoyed reading, and didn’t like maths.

And, quite simply, it wasn’t long before she was expelled from her school, ignored by most of her friends and taunted by former classmates. She was eight when Mussolini passed the anti-Jewish Racial Laws in 1938, and, in turn, discovered – like many other children from secular families – that she was Jewish. Until then, it had meant nothing to her, other than that her and a few others played in the corridor while the rest had religion class. Now it meant she could no longer attend school. It was incomprehensible to a child her age, and made her worry she herself had done something wrong.

In response to the expulsion of Jewish children from schools, private Jewish schools were set up around Italy. Liliana’s father, Alberto, wasn’t interested. With the exception of their heritage, nothing in their day-to-day lives had much to do with Judaism. Her Catholic aunt’s suggestion that she get baptised was taken up: Liliana was taken into the school of nuns at the Institute of St Marcellina convent. As Liliana was being baptised, she turned to look at her father. He was crying behind a pillar in the church.

Two years later, when Mussolini announced Italy’s entry into the war, other Jews in Milan began to emigrate. The Segre family, however, stayed.

In 1943, the Nazis occupied northern Italy. Liliana and her father tried to escape, but, by then, it was too late.

»

Liliana Segre speaks at the International Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremony, 2020

Arrest and deportation

On 7 December 1943, Liliana and her father tried to seek asylum in Switzerland. Almost as soon as they crossed the border, they were stopped by the Swiss guards and sent back to Italy, where they were immediately arrested.

Liliana spent the next two months in several prisons around Milan: Varese, Como and San Vittore, where she was reunited with her father for forty days, in the section of the prison reserved for Jewish prisoners. She was glad to be with her father, to be able to hold his hand again and not be alone in the prison. On 30 January 1944, they were driven to Milan central railway station. They were forced onto crowded cattle cars and deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Seven days after arriving, Liliana was separated from Alberto. She never saw him again.

Liliana, who was tall for a thirteen-year-old, passed the selection. She was soon forced to undress and given a striped uniform. A prison guard tattooed an identification number on her arm. Her hair was not shaved at first – just covered with a red headscarf someone gave to her. She still has that scarf today. 'We became *Stücke*, pieces,' she said.

› *'... I had a very personal German vocabulary, which accompanied me throughout my imprisonment.*

It was made up of only a few words, but they perhaps mean more than many speeches:

crying

fear

punch

snow

hunger

bread

pain

move!

alone

seven-five-one-nine-zero.'

Liliana with her father Alberto

Liliana with her mother Lucia Foligno Segre, who died when Liliana was still a baby

For a year, Liliana was forced to work in an ammunition factory in Auschwitz.

She was not present in Auschwitz when the camp was liberated on 27 January. A few days earlier, Liliana, along with 60 000 other people, had been hastily evacuated by SS troops who led prisoners on a long march back to Germany in an effort to cover up their crimes. Forced to travel through the snow at a brutal pace, many perished from exhaustion or were shot in what are now known as the death marches. During the march, she met a woman who had met her grandparents in the concentration camp. They had thought Liliana was safe in Switzerland. Liliana had thought they were at home. They had, in fact, been deported after her, and gassed on arrival.

Liliana spent two weeks in the Ravensbrück camp in Germany before being moved to smaller camps, first to the neighbouring Jugendlager (youth camp), and then to Malchow.

When defeat was obvious, Nazi forces evacuated the camp. Liliana saw the Nazi commandant of the Malchow camp throw his gun aside, take off his uniform, and change into civilian clothes. For a moment, she thought about picking up the gun and killing him, in revenge. In the end, she told herself to choose and honour life.

Liliana with her father Alberto in Colle Isarco, August 1937

Liliana (right) with Giuliana Ravazzini (left), Inverigo, June 1940

After the war

To hell and back again.

When the war ended, Liliana was a shadow of her former self. Fourteen years old and just 32 kilos, she narrowly avoided succumbing to an infection with some penicillin administered to her by American soldiers.

She returned to Milan. Her possessions were all gone and she couldn't go home – another family now lived there. When the doorman realised who the skeletal girl he mistook for a beggar was, he screamed.

She moved in with her maternal grandparents.

› *'I was a child who became invisible. And this happened to me even after the war. When I, by chance, survived and returned to Milan, where the ruins were still smouldering, I met old schoolmates who had not seen me in years. They asked me, "Segre, where did you go? I haven't seen you at school."*

I was a wounded girl, a wild girl, a girl who no longer knew how to eat with a fork and knife because I had been accustomed to fressen, not essen – eating like an animal, not like a person... I was even criticised by those who loved me and wanted me to be the well-mannered bourgeois girl I had once been.'

Speech at the European Parliament, 29 January 2020

In 1948, she met Alfredo Belli Paci at the Pesaro seaside. He had spent the war in several German prison camps for refusing to swear allegiance to Mussolini. When he saw her Auschwitz tattoo, he recognised it for what it was. They were married three years later.

For many years, Liliana did not speak to anyone, including her children, about what had happened to her, except for her husband and a friend she had met in Auschwitz. 'It was better,' she said, 'not to talk, than to talk and not be understood.'

After forty years of silence, and a period of severe depression, Liliana felt that she had to tell people what had happened to her. She went back to the beginning: to the St Marcellina convent. There, she told her story to a small group of nuns.

She hasn't stopped talking about what happened to her and her family since. Over the years, the size of the groups has grown, and she now mainly addresses schools and universities.

For this, President Sergio Mattarella honoured her as Senator for Life in 2018. It was a great honour for Liliana. This recognition has, however, come with its corresponding threats. The 94-year-old Holocaust survivor is under constant protection owing to threats against her life. She won't let this stop her. 'I cannot experience again being expelled from school. I am free. If someone wants to kill me so be it, but I won't run away anymore.'

Liliana, 17, in Rapallo, July 1948

Liliana on holiday with friends at Lake Como in June 1949; in the photo above right she is with Alfredo Belli Paci during their engagement and in the photo below left she is with her uncle Oscar Foligno.

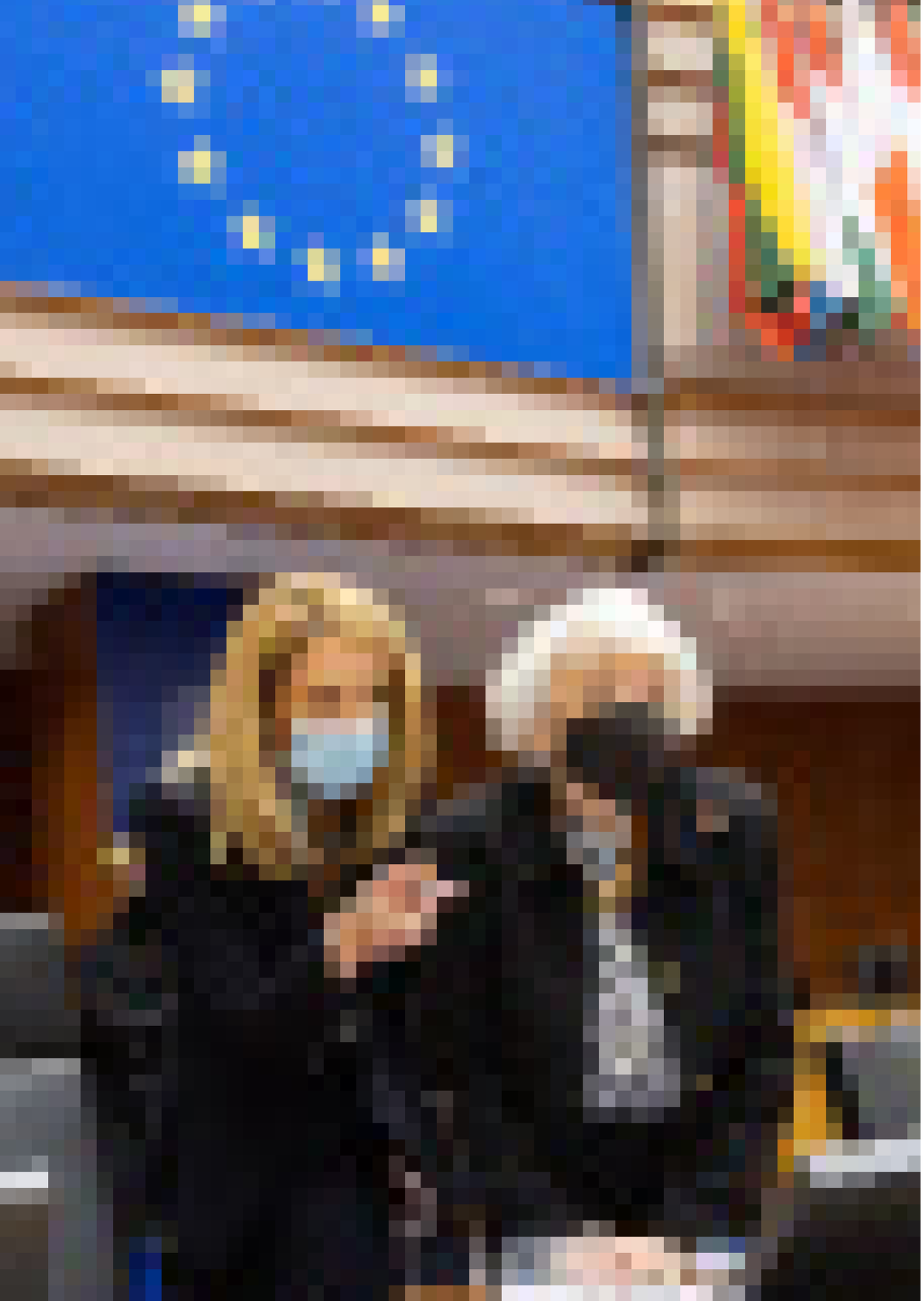
Liliana Segre's message to Europe

› *'It is hard to remember these things. I have to say that I have been speaking in schools for thirty years and now I feel a very strong psychological difficulty to continue, even though it is my duty to do so, and it would be until I die, because I have seen those colours, I have smelled those smells, I have heard those cries, I have met people in that Babel of languages that today I can only remember here, where so many languages meet in peace, because it was only by finding common words that it was possible to communicate with the comrades who came from all over Europe occupied by the Nazis.'*

Speech at the European Parliament, 29 January 2020

› *Watch Liliana Segre's speech*

» *Liliana Segre addresses journalists at the European Parliament, 2020*



Margot Friedländer

'Try to make your life'

› *'"Where is she?" I ask, out of breath. The woman waits until I'm inside. Then she shuts the door. "She left." At first, I don't understand. Did I get here too late? Is she out looking for me? "She left a message for you." I am waiting for the woman to hand me something, but she just stands there. I look for a slip of paper in her hand, something my mother would have written down for me.*

"I'm supposed to give you a message." Then she tells me what my mother can no longer tell me herself: "I have decided to go to the police. I am going with Ralph, wherever that may be. Try to make your life."'

'Try to Make Your Life', Margot Friedlander with Malin Schwerdtfeger (2014)

Margot's mother had turned herself in to the Gestapo – just hours after Ralph, Margot's seventeen-year-old brother, had been arrested. They were both deported a few days later and died in Auschwitz.

The only thing that Margot had left of her mother was her handbag, containing her amber necklace and an address book. Margot wore the necklace on many official occasions, including when she visited the European Parliament on 27 January 2022.

»

President of the European Parliament Roberta Metsola and Margot Friedländer, 2022

Life before the war

Margot grew up in Berlin with her younger brother and their parents. Her father, Arthur, ran a wholesale company that sold button-making machines and accessories for clothing to tailoring shops and garment businesses in the capital's thriving textile industry and abroad. Her mother Auguste, an entrepreneur in the button trade, had founded the business herself before stepping back to become a housewife after her marriage. Margot was born in 1921, a year after their wedding.

She and her brother Ralph – whom Margot described as a 'math whiz' who 'played the violin at seven' – grew up in a loving family, with frequent holiday trips to visit relatives in Germany and Czechoslovakia. Her parents were passionate about the arts, and held season tickets to the opera. Margot dreamed of becoming a seamstress and designer. In 1936, she enrolled in the Jewish School of Applied Arts to study fashion and soon began an apprenticeship in a small salon.

One morning in November 1938, Margot stepped outside to catch the streetcar to work and immediately felt an eerie stillness in the air. As she passed the shops, she saw shattered shop windows and smelled smoke – the aftermath of Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass. The salon where she was employed had been taken over, and she was banned from working there. Her father, who had recently separated from her mother, went into hiding, and they had no idea of his whereabouts. He soon reappeared. He had been forced to give up his company: it had been 'aryanised'. As part of the transfer of his company, he was to travel abroad with the new owner to introduce him to foreign customers – his chance to escape. Before he left, he secured a position for Margot in the Kulturbund, an association founded in 1933, in which Jews expelled from Germany's public cultural institutions worked to stage plays, lectures, concerts and operas.

Shortly after, her father fled to Belgium, leaving them behind. As antisemitism escalated, and the war began, her mother, attempting to escape Germany with the children, sought asylum in the United States, Brazil and China, but all their applications were denied. Soon, Margot and her brother were assigned to forced labour to support the war effort. The family shrank further as grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins either fled or were deported: 'There was hardly anybody left, everybody had disappeared in various directions. We did not hear from anybody anymore, we did not know what happened to them.'

Just as Margot, her mother, and her brother were preparing to escape to Bielitz, Ralph was taken by the Gestapo in January 1943.

Disappearing in Berlin

'Try to make your life'. It wasn't until much later when, in the midst of educating students, and writing and speaking publicly on the Holocaust, that Margot finally felt that she had fulfilled her mother's wish.

› *Every decision I made for myself was awful. Should I turn myself in to the Gestapo or should I go into hiding by myself? I didn't know which was more of a betrayal of my mother: by leaving her in the lurch or not carrying out a legacy.*

Since all of her friends were Jewish, and in hiding, Margot didn't know where to seek refuge. She approached a non-Jewish Swiss aunt for shelter, but her aunt rejected her, suggesting that Margot should have accompanied her mother to the Gestapo.

Alone and scared, Margot also went into hiding. In an effort to look 'less Jewish', she dyed her hair a reddish shade, wore a cross pendant, and had underground surgery performed on her nose.

Over the next fifteen months, sixteen people risked their lives to help her, giving her places to stay and food to eat. She was never to ask the names of those who hid her, nor where they lived, in case she was caught and exposed the network. She would memorise an address, destroy the paper and go to the address.

She was eventually caught by Jewish spies, the so-called Greifer ('snatchers') in April 1944 when leaving a bomb shelter with two of her helpers. When she couldn't show her documents, she admitted she was Jewish. She was taken to the gathering point set up at the Jewish Hospital in Iranische Strasse, where she stayed a few weeks before being deported to Theresienstadt ghetto-labour camp.

Life in Theresienstadt

When she arrived in Theresienstadt in June 1944, the camp was overcrowded, with thousands of people being moved in and out at a rapid pace, staying for only a few months before being deported to death camps. The sanitary conditions were horrific, with cramped barracks infested with lice and fleas, little to no food, and diseases rapidly spreading.

A man she knew from the Kulturbund and who worked in the Jewish administration of the camp managed to get her a position sewing clothes for the commandant, the SS and their families. He then secured her a shift at a mica factory, a job which offered some protection. Margot survived a winter that saw many others die from the cold and malnutrition.

At the beginning of February 1945, trains carrying prisoners from Auschwitz arrived in Theresienstadt – Margot did not see any of them at first, but heard about them from the labour squads who helped unload the living and the dead, and from the nurses who cared for them.

At that same time, prisoners who had been sent to Wulkow to build barracks, bunkers and air raid shelters for the Reich Security Main Office also returned to Theresienstadt. The project was abandoned as the Belorussian front had already advanced too far. One of those prisoners was Adolf Friedländer, a man Margot knew (though not well) from the Kulturbund: 'I did not recognise him at first – his arm was in a sling, his head and neck were bandaged. But when he approached, he immediately greeted me by name: Margot ... We were so happy to meet someone from before.' As they both stayed at the same barracks, they could see each other often. The mica factory had been closed down and Adolf had not yet been assigned work while recovering from furunculosis, so they spent many hours talking.

At the end of April 1945, Margot and others were called to help with an expected transport – their first encounter with the death camps. A long train of cattle wagons arrived. As the doors were pushed open, people who barely looked human fell out or were pushed out of the overcrowded wagons. One could hardly tell the living from the dead. Something fell into Margot's arms: a human being so weak that she had to carry him. He was as light as a feather.

Margot heard the name Auschwitz for the first time, everyone had only ever talked about transports to the East. The prisoners had been sent on a death march shortly before the liberation of Auschwitz on 27 January. The SS did everything they could to prevent the survivors from falling into the hands of the Russians and to prevent the Allies from finding out about the true extent of the extermination in the concentration camps. The majority of those prisoners had long died – shot, starved, or deceased from exhaustion, cold or typhus. At some point, the remaining survivors had been picked up, forced into cattle wagons and sent to Theresienstadt, one of the last camps that had not yet been liberated.

At that moment, Margot realised that she would never see her mother and brother again.

When the camp was finally liberated in May 1945, Adolf proposed to Margot. They were married by a rabbi in Theresienstadt one month later. At the end of June 1945, Adolf received a telegram from his sister Ilse, who was living in New York. From then on, it was clear to him that they would emigrate to the US. Margot wasn't quite so sure, but knew that she would go with Adolf wherever he went.

In July 1945, they were taken to the displaced persons camp in Deggendorf, where, in Margot's words, they were 'turned back into a human being again'. Margot and Adolf worked in the administration of the camp. On the train journey to Bremerhaven in July 1946, they travelled through destroyed villages and cities and over provisionally rebuilt bridges; there was still little sign of reconstruction. Margot and Adolf finally boarded a ship that took them to the United States. On 28 July 1946, they arrived in New York.

Life after the war

› *'When you are young, you want to live. When you survived, you suffer.'*

Margot and Adolf lived in New York for 51 years, Margot working as a travel agent and a seamstress and Adolf as an administration manager, never returning to Germany.

After her husband passed in December 1997, she enrolled in a writing class. The result was an autobiography titled after her mother's words 'Try to make your life'.

› *'I wrote every night … I had all these stories in my head. Everything started coming back to me, many things that I pushed aside for years.'*

She began circuiting schools, educating students on what had happened to her. Margot was invited back to Berlin by the Berlin Senate in 2003. The filmmaker Thomas Halaczinsky accompanied her and shot the film *Don't call it homesickness* with her in the places of her youth. The trip was revelatory for her: she felt like she was home again and in 2009, aged 88, she returned for good. Her German citizenship was restored in 2010 and she was awarded the Federal Cross of Merit in 2011.

In 2016, she received the Order of Merit of the State of Berlin. Margot was made an honorary citizen of Berlin in 2018, and told the ceremony's audience: 'Hitler, Göring and Goebbels were also honorary citizens. They would turn in their graves now, if they had graves.'

Further honours and prizes followed, including the Federal Cross of Merit First Class in 2023 and the Commander's Cross of the Order of Merit in 2025.

At 101 years old, she established the Margot Friedländer Foundation to campaign for freedom, tolerance and democracy, so that what was done to millions of people in her generation would never happen again.

Margot passed away on 9 May 2025, aged 103.

Margot and Ralph Bendheim, circa 1927
© Private collection

Margot Bendheim during her time underground, disguised with a cross and dyed hair, Berlin, 1943
© Private collection

Margot and Adolf Friedländer on the crossing to New York, summer 1946
© Private collection

Margot with her helpers Gretchen and Irmgard Camplair on the Kurfürstendamm avenue in Berlin, 1943
© Private collection

Margot wearing her mother's amber necklace
© Fivekit/ Christoph Gräfenstein

Margot Friedländer's message to Europe

› *'What happened, happened: we can no longer change it. It must never, never happen again. I speak not only on behalf of the six million Jews who were murdered but for all innocents who were murdered by the National Socialist regime. It is for you, for your children, for your descendants. It is my mission. I will say it again: be human!'*

Speech at the European Parliament, 27 January 2022

› *Watch Margot Friedländer's speech*

The Herzog family

Speech by President of Israel Isaac Herzog

In 2023, President of Israel Isaac Herzog addressed the International Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremony at the European Parliament.

His father Chaim Herzog was President of Israel (1983–1993), and his grandfather was the Chief Rabbi Yitzhak Isaac Halevi Herzog, who was Chief Rabbi of the British Mandate of Palestine (1936–1948) and the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel. Their political and religious leadership of Israel, along with their personal involvement in the aftermath of the Second World War – both having witnessed war-torn Europe first-hand – linked them to the Holocaust.

› *'Their only crime was being Jewish and the humanity inside them. They were beloved and cherished. They dared to hope and dream even in the midst of devastation.'*

Speech by President Isaac Herzog at the European Parliament, 26 January 2023

Recovering Jewish life after the war

Rabbi Yitzhak Herzog was born in 1888 in Łomża, Poland. A renowned scholar, religious expert and author, he became Chief Rabbi of Belfast in 1916, where his sons Chaim and Yaakov were born. He became Chief Rabbi of Dublin in 1919 and of Ireland in 1922. In 1936, he became Chief Rabbi of Palestine.

During the Holocaust, Rabbi Herzog tried to rescue Jews from Europe. He met with senior members of the UK Government, and worked to get immigration permits for Mandatory Palestine and donations for Jewish refugees in Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe.

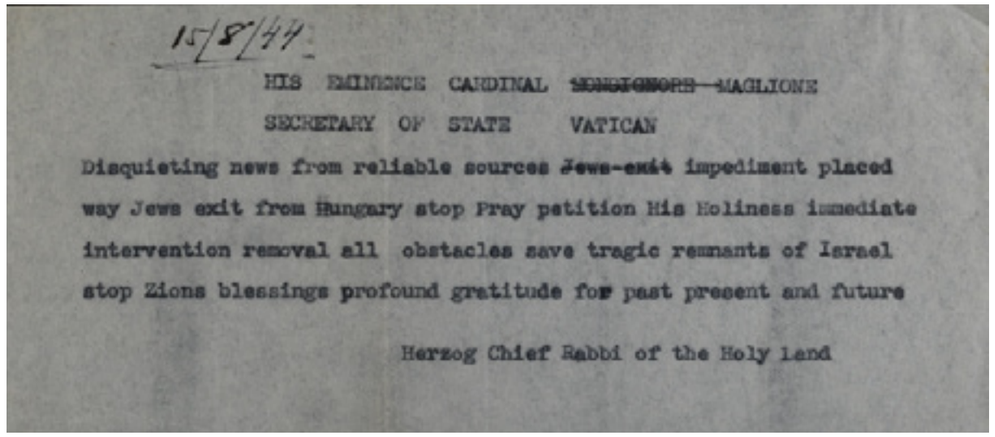
After the war, Rabbi Herzog travelled throughout Europe to recover Jewish children who had been hidden with Christian families and in monasteries. He met with Pope Pius XII to ask for his help in finding children and organising their return to the Jewish community. In the end, he managed to help 500 orphaned children who survived the Holocaust go back to Mandatory Palestine.

He also travelled to displaced persons (DP) camps to give Torah lessons.

› *'As he looked around him, he saw not only smouldering heaps of stone and sand, but also the silent cry of a down-trodden nation. The lives of millions of men, women and children had come to an end, and in their stead he saw only crumbling stone.'*

Rabbi Herzog also played an important role in saving Jewish religious texts and artefacts that had been found in the *Bürgerbräukeller* Beer Hall in Munich. The Babylonian Talmud recovered from here was transferred to Yad Vashem in 2024.

» *President of Israel Isaac Herzog, International Holocaust Remembrance Day 2023*



15/8/44

HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL ~~ARCHBISHOP~~ MAGLIONE

SECRETARY OF STATE VATICAN

Disquieting news from reliable sources ~~Jews exit~~ impediment placed way Jews exit from Hungary stop Pray petition His Holiness immediate intervention removal all obstacles save tragic remnants of Israel stop Zions blessings profound gratitude for past present and future

Herzog Chief Rabbi of the Holy land

Telegram from Rabbi Herzog to the Vatican's secretary of state on the deportation of Jews from Hungary. During the war, Rabbi Herzog contacted organisations, institutions and clergy around the world alerting to them to the situation of Jews in Europe.

Rabbi Herzog at the site of the destroyed Warsaw ghetto

Rabbi Herzog visits the displaced persons (DP) camp in Marina di Leuca, Italy. From 1945 to 1952, more than 250 000 Jewish displaced persons lived in camps and urban centres in Germany, Austria and Italy.

Chaim Herzog passes his son the cup of wine under the canopy during the wedding ceremony of Isaac Herzog and Michal Afek, 1985
© Photographer: Sa'ar Ya'acov | National Photo Collection of Israel

The family's first President

Chaim Herzog moved from Dublin to Mandatory Palestine in 1935 and served in the Haganah paramilitary group. During the Second World War, Herzog enlisted in the British Army. He was among the Allied troops that landed in Normandy in June 1944 and participated in combat operations as a tank commander.

› *'As we advanced we encountered the still hardly known horror of the concentration camps. Nobody who saw those terrifying scenes will ever forget them... When we reached Bergen-Belsen, we were shattered by the horrifying evidence of starvation, torture and disease, and by the final epidemic of typhus raging there. To one who has seen anything of the Holocaust even marginally, it ceases to be an abstract concept and becomes a searing actuality never to be forgotten.'*

Speech of President of Israel Chaim Herzog at the Dedication of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 22 April 1993

Later, as an intelligence officer, he helped identify a captured German soldier as Heinrich Himmler, the Nazi Gestapo chief.

After the war, he returned to Palestine. He served in the Israeli army, and was Head of Israel's military intelligence from 1948–1950 and from 1959–1962. He rose to prominence in Israeli society as a political and military commentator during the Six-Day War in 1967 and became the first military governor of the West Bank. He was the Israeli ambassador to the UN from 1975–1978. He was first elected to the Knesset in 1981 and became President two years later, serving two terms.

Isaac Herzog's message to Europe

As President of Israel, Isaac Herzog spoke in memory of his father and grandfather, in view of the disturbing rise in antisemitism in Europe, the threats to Jewish communities in Israel and around the world, and the position of the European Parliament as an international body founded in spite of – and because of – the history that preceded its establishment.

› *'Honourable Members of the European Parliament, the Holocaust was not born in a vacuum. We should never forget that the Nazi death machine would not have managed to carry out its nightmarish vision had it not met soil fertilised with Jew-hatred, which is as old as time itself.'*

Speech at the European Parliament, 26 January 2023

› *Watch Isaac Herzog's speech*

Chaim Herzog in a British army uniform posing with his mother Rabbanit Sara Herzog, 1945
© Photographer: Eldan David | National Photo Collection of Israel

Irene Shashar

‘I am here to tell you today that Hitler did not win’

Many questions about her survival are still a mystery to Irene today. Her mother orchestrated their escape from the Warsaw ghetto, leading her through a manhole, wading through the sewage until they climbed out into Warsaw again, outside the ghetto walls. To this day, Irene doesn’t know how her mother calculated the exit point correctly, or how she even came up with the plan in the first place. Or how, while hiding in Warsaw, she could always sense when they needed to leave the place they were staying and find shelter elsewhere.

Her mother died soon after the war, in 1948, so Irene will never get answers to these questions.

» *Irene Shashar greets the European Parliament plenary session, 2024*

The Warsaw Ghetto

Soon after Poland's annexation, the Nazi regime enacted the same antisemitic legislation and administrative measures that had been in effect in Germany since 1935. Apartments and houses were confiscated, and their Jewish owners evicted, often forced to live in ghettos, segregated from the rest of society as a means of control and isolation. Beginning in 1939 in Piotrków Trybunalski, over 1 140 ghettos were created, largely – but not exclusively – in Eastern Europe. Some lasted only a few days, while others remained for months or even years.

The Warsaw Ghetto was the largest in Nazi-occupied Europe. Originally a Jewish area of the city, segments of its non-Jewish population were expelled, while Jewish people from other neighbourhoods moved in, including two-year-old Irene and her parents. A wall now trapped its inhabitants, and the flow of resources was heavily controlled. Relentless waves of dispossessed refugees arrived, as the ghetto became a transit point where Jews were held before being sent to concentration camps. At its peak, 450 000 residents were crammed in just 3.3 square kilometres. In such incredibly overcrowded conditions, many died of starvation and disease.

In 1942, when Irene was five years old, her father was shot in the ghetto. His death precipitated their escape: his murdered body in the kitchen was the breaking point for Irene's mother.

› *'The vision of his pale, mangled body was the last I ever knew of the man I loved most. I do not even know what happened to his body. Maybe it was buried, but who really knows for sure? …*

Worse than the trauma of finding his body, remains the fact that he disappeared from the earth and my life without leaving even a trace of who he was. Most everyone has photographs to document their childhood, but the tragic nature of mine left me with nothing except the faintest memories of my youth and my angelic parents.'

Irene and her mother in France, 1946
© Private collection

Irene with Felicia and Michel Topilski in Lima, Peru
© Private collection

Into hiding

Irene and her mother were now on their own. Their survival became more desperate. Shortly after that horrific day, during their usual hunt for scraps of food, something was different: Irene's mother was carrying a bulky bag and let Irene take her doll, her beloved Laleczka. Suddenly, her mother pulled open a sewer cover and gently tossed Irene down into the sewer.

› *'We were crossing the sewer for the entire ghetto area of Warsaw. 80 years later, I can remember the stench like it was yesterday. I clutched my travel companion, my beloved Laleczka, close to my chest. I told her to be strong, but neither she nor I were immune to the horrific conditions in the sewer. She was more than my precious doll, she was my best friend, and even she was not safe in this hell on earth.'*

After escaping the ghetto, Irene spent the rest of the war within the confines of wardrobes. She became what is known as a 'Holocaust hidden child'. Her mother could pass as an 'Aryan'. She had friends from earlier years who were willing to employ her in their homes, even though this was dangerous for them.

› *'One specific instance stands out in my mind... My mother and I were both hiding in an attic of a Polish farmhouse when German officers pounded upstairs to inspect it. Luckily, their search equipment consisted of a stick and not a flashlight. My mother squeezed me tightly as they passed, and one of the sticks touched my foot. The seconds ticked by painstakingly slowly and I held my breath, but they must have mistaken my bony toes for a lumpy sack of potatoes. Once more, my life was spared by a stroke of luck.'*

After the war

Irene was placed in a Jewish orphanage in the northwest of Paris, Manoir de Denouval in Andrésy, while her mother worked in Paris during the week and visited her on Sundays. One Sunday in the spring of 1948, she simply did not come. She had passed away from a heart attack.

Before her sudden passing, Irene's mother had still made arrangements for her and Irene to live with relatives in Peru who had also survived the war. Here, Irene found a loving family. As a top student, she earned a scholarship and a degree in Latin American studies at New York University and was offered a job in the Spanish and Latin American Department of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. At the age of 25, she moved to Israel and became the youngest faculty member of the university. She spent the next 40 years there as a lecturer.

› *'I was blessed with the opportunity to have children and grandchildren, and I did the very thing Hitler tried so hard to prevent. But Hitler did not win.'*

Irene continues to campaign against antisemitism. In January 2020, she addressed the UN, telling the audience that she 'emerged from the Shoah with hope and courage and with a dream for the world. But I implore you. Don't let my dream turn into a nightmare.' Her speech at the Senate of Spain in January 2023 reminded listeners of their 'duty to future generations who must know and not forget, in order to have a fairer and more humane future for themselves.' In April 2025, she joined the March of the Living, a silent procession held annually to commemorate Holocaust victims and call for an end to antisemitism.

› *'I marched the March of the Living at the age of 87 from Auschwitz to Birkenau in the name of 1.5 million Jewish children that could not and never will be able to do this, and I've done that in their name and in their memory.'*

Irene Shashar in Peru
© Private collection

UN Secretary-General António Guterres greets Irene Shashar at the United Nations Holocaust Memorial Ceremony '75 Years after Auschwitz – Holocaust Education and Remembrance for Global Justice', 2020
© Photographer: Manuel Elías | UN

Irene Shashar's message to Europe

› *'The resurgence of antisemitism means that the hate of the past is still with us. Jews are again not feeling safe living in Europe. After the Holocaust, this should be unacceptable. 'Never again' should truly mean NEVER AGAIN.'*

Speech at the European Parliament, 25 January 2024

› *Watch Irene Shashar's speech*

Pál Hermann

'Ego sum anima musicae'

ESTRIN: I love how it's optimistic. It feels forward-looking, uplifting. It feels modern.

KENNEDY: Absolutely. Hermann was in his 20s when he wrote his Cello Concerto. He was basically a student. And it's full of optimism. It's full of life because so was he. He was huge fun. This amazing violinist he used to play with called Zoltán Székely, who was very famous through the 20th century, described him as 'flott'. And I spent ages trying to interpret what 'flott' means. It's a Hungarian word that translates roughly as light and easy, fun and chilled out. That was Pál Hermann.

I want to remember him with that 'flott', that energy, that lightness, because that was who he was.

– NPR interview by Daniel Estrin of Kate Kennedy, author of *Cello: A Journey Through Silence to Sound*. Here, they are listening to Pál Hermann's 'Cello Concerto: 1. Allegro Cantabile' performed by Clive Greensmith and Lviv International Orchestra.

The biography of Pál Hermann could almost have been the typical story of a remarkable musician: a talented cellist hailing from Hungary, he made his international break in 1923 and soon emigrated to Berlin. Here, the story starts to veer in another direction: his life in Berlin was slowly, but increasingly, encroached upon by Hitler's regime. He lost his job and moved first to the Netherlands, and then to Belgium. Eventually, he escaped to France, where, in February 1944, he was deported – probably to Lithuania – never to be heard from again.

He is survived, materially, by 26 compositions. Pál left several of them behind in his in-laws' home in Amersfoort and in his brother-in-law's place in Toujouse, and others were found in the BNF in Paris, the Banff archives and the historic archives in Toulouse. Just recently, his last two works were discovered in Toulouse. In a near-miraculous turn of events, his cello was rediscovered in 2024. The stark losses – a life of musicianship, other compositions lost during the war, and what might have been – leave Pál's compositions and cello as poignant, yet meagre, remnants of a life lost to the Holocaust.

»

Pál Hermann

A gifted cellist

At 13 years old, Pál entered the Royal National Hungarian Academy of Music, now the Franz Liszt Academy. He counted renowned composers Zoltán Kodály and Béla Bartók among his teachers, and violinist Zoltán Székely among his friends. Lists of student performances in the Academy's archives show Pál and Zoltán played together constantly.

His first performance outside of Hungary was a private concert of Kodály's Sonata for Solo Cello, Op 8 at composer Arnold Schoenberg's home in Vienna in 1920. A few years later, his performance of the same sonata in Salzburg at the International Society for Contemporary Music marked a breakthrough in his reputation as an interpreter of contemporary music.

The introduction of antisemitic policies under Hungary's Regent Admiral Miklós Horthy, a decade before the Nazis came to power, led many young musicians to leave the country. Pál left Budapest for Berlin in 1920.

In Berlin, Pál studied with the famous cellist and composer Hugo Becker at the Staatliche Akademische Hochschule für Musik, then known as a centre of avant-garde music. Very much in demand, Pál performed with numerous ensembles across Europe. The Baroque music ensemble he performed with held concerts almost every week; among those in the audience was Albert Einstein, who invited him and other musicians to perform in his home. Einstein, himself a skilled musician, joined in on occasion.

During this time, Pál also taught cello and composition at the Volksmusikschule Berlin-Neukölln: one of the first public music schools in Berlin, which brought folk music, singing and music theory classes to workers and children typically excluded from formal music education.

Together, Pál and Zoltán performed across the Netherlands, Germany and England. In the Netherlands, they performed the Dutch premiere of Kodály's Duo for Violin and Cello, bringing it to international attention, and they premiered Hermann's Grand Duo for Violin and Cello. In England, they enjoyed the patronage of the Dutch-born couple Jaap and Louise de Graaff, ardent music lovers and art patrons. They bought excellent instruments for Zoltán and Pál – a Stradivarius violin for Zoltán and a Gagliano cello for Pál.

In 1929, Louise suggested to her niece Ada Weevers that she go and see Pál in concert in Amsterdam. Pál and Ada met, and fell in love. He began to visit her in her hometown of Amersfoort whenever he could. As their relationship grew, Ada withdrew from her medical degree at the University of Amsterdam. They married in 1931, and Ada moved to Berlin to live with Pál. They welcomed their daughter, Corrie, in 1932.

Pál and Corrie Hermann
© Family archive

Leaving Berlin

In March 1933, Hitler consolidated absolute power in Germany and it was soon evident that the Hermanns would have to leave Berlin. Fleeing the country, they spent the summer in the Netherlands, hoping for respite. But tragedy struck when Ada was caught in a vortex in the sea: she was rescued, but the water she had inhaled led to pneumonia, and she died soon after.

With the Dutch Musicians' Union policy to only give work to Dutch artists, Pál moved to Brussels. He often visited Corrie who he had left in the loving care of Ada's family. Pál continued to work as a musician, performing in quartets throughout Belgium, France, Switzerland, Italy and Hungary.

In 1937, he moved to Paris, where he performed regularly as a soloist. War broke out in 1939, curtailing Pál's life even further. Contact with and visits to his family in the Netherlands became sparse and then practically ceased altogether. When France began to mobilise, Pál signed up as a foreign volunteer with the 23rd RMVE of the French army and was initially assigned to a military marching band. After the German occupation, the regiment was disbanded. He moved to the south of Bordeaux, where he stayed with the de Graaff couple. Their home was just within the 'Free Zone' that remained for the first part of the war outside Nazi control, and Pál was among many musicians and artists who fled across this border and sought safety in the de Graaff home. However, in need of some semblance of normalcy – and to make music and money – he eventually moved to Toulouse.

For two years, Pál moved between a cheap hotel and rented rooms, taught cello to a handful of pupils and played public performances – surprisingly often in his own name, although as the campaign to round up Jews intensified, he adopted the pseudonym de Cotigny to try mask his identity.

He was arrested there in April 1944: whether because his 'de Cotigny' papers had been found to be forgeries, or because he had been caught in a street round up remains unclear. He was deported and taken to the Drancy Camp near Paris. From here, he was among the passengers on Convoy 73, a train destined for the Kauen concentration camp near Kaunas, Lithuania.

While still in the station, he wrote a note to his brother-in-law Jan Weevers and threw it out of the train. A stranger found it and posted it to Jan. It read:

> *'They told us we were going to work for Organisation Todt. We are full of hope despite everything. Regarding my instruments, please save what you can.'*

Pál was never heard from again.

Pál Hermann and Zoltán Székely
© Family archive

Pál and Ada after their engagement, c. 1930
© Family archive

Pál, Jan Weevers (Ada's brother), and Corrie, 1934
© Family archive

Pál Hermann in a friend's garden, c. 1935
© Family archive

Pál Hermann, c. 1936, Ouddorp, the Netherlands
© Family archive

Left: Louise de Graaff; 3rd from left: Jaap de Graaff; Right: Pál, c. 1930
© Family archive

Pál and Corrie Hermann
© Family archive

Corrie Hermann with European Parliament President Roberta Metsola (right) and Secretary-General Alessandro Chiocchetti (left) on International Holocaust Remembrance Day, 2025
© European Union

‘I am the soul of music’

Jan came up with a plan to save Pál’s cello. Despite limited transport during the war, he set off for Toulouse.

In Toulouse, he met two friends who would help him with his task. At night, they went to Pál’s apartment, making their way past police patrols in the city. The Gestapo had boarded it up, but they managed to force open a tiny window and get inside. Once inside, Jan’s friends pushed a cheap student cello in behind him. Jan then swapped the Gagliano cello for the lesser model they had brought with them, and they made their escape.

Jan cycled 150 km home with the cello on his back. The cello was saved.

A few years later, the family reluctantly decided to sell the cello to pay for Corrie’s studies. After that, the family lost track of it until very recently.

In 2024, musician and musicologist Kate Kennedy published her book *Cello: A Journey Through Silence to Sound*, the story of four cellists – including Pál, and his missing Gagliano cello. She travelled all over Europe looking for the cello, which bears a most unusual, distinctive inscription burnt into the sides of the instrument. She failed to find the cello before her book was published, but just before its launch she was contacted by cellist Jian Wang who remembered seeing the cello’s Latin inscription: ‘I am the soul of music’ at a competition in Brussels in 2022. The cello was discovered to be in the care of the Robert Schumann Conservatory in Düsseldorf and was being played by Australian cellist Sam Lucas. Corrie and her father’s cello were soon reunited at a concert held at London’s Wigmore Hall – where Pál had played 100 years before.

Corrie Hermann’s message to Europe

› *‘Hitler has burned books, destroyed paintings and buildings, murdered millions of people. But music is invincible.’*

Speech at the European Parliament, 29 January 2025

› *Watch Corrie Hermann’s speech*

Andra and Tatiana Bucci

‘Always remember your name’

Silence pervades life after the Holocaust. The silence of the dead is the heaviest. But there are also the hushes around survivors: the unspoken struggles of those survivors who could not go back, in any way, to what had happened to them and those who could not leave the past behind for the world they had returned to. Many of them found themselves speechless in a world that would not, or perhaps could not, hear them.

Mira, Andra and Tatiana’s mother, never told her children what she had suffered in Auschwitz. She did not ask what had happened to them in the *Kinderblock* (children’s barracks) of Auschwitz-Birkenau, and they did not tell her. ‘Between us’, they write, ‘was an impenetrable, total silence.’

Far from being oppressive, the silence, as Andra and Tatiana tell it, set them free. Happiness followed in the years after the war. They are grateful to their mother for this, for their normal life. It was a way of protecting them, they say; it allowed them to look forward rather than back. They could, unlike many, ‘leave Birkenau’. The silence, however, didn’t last forever. Today, they share their story.

»

Tatiana (left) and Andra (right) in Trieste, summer 1947

Before the war

Andra and Tatiana (born Liliana) Bucci lived in Fiume, Italy (today Rijeka, Croatia) with their parents. Their mother Mira was a Jewish seamstress whose family had emigrated from Ukraine around 1910 when she was about two years old, and their father Giovanni was an Italian Catholic ship's cook. Tatiana was born in 1937, and Andra was born in 1939. The world they came into, as everyone knew it, was falling apart and their family felt it. Giovanni had to Italianise his name from "Bucich" to "Bucci" and join the Fascist Party or lose his job. With the Italian Racial Laws about to be introduced in 1938 – announced by Mussolini in Trieste, not far from where they lived – Mira had herself and Tatiana baptised, and Andra was baptised when she was born. As things worsened, she tried to find a place for the family to hide, turning to her Catholic mother-in-law who knew a lot of people in the small towns around Fiume, but no one helped them.

After Italy joined the war on the side of the Nazis, Giovanni's crew was taken captive, and he was imprisoned in South Africa for five years. Every night, Mira made the children kiss the wedding photo of their parents so they would remember what he looked like.

Deportation

In the years since, the sisters have tried to reconstruct the evening they were taken away. On 21 March 1944, Nazis and Italian fascists burst into their house; Tatiana is six and Andra is four. The table, as far as they recall, was set for dinner. They first remember the noise, their mother entering the room and hurriedly dressing them with no explanations: they have to move, to leave. The second memory is of their grandmother.

› *'Our beloved Nonna Rosa, dressed in black, as old, widowed women used to do, is on her knees, weeping and praying to a tall impassive man, who is standing still and straight in front of her. She asks him to leave the children – take the adults but not the children. What fault do little children have? As if they, the adults, had ever had any fault. We feel no fear, but rather disbelief. We've never seen Nonna Rosa in such a state. We've never seen her cry. Tati remembers that she wasn't afraid but only pained at seeing her like that.'*

'Always Remember Your Name', Andra and Tatiana Bucci (2022)

Mira and Giovanni Bucci on their wedding day, Fiume, 5 December 1935

Sergio, Tatiana and Andra (from left) with the sisters' mother Mira, Aunt Paola, Nonna Rosa and Aunt Gisella (behind, from left), Fiume, summer 1943

They, along with other members of their family, were taken to Susak, a small village near Fiume, for one night, before being brought to the *Polizeihaftlager* (police detention camp) at the Rice Mill in San Sabba. Some days later, on 29 March 1944, they were shoved into freight cars by uniformed guards and crowded into the train that would take them to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

› *'We stay close to Mamma, standing, each of us clinging to one leg. The people are motionless. We're all silent, there's no confusion but, rather, fear, the anxiety to know where we're going. It's a silence that isn't a silence. Nonna is near us, with Aunt Gisella, Aunt Sonia, and Uncle Jossi.'*

'Always Remember Your Name', Andra and Tatiana Bucci (2022)

On the way, probably during a stop on the Brenner, Mira threw a note to her husband out the window. It was picked up and somehow reached Giovanni's family.

The *Kinderblock*

On 4 April 1944, they arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau. The deportees were forced to line up for the selection and the family was split up. Andra and Tatiana's grandmother, Nonna Rosa, and their aunt Sonia were taken away and gassed. Children were usually killed. Ultimately, Andra and Tatiana do not know why they were weren't. It is possible that Mira insisted to guards on the fact that they had converted to Catholicism. Another theory – perhaps the more likely – is that they were saved by their seeming appearance as twins. Dressed in matching coats, bearing a strong resemblance to one another and close in age, they may have been taken as suitable victims for Josef Mengele's experiments, like many in the *Kinderblock*.

Mira kept her daughters close to her as long as she could, but after their numbers were tattooed, they were separated. Somehow, she managed to see them a few times at the *Kinderblock*. Again, Andra and Tatiana are not sure how, since her barracks would have been quite far from theirs – bribing *blockovas* (female camp guards), perhaps, or just sheer bravery.

Mira was almost unrecognisable in these rare nighttime visits: her head was shaved, and she was extremely thin and exhausted. Her appearance frightened them, and it was hard for the sisters to show their mother affection. In later years, they regretted the pain this must have caused Mira, but trust that she must have understood it came from their fear and trauma. During her visits, Mira insisted that the girls remember their names, and that they were Italian. She made them repeat their names to her and to each other: 'Remember, your name is Liliana Bucci [the name that appeared on documents, although everyone called her Tatiana]. Remember, your name is Andra Bucci.'

Life in the camp was defined by cold and hunger. Their thin jackets offered little protection, hunger was barely kept at bay by the tasteless, watery soup, and the air was constantly filled with the smell of burning from the crematoria. Death was everywhere – visible in the piles of corpses and in the chimneys spitting flames and smoke – and it became so constant that the children grew used to it, even playing among the bodies Tatiana called 'pyramids.' During the day they were allowed to play outside the barrack, but with no toys they relied only on imagination, using pebbles in summer and snow in winter, their games unfolding amid mud, cold, and death. Only gradually did the children understand that they were imprisoned because they are Jewish.

The children did not understand what was happening when a man in a white coat would enter the barrack and take children away, but they felt that something was terribly wrong and were filled with fear. Their life became an alternation between numbness and terror, and yet they tried to cope by immersing themselves in the strange, absurd routines of camp life.

› *'Death is everywhere around us. And yet, strangely, we're not afraid of it, and we quickly get used to this parallel reality. We are always seeing the corpses of adults. Bodies piled in a corner, heaped up in a barrack, transported by other prisoners. But to us it seems ordinary.'*

'Always Remember Your Name', Andra and Tatiana Bucci (2022)

One evening, when Andra and Tatiana's mother said she would no longer come and then disappeared, the girls assumed she had died. Death was so common in Auschwitz that the disappearance of adults no longer seemed unusual.

The *blockova* of the *Kinderblock* had taken a liking to the girls, once even gifting them angora sweaters. They don't know why this was, either – perhaps she reminded them of grandchildren or daughters of her own. It was her who warned them that a man would come to the barracks and announce that whoever wanted to see their mother should step forward. They were under no conditions, she told them, to move. The girls passed the message to their cousin Sergio. But when the man did come to the barracks, Sergio stepped forward: he could not resist seeing his mother again. He left with nineteen other children on 29 November 1944, his seventh birthday. The sisters never saw him again.

Sergio De Simone, who was arrested with the sisters and interned in the same Kinderblock, *1943*

After liberation

On 27 January 1945, the camp was liberated by the Russian army. After the war, Andra and Tatiana were sent to an orphanage in Prague. Their Italian mostly forgotten in lieu of German in the camps, they now learned to write in Czech. Neither remember the orphanage fondly. Andra hid any illnesses in fear of being sent to a hospital like those in the camps; Tatiana developed migraines that still occur rarely today.

› *'Life in Prague was so grim that we've erased from our memory even the room we slept in. We don't remember it...the absence of affection or sympathy on the part of the adults was total. Nothing. For the same reason, we didn't make friends with anyone, with the children or with the teachers.'*

'Always Remember Your Name', Andra and Tatiana Bucci (2022)

In early 1946, they left Prague to board a plane to England. Their new home would be Lingfield House, a home run by a woman named Alice Goldberger, a Jewish woman who had fled Germany in 1933, been imprisoned as an "enemy alien" on the Isle of Man, before being released with the help of Anna Freud who recognised her work for young children. Here, Tatiana says, 'everything started again for us.'

The women running Lingfield crucially understood the need for affection and empathy, and for the children in their care to have a normal childhood. 'It may seem silly', Andra and Tatiana write, 'but when we entered that room of toys we felt instantly revived.' They particularly remember one nurse, Manna, with real fondness. Of course, the lives of these children were far from normal. Tatiana's friend Miriam felt a lifelong guilt for how her sister Judith went to the camps while she survived in hiding. Andra saw that her friend Zdenka, an orphan who had survived Theresienstadt, held Lingfield – the only family she had left in the world – close to her heart for her entire life.

One day, Andra and Tatiana were called to Alice Goldberger's office. She showed them a photograph and asked if they recognised the people in it. They knew the photograph well: it was their parents' wedding photo that their mother had made them kiss every night when their father was away at sea. They had remembered their names, like their mother had instructed them, and Mira and Giovanni had been able to track them down. They were about to live the dream that most children at Lingfield would never realise.

› *'There were many farewell parties and gifts until they both left for London, both girls dressed in nice blue coats, with little embroidered caps and matching shoulder bags. Manna, the nurse who was specially looking after them and who was very attached to them, had made these things for them and Sophie, our cook had dressed two dolls with exactly the same outfit. Everybody turned round to see the lovely sisters who looked like twins again...'*

Report of Alice Goldberger, December 1946. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, Gift of Judith Sherman

Reunited with parents

On 4 December 1946, Andra and Tatiana began the long journey back to Italy, accompanied by a social worker of Lingfield. When they eventually arrived in Rome, the train station was crowded with distraught parents of missing children asking them if they had seen their missing children. Andra was overwhelmed by her inability to tell them what they wanted to hear.

› *'When these people asked me, 'Have you seen this person?' I would say, "Perhaps I saw them." Because I thought it was cruel to say, "I didn't see them."'*

'Always Remember Your Name', Andra and Tatiana Bucci (2022)

Here, the pair separated from the Lingfield worker and began crying.

› *'What a sad paradox! We burst into tears. Mamma didn't know what to do to calm us. She hugged us, kissed us, tried to be loving. We can only imagine the world of emotions she must have felt at that moment. To this day, Andra feels a sense of guilt about that singular meeting, about not having immediately displayed all the joy she felt at seeing Mamma again. But the truth is that we were children who had already been forced by life to confront cruel trials.'*

'Always Remember Your Name', Andra and Tatiana Bucci (2022)

By now, their Italian was long forgotten. They spoke German with Mira, English with Giovanni and shared the secret language of Czech with one another, until they were eventually made to speak only Italian in school.

Andra, Sergio and Tatiana (from left), Fiume, summer 1943

Sergio

Aunt Gisella, Sergio's mother, never accepted that her son never came home. 'A child so lovely', she would say, 'couldn't help being welcomed and cared for by someone in some corner of the world.' For Tatiana and Andra, their cousin's fate is lasting source of loss and regret, rooted in an unshakeable feeling, no matter how powerless they had in fact been, that they were unable to prevent his departure or protect him.

For decades, the fate of Sergio and the nineteen other children who were tricked with the promise of seeing their mother remained unknown. It was only in the early 1980s that journalists Günther Schwarberg and Barbara Hüsing reconstructed what had happened, identifying the victims and uncovering the truth about their torture and murder.

They were transported to Hamburg, where they were subjected to medical experiments by the Nazi doctor Kurt Heissmeyer, who injected them with tuberculosis bacteria and performed surgical procedures on them in the name of pseudoscience.

After the experiments were completed, all twenty children were murdered by hanging on the night of 20 April 1945, in the basement of the Bullenhuser Damm school in Hamburg. Their deaths were intended to erase the evidence of the crimes committed against them.

Today, Sergio is commemorated in several places, including a memorial plaque on the door of his former home at Via Morghen 65 in Naples and a street named Sergio-de-Simone-Stieg in Hamburg-Burgwedel. The Bullenhuser Damm Memorial in Hamburg is dedicated to the twenty children who were murdered there.

Gisella and Sergio De Simone in Naples, c. 1940

Tatiana, Sergio and Andra (from left) in Fiume, 29 November 1943

Life after the war

From the silence, the stories of Andra and Tatiana have emerged. In the years after, schoolmates knew that they had been in the camps, but they never discussed it. The sisters still bore the tattooed numbers on their arms: 'People would ask if it was our telephone number, and we said yes. What should we have said?'.

In the distance of time, they have worked to understand what happened to them and come to terms with what they will never know. In many ways, they have come to understand their mother through having their own children: for Andra, when her children became the age at which she and Tatiana were sent to the camps; for Tatiana, when she remembered how she and her sister had been frightened by Mira's appearance in the camps, and imagined, with a new understanding, the pain of their mother being rejected by her children.

By being able to leave Auschwitz for so many years, for which they are unendingly grateful to their mother, they gradually have also been able to return. Andra and Tatiana have told scores of schoolchildren what has happened to them, on several occasions in Auschwitz-Birkenau, answered their children's and grandchildren's questions, and recorded their testimonies in books and interviews.

Tatiana, Sergio and Andra (below, from left) with Aunt Paola, Aunt Gisella and the girls' mother Mira (behind, from left), Fiume, summer 1943

Andra, Sergio and Tatiana (below, from left) with the sisters' mother Mira, Aunt Gisella and Aunt Paola (behind, from left), Fiume, summer 1943

Tatiana in Prague, 1946

Andra in Prague, 1946

Walter Frankenstein gives his testimony to a European Parliament team, January 2025
© European Union

Walter Frankenstein

‘Help others in need’

In January 2025, a team from the European Parliament travelled to Stockholm to interview Holocaust survivor Walter Frankenstein. At 100 years old, Frankenstein was still passionately fighting to get his message across: help people in need.

Walter, his wife Leonie and their two children Peter-Uri and Michael were among the few survivors of the genocide of Jews in the Second World War. Surviving the war was a near-miraculous feat, only possible with the help of, as Walter said, ‘good people … and a lot of luck.’

Walter Frankenstein passed away on 21 April 2025.

› *Watch extracts from Walter’s oral history interview on Europeana*

Walter at the Auerbach Orphanage
© Jewish Museum of Berlin – Walter and Leonie Frankenstein Collection

Walter doing the long jump
© Jewish Museum of Berlin – Walter and Leonie Frankenstein Collection

Walter Frankenstein was born in 1924 to a Jewish family in Flatow, West Prussia. In 1936, when he was no longer permitted to attend public school there, his uncle found him a place in the Auerbach Orphanage in Berlin, where he met his future wife Leonie.

As Nazi oppression prevented him from fulfilling his dream of becoming an architect, in 1938, Walter began training to be a mason at the Jewish Community's school of architecture and construction crafts. Beginning in 1941, he was enlisted into forced labour and repeatedly threatened with deportation.

Forced labour

In 1941, the Nazis shut down the Jewish construction school. Walter and two of his teachers were employed as construction workers by the Jewish Community, which was under the control of the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA). The Gestapo deployed the construction workers for its own purposes. One day, Walter was ordered to work on the premises of the *Judenreferat*, the department responsible for 'Jewish affairs and evacuation'. 'One speck and you're in Auschwitz tomorrow,' the SS officer threatened Walter as he plastered one of the rooms. Walter did not know who the man was. It was only when he left the room and turned around to read the name on the door that he realised it was Adolf Eichmann, the man responsible for the deportation and extermination of Europe's Jews.

Leonie and Walter wanted to get married. As Walter was 17, their guardians signed the papers. On 20 February 1942, they married in a civil ceremony in Berlin with their closest family members present.

Leonie became pregnant shortly after the wedding. Peter-Uri was born in the Jewish Hospital in Berlin on 20 January 1943. He was circumcised against his parents' wishes; Leonie and Walter feared that it would make their child identifiable as Jewish.

‘Fabrikaktion’ and going underground

At the beginning of 1943, around 15 000 Jews were still working as forced labourers in Berlin, including Walter and Leonie. The Nazi leadership’s goal was to make Berlin ‘free of Jews’. For this reason, the Jewish forced labourers still active were to be replaced by prisoners of war, among others. They were to be arrested in the factories (in German: ‘Fabrik’) during working hours.

The ‘Fabrikaktion’ began on 27 February 1943. The day after it started, Leonie and five-week-old Peter-Uri were picked up from their home in one of the notorious trucks and taken to an assembly point. In the queue that formed there, Leonie stayed at the front with eight women who had restitution certificates from the Gestapo – Walter had such a certificate too, but she had left it at home. The marshal on duty let the eight women go. Leonie asked what she should do, to which he replied: ‘You shouldn’t ask such stupid questions.’ Leonie seized the opportunity and went home. In the meantime, Walter had arrived home to find a sealed door. When he heard what had happened, he rushed to the assembly point where he was told that Leonie had gone home. The situation for the young family was becoming more and more dangerous.

Walter had gone to work as usual, but none of his colleagues were there. They had been collected for deportation the night before. The Frankenstein family was lucky: they had just moved house and had not yet officially changed their address. While the official disappeared into the building to find out what to do with Walter, he quickly ran off and rushed home. Leonie and Peter-Uri travelled to Leonie’s mother in Leipzig, and Walter followed a few days later.

Walter’s mother Martha was assigned to forced labour too. On 1 March 1943, she was captured at her workplace and deported to Auschwitz from Grunewald station.

Martha Frankenstein, 1935

Leipzig

Living illegally meant coping with the constant threat to their lives. They were often very lucky.

Walter did not dare stay in Leipzig for too long. He could not live in the apartment with the family and stayed at the workshop of an old left-wing carpenter, Mr Koch. As a young man seemingly fit for military service, it was easy to generate mistrust, and when the first rumours began to circulate in the neighbourhood, Walter returned to Berlin.

Leonie's mother Beate Rosner married her second husband Theodor Kranz, a Gentile and a leftist, in the mid-1920s. She felt reasonably secure, being married to an 'Aryan'. However, in August 1943, a woman queuing behind Beate at the post office denounced her because her *Postausweis* (the card required to collect post) was missing the middle name 'Sara', which was mandatory for Jews. Beate was ordered to report to the police station herself where she was accused of 'concealment of racial background' and taken into custody. When the Gestapo took over, she was taken to Auschwitz on 6 November 1943, where she died on 3 January 1944.

Berlin

When Walter got back to Berlin, he approached Edith Berlow, the girlfriend of his cousin Kurt Hirschfeldt. She was not Jewish and was active in a resistance group against the Nazi regime. She was hiding her boyfriend Kurt and some other Jews. She found a hiding place for Walter with a friend, Arthur Ketzer. Walter stayed on the premises of Arthur Ketzer's pharmaceutical factory for approximately eight months until it was destroyed by an air bomb. Walter was able to work informally for various people. His training as a mason was now of great use to him, and he often took on repair work after bombing raids.

Leonie and Peter-Uri left Leipzig shortly after her mother's arrest and joined Walter in his hiding place on Arthur Ketzer's factory premises in the autumn of 1943. When the factory was destroyed in early 1944, Arthur suggested that Leonie register as a bombed-out person under a false identity. As a 'German mother' with a baby, she had to leave Berlin immediately and was sent to Briesenhorst near Landsberg/Warthe, where they stayed with a farmer's wife, whose husband and son were in Russia, as well as the woman's daughter and an old Polish prisoner of war.

Walter remained in Berlin and struggled on. He secured contacts with other people living underground. One of them was Arthur Katz. The Frankenstein and Katz families had been neighbours in Flatow. Arthur Katz knew Sophie Döring, whose husband was a Wehrmacht officer stationed in Poland, and arranged for Walter to live in her bombed-out apartment. In return, Walter fixed the apartment. Sophie Döring also shared the food rations she received from her husband with 'her two illegals', Walter and Arthur Katz.

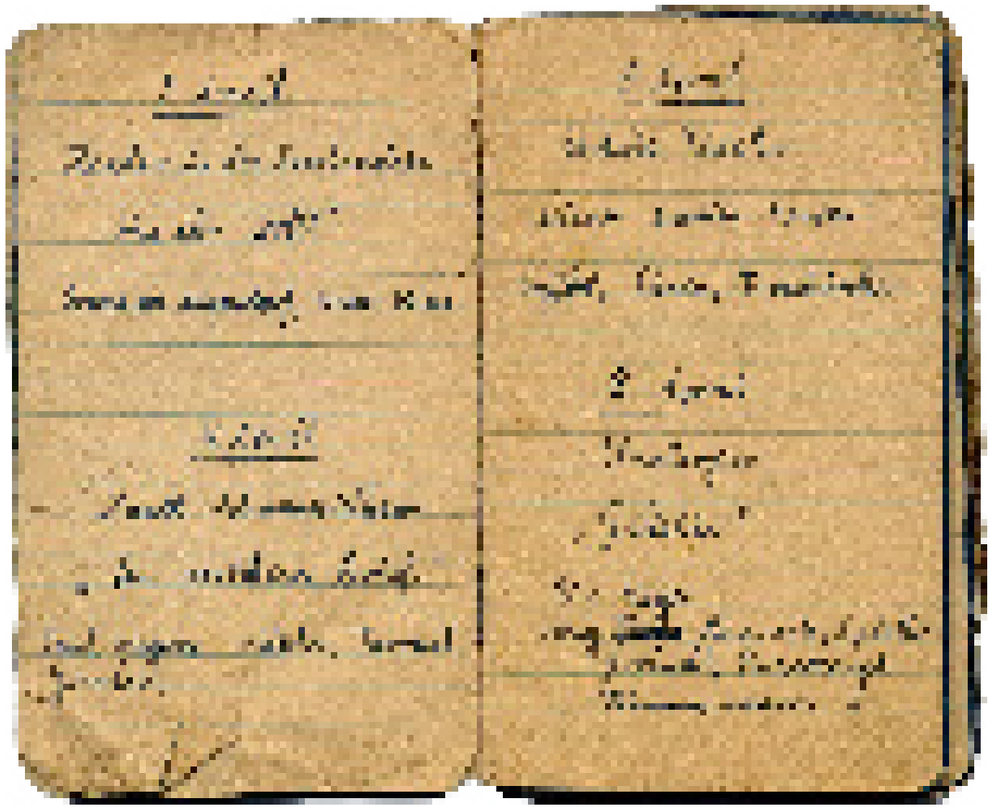
While Leonie was in Briesenhorst, the couple kept in touch via letters, which they picked up at the post office. Around the time of the birth of their second son in autumn 1944, Walter witnessed an arrest at his regular post office and did not dare to pick up his post for several weeks. Leonie found those weeks utterly distressing.

Michael was born on 26 September 1944. Leonie gave birth at a clinic in Landsberg/Warthe, leaving Peter-Uri in the care of the farmer's wife in Briesenhorst. Due to an infection, Leonie had to stay at the clinic even longer and she constantly thought about the fact that Peter-Uri was circumcised and therefore clearly identifiable as a Jewish child. However, the farmer's wife never said a word about it.

Portraits of Walter, Peter-Uri and Leonie taken just after the war in 1945

Beate Rosner, Leipzig c. 1928–1929

Leonie and Peter-Uri in Briesenhorst, 1944



In Berlin, Walter often hid in the opera – it was dark, warm, and an escape from the outside world for a few hours. According to Walter, if Wagner was playing, it also gave him time to sleep. He kept a record of all the operas he visited in a diary.
© Jewish Museum of Berlin – Walter and Leonie Frankenstein Collection

Edith Berlow, ca. 1936
© Photographer: Ilse Lietdkem | German Resistance Memorial Center

Arthur Ketzer, 6 August 1936
© Private/Reproduction German Resistance Memorial Center

Meanwhile, Leonie could not remember the correct date of birth of the Christian acquaintance from Leipzig whose name she was using at the clinic, and the registry office kept asking her. When the situation became too dangerous, Leonie decided to join Walter in Berlin in early November 1944.

There was not enough space for the whole family at Sophie Döring's apartment. Arthur Katz put the family in contact with Mary, a madam of a brothel, who rented out a room to them. They stayed there until January 1945, when the house burnt down following a bombing raid. Fräulein Dora, a prostitute that Walter recognised, passed by. Leonie confessed to her that they were living illegally, and Fräulein Dora handed them the keys to her apartment where the family stayed until shortly before the end of the war.

At the end of April 1945, when the risk of the house being hit became too high, they went to a public bunker at Kottbusser Tor.

Liberation

On 28 April 1945, Soviet soldiers entered the bunker.

It took some time for Leonie and Walter to get used to the fact that the situation of constant fear for their children and for each other had ended – now an uncertain future lay before them.

Life after the war

After an arduous journey to Israel, where the family lived for several years, they emigrated to Sweden in 1956, where Leonie and Walter would spend the next 53 years of their lives together. As retirees, they regularly went to Germany and, in particular, to Berlin, where they campaigned for the remembrance of the Holocaust.

Leonie died on 19 May 2009. Walter continued their commitment on his own. In 2014, he received the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany and, in 2017, he received the Order of Merit of the State of Berlin. He passed away on 21 April 2025 at 100 years of age.

Leonie, Peter-Uri and Michael in Hadera, 1947
© Jewish Museum of Berlin – Walter and Leonie Frankenstein Collection

Walter Frankenstein's message to Europe

During one of his last interviews, which he gave to a team from the European Parliament in January 2025, he emphasised once again:

› *'For as long as I live, I am over 100 years old now, I will strive and be at the ready to give my account of what happened … These days, it is so very important to learn about the past, what it was really like back then, rather than the myths online … These are not myths. This is real life.'*

'What is very important to me is that, when I die, this thought should remain: you should help all people who are in need … We are all people and we all come from the same source.'

Walter and Leonie in Sweden, 1957

Further reading

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La memoria rende liberi. La vita interrotta di una bambina nella Shoah, Enrico Mentana and Liliana Segre (2015)

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I Won Against Hitler: The true story of Irene, Irene Shashar, Daniel Schydlowsky, and Amnon Fleishman (Illustrator) (2022)

Cello: A Journey Through Silence to Sound, Kate Kennedy (2024)

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Acknowledgements

Dokumentations- und Kulturzentrum Deutscher Sinti und Roma

European Jewish Congress

Fondazione Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea

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The exhibition ‘Europe Remembers: Holocaust remembrance at the European Parliament’ is brought to you by the Archives of the European Parliament.

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It was made possible with support from the services of the European Parliament, in particular:

The Cabinet of the President

The Directorate-General for the Presidency

The Directorate-General for Translation

The Directorate-General for Information Technologies and Cybersecurity

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