The word holocaust means total destruction, usually by fire. Since World War II it has earned a new meaning: the massacre of six million Jews by the German Nazis. Hitler's main goal was to exterminate all the Jews in Europe, and he succeeded in killing two-thirds of them before he ended his own life with poison in his bunker under the German Chancellery building in Berlin.

The Holocaust began as soon as Hitler took power. Between 1933 and 1939 the Nazis boycotted Jewish businesses, established quotas in the professions and schools, outlawed marriages between Jews and Gentiles, and built Dachau, Buchenwald, and Oranienburg, the first concentration camps. On the night of November 9, 1938, Hitler's Storm Troopers went on a rampage, burning 267 synagogues, arresting 20,000 people, and smashing Jewish places of business in an orgy of terror which has since been called Kristallnacht, “the night of broken glass.” To make a horrible night worse, the Nazis then forced the Jews to pay an “atonement” fine of $400 million for the damage which had been done by the government to the Jews’ own property.

World War II began for Europe in September, 1939. (The United States did not enter the war until December, 1941.) After Germany conquered Poland, Reinhard Heydrich decreed that all Polish Jews were to be confined in a ghetto. Seven hundred thousand of them died during the next two years, and when Germany attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941, “strike squads” were sent in against Soviet Jewish citizens. In one atrocity alone, 33,771 Jews were machine-gunned on September 29, 1941.

In January, 1942 Hitler called the Wannsee Conference to debate what he called the “final solution of the Jewish question.” As a result, during the next three years Jews represented over half of those exterminated in the concentration camps. Gypsies, Slavs, and political prisoners made up most of the rest. Several camps, including Auschwitz, were actually extermination camps built to kill people. The Nazis were proud of their efficiency in murder, and their methods included cyanide or carbon monoxide gas, electrocution, and phenol injections.

The concentration camps have come to stand for the worst that humans can do. They totally debased and depersonalized their inmates, treating them as though they were not people at all, crowding them onto cattle cars, as many as a hundred to a car, and carrying them to the camps without water, food, or sanitary facilities. They abused them physically and verbally in the worst ways possible and split up families, sending men and boys to one place and women and girls to another. In Auschwitz the infamous medical director, Dr. Mengele, decided with one look at the incoming prisoners which ones would live and which would die.

Everything they owned—money, clothing, books, jewelry, even the hair on their heads and the gold fillings in their teeth—was taken from them. They slept on wooden shelves which served as beds, crowded so closely together they could not turn over in their sleep, without blankets or pillows.
The Holocaust (cont.)

They were forced to work as slave laborers until they could no longer work and then they were killed. They were called by the numbers tattooed on their arms. Hundreds of thousands died of typhus or other terrible diseases which flourish when people are forced to live together in unsanitary conditions. Thousands of whole families were wiped out.

Having no weapons and weakened by disease and malnutrition, the Jews were isolated from the Allies with little resource except to hide, as the Franks did for two years. Escape was impossible after the early years. Sixty thousand managed to join up with partisan groups who fiercely resisted the Nazis throughout the war, and uprisings occurred in several of the larger ghettos, including the one in Warsaw, Poland.

Those killed included men, women, children, babies, old people, and the handicapped. They included doctors, teachers, librarians, lawyers, business people, store clerks, housewives, students, farmers, and secretaries. People from every walk of life were killed, regardless of who they were, how wealthy or how poor they were or how good or how bad they were. They were all the same to the misfits and criminals who ran the government and the camps.

The camp to which Anne, her mother, and her sister were taken first was Auschwitz in Poland, the largest of the camps and considered a model extermination camp. Its gas chambers were large enough to kill hundreds of people at once and its huge furnaces burned the bodies of the dead. Columns of black smoke rose from the furnaces into the air twenty-four hours a day. Anne’s mother died there, then Anne and Margot were taken to Bergen-Belsen. In Auschwitz there was a little food to eat, but in Belsen there was nothing. It was only a matter of time until Margot, and then Anne, died of typhus.

The holocaust is one of the darkest chapters in all of human history. It was truly a time when the inmates ran the show, when evil was turned loose on the inhabitants of a whole continent and became official policy.

Activity: In Berlin, once again the capital of Germany, a large monument in memory of the victims of the Holocaust is going to be built over or near Hitler’s bunker, which still exists underground. All the known names of the victims will be on the monument.

Design a monument to the victims of the Holocaust. Draw a picture of how it will look and indicate on your plan the following:

What material or materials will you use?

How large will it be?

What symbols will you include, and how will you include them?

How will you landscape the grounds around your monument?

When your monument is finished, what kind of ceremony will you have to dedicate it?

Where will your monument stand?