In Their Own Words
Diaries from the Holocaust

A RESOURCE FOR TEACHERS
I only wish for one thing: That we will be able to go together with Mama and Kitty...Kitty is strong enough for her age, but one wants to stand by their children’s side in these difficult days.

—Bela Weichherz
March 1942
Again we sleep on the barren floor—no blankets—but the feeling of freedom warms us and so we don’t mind it anymore.

—Michael Kraus

Michael Kraus had just turned 14 when he was imprisoned in Auschwitz-Birkenau with his parents. After witnessing the subsequent deportation of his mother and the death of his father, he was liberated from a death march by the American army and spent the next few years filling three diaries with painstaking descriptions and drawings of his wartime experiences—all in an effort to honor the memory of his beloved parents, Karel and Lotte.
Papers full of annexation of Austria...Jews trying to escape over border, arrests...Jewish stores marked “Jude.” See the downstairs couple looking so sad.

—Helen Baker
March 16, 1938

An American living in Vienna with her children and husband while he was on a six-month sabbatical, HELEN BAKER became an eyewitness to history when Germany annexed Austria in 1938. The Baker family filmed what they saw on their Kodak movie camera and Helen wrote it all down in a notebook, capturing the chaos in the streets, the Nazis’ use of propaganda to foment antisemitism, and the mounting distress of her Jewish acquaintances as persecution against them intensified.
My heart beat in me, it threatened to explode...At that moment, I reached the iron decision never to give myself up alive into their hands, to fight against the murderers until the end.

—Kalman Linkimer
June 5, 1944

After escaping from a forced labor camp in Latvia, KALMAN LINKIMER and two other prisoners returned to their hometown of Liepāja and found refuge with Robert and Johanna Sedols, who hid them and eight other Jews in their cellar. In his diary, Kalman chronicled his dramatic escape from the camp and the men’s terrifying days in hiding, where they remained until liberation—among the very few Jews of Liepāja to survive.
We celebrate the VE day in Belsen Camp...if for no other reason the parade was worthwhile for this—it gave the women something to think about, perhaps it registered that they were free.

—Charles Phillip Sharp
May 8, 1945


One of the first British army officers to enter the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp after liberation, MAJOR CHARLES PHILLIP SHARP oversaw the arrest of the camp commandant, the care of women and children, and the burial of the dead. And all the while he kept a careful diary, tucking maps and documents in between the pages to provide irrefutable evidence for those who were not there to see what he saw.
Mirjam Korber was 18 years old when she began keeping a diary of the difficult days she and her family faced after their deportation to the Djurin ghetto in the Transnistria region of Romania. The family survived, and Mirjam’s determination to record what she witnessed and experienced—the harsh winters, the outbreaks of disease, the exploitation by local residents—produced a rare, invaluable account of ghetto life in Transnistria.

I know that all my writing is meaningless. Nobody will read my journal and, as for me, should I escape alive from here, I will throw into the fire everything that will remind me of the damned time spent in Djurin. And still, I write.

—Mirjam Korber
July 15, 1942
Today the first time since Inka is with us she started to smile. We are like children, Inka starts laughing, and we start laughing. In other words wonderful Inka.

—Stanisława Roztropowicz
July 14, 1943

In 1943, JÓSEF AND NATALIA ROZTROPOWICZ welcomed Sabina Kagan—a Jewish infant who had been abandoned—into their home in a Polish village, where they renamed her Inka to hide her identity and cared for her until the end of the war. The Roztropowicz family recorded Inka’s arrival in a diary, writing affectionately of the joy the little girl brought them despite the deprivations of war and the risk they undertook in hiding her.
When in a single move Destiny unleashes its terrible game
And sweeps you away to some far distant land
When our exile stretches ever further
Will the last bonds of our community be torn apart!?

—Manfred Lewin
1942

MANFRED LEWIN and Gad Beck met as teenagers when they joined the same Zionist group in Berlin. The two fell in love, and Manfred created a keepsake book for Gad to memorialize their relationship and the community of Jewish youth from which they drew their strength and their solace. Though Manfred died at Auschwitz, Gad was spared from deportation and joined the underground, risking his life to help fellow Jews hide and escape.
A year ago today—we were probably in the movies, after that at home listening to the radio...Now the five of us are suffering in 3 different places—we are cold and hungry and working.

—Lilly Isaacs
February 10, 1945

In October 1944, the Nazis deported more than a thousand Jewish Hungarian women to Sömmerda, a subcamp of Buchenwald, where they were forced to manufacture ammunition. Despite the dire living conditions, THE WOMEN OF SÖMMERDA managed to create a camp newspaper, write and perform songs, secretly observe their Jewish faith, and record it all for posterity in their diaries. In April 1945, the majority of the women were sent on a death march and later liberated by Allied forces.
CHAIM KAPLAN began his diary on September 1, 1939, when Germany invaded Poland and World War II began. For the next three years he faithfully recorded the starkly circumscribed world of the Warsaw ghetto, capturing both the hardships the Jewish residents faced and the religious and communal life to which they defiantly clung. Chaim is believed to have died at Treblinka, but his work as a respected writer and educator—and the enduring spirit of the people of the Warsaw ghetto—lives on in his diaries.

In our scroll of agony...every entry is more precious than gold, so long as it is written down as it happens, without exaggerations and distortions.

—Chaim Kaplan

October 26, 1939
Finally, we hear shouts of HURRAAH! And HELLOOO! We simply cannot believe that, after three years, it could finally be over for us...we finally emerge, all covered with yellow mud and in terrible condition.

—Felicitas Wolf
May 8, 1945
This little book is for me... about the time that my man and I are hidden in a hayloft somewhere in Poland. I have the hope that I will live free again.

—Selma Engel
June 21, 1944

SELMA ENGEL, a Jewish woman born in the Netherlands, met her future husband, Chaim, a Polish Jew, when they were imprisoned in the Sobibór killing center. Young and in love, they made a daring escape with other prisoners during the camp uprising and found refuge with a farmer until liberation. In her diary Selma writes about Sobibór and her deepening relationship with Chaim, with whom she created a translation dictionary so the two could communicate with each other.