The term holocaust is derived from the Greek word ‘holókauston’, an animal sacrifice offered to a god in which the whole (‘holos’) animal is completely burnt (‘kaustos’). For hundreds of years, the word "holocaust" was used in English to denote great massacres, but since the 1960s, the term has come to be used by scholars and popular writers to refer exclusively to the genocide of Jews. The biblical word ‘Shoah’ meaning "calamity" became the standard Hebrew term for the Holocaust as early as the 1940s, especially in Europe and Israel. The Nazis used a euphemistic phrase, the "Final Solution to the Jewish Question" and the phrase "Final Solution" has been widely used as a term for the genocide of the Jews subsequently. Nazis also used the euphemism, “Leben unwertes Leben” or “Life unworthy of life” in an attempt to justify the killings philosophically.

The Holocaust was the genocide of approximately six million European Jews during World War II, a programme of systematic state-sponsored murder by Nazi Germany, led by Adolf Hitler, throughout Nazi-occupied territory. Of the nine million Jews who had resided in Europe before the Holocaust, approximately two-thirds perished. In particular, over one million Jewish children were killed in the Holocaust, as were approximately two million Jewish women and three million Jewish men. Some scholars maintain that the definition of the Holocaust should also include the Nazis' genocide of millions of people in other groups, including Romani (more commonly known in English by the exonym "Gypsies"), Sinti, Soviet prisoners of war, Polish and Soviet civilians, homosexuals, people with disabilities, Jehovah's Witnesses and other political and religious opponents, which occurred regardless of whether they were of German or non-German ethnic origin. Using this definition, the total number of Holocaust victims is between 11 million and 17 million people.

The persecution and genocide were carried out in stages. Various legislations like removing the Jews from civil society, predominantly the Nuremberg Laws, was enacted in Nazi Germany years before the outbreak of World War II. Concentration camps were established in which inmates were used as slave labour until they died of exhaustion or disease. Where the Third Reich conquered new territory in Eastern Europe, specialized units murdered Jews and political opponents in mass shootings. The Third Reich required Jews and Romani to be confined in overcrowded ghettos before being transported by freight train to extermination camps where, if they survived the journey, the majority of them were
systematically killed in Gas chambers. Significant historical evidence points to the idea that the vast majority of Holocaust victims, prior to their deportation to concentration camps, were either unaware of the fate that awaited them, or were in disbelief of the information that they had received; they honestly believed that they were to be re-settled.

Holocaust refers to the period of twelve years from 1933 until 1945, that European Jews were hunted, persecuted, slaughtered, tortured and massacred by the German Nazi Party and by their various collaborators. The Holocaust was, is and will forever be, one of the most shocking examples of human degradation ever to darken the face of the earth.

Jews were persecuted for various reasons, but mostly due to their significantly different beliefs and customs to those who followed the Christian faith. Jews followed different customs and practiced different beliefs and traditions to Christians. Jews formed their own communities (ghettos) inside larger communities, a bit like Chinatowns or Little Italys. The Jews kept to themselves and mingled in and amongst themselves. This show of apparent isolationism bred contempt and suspicion from non-Jewish people who accused them of almost anything, when there was any accusing to be done. In the 14th Century, for example, when the Black Death ripped through Europe, frantic and horrified peasants, desperate for answers, lunged at rumors that Jews poisoned wells and that this poison spread the Plague. It wasn’t true, of course, but when mass-hysteria grabs hold, there’s very little to hold it back.

The seeds of the Nazi Holocaust were sewn in the mid 1920s and the 1930s. Germany, crushed and humiliated after losing the Great War of 1914-1918, had been ripped to pieces. Its land had been cut up, its military forces had been ripped to shreds and all its finest ocean-liners were sold off to the Allies to pay for war-damages. Furious and downhearted, Germans found comfort in the belief that it was the Jews who “stabbed Germany in the back”. The stab-in-the-back theory of anti-semitism made Germans feel better about themselves, and this set the ball rolling for the Nazis, who were, in the 1920s, a small, insignificant political party. Anti-semitism grew in the second half of the 1920s and early 1930s with the German Hyperinflation Crisis of 1922. In order to pay off massive debts incurred by the First World War, thousands of German marks were printed. This influx of currency reduced the value of the Mark until it was literally worthless. The Depression that came less than ten years later, secured Hitler’s rise to power and the start of a systematic program of anti-Jewish measures.
To many people, the Holocaust and Jewish persecution started in 1939, with the declaration of war, by the United Kingdom and France, upon Germany. However, what people may not be aware of is the fact that German persecution of Jews started significantly earlier than that. Anti-Jewish laws and regulations were brought into Germany along with the Nazis in 1933. At first, the laws and regulations started out small and here are a few:

7th April, 1933
- Jews barred from civil service in Germany.
- Jews barred from becoming practicing lawyers.

25th April, 1933
- Jews barred from German Universities.

1934
- Jews excluded from serving in the German military.

1935-1936
- ‘Mixed marriages’ between Aryans and Jews were forbidden.
- Jews lose the Vote.
- Jews lose German citizenship.
- Jews banned from entering or using public places (restaurants, swimming-pools, public parks).
- Jews were no longer allowed to own bicycles, typewriters, records and phonographs.
- Jewish travel restrictions began.

It was around this time that many German Jews started trying to leave Germany. The smart ones took trains north or west, to England or France and boarded ocean-liners, either to the United Kingdom or across the Atlantic, to the United States. Firm anti-Jewish immigration laws, however, only allowed so many hundreds of Jews to immigrate to these places each year. Many just moved across the border to France, Poland or other neighbouring countries, which would soon be swallowed up by the Nazis.

1937-1938
- Jews excluded from cinemas, theatres, concert-performances, public beaches and holiday resorts.
- Jewish children are expelled from schools and forced to attend “Jewish schools” instead.
- Jews have their passports marked with a “J” (for ‘Jude’, the German for ‘Jew’), to identify them when they travel.
In 1939, with the invasion of Poland by the German Army, the Allies, who had sat back for long enough without doing anything, finally started waking up to the fact that Hitler would not stop wanting to grab more and more land. On the 3rd of September, Great Britain and France declared war on Germany. For the Jews, now living in a country at war, life became even harder. Stricter and tighter rules were put in place. Amongst these, were:

- Jews could not own radios.
- Jews had to abide by a curfew.
- Jews could not own telephones.
- Jews were forcibly evicted from their houses without reason or notice.
- Jews forbidden to leave the country.
- Jews forbidden pets.

And then, from 1941 onwards, the most famous of all Anti-Jewish measures was made law.
- All Jews over the age of six years old must wear a yellow Star of David, with ‘Jude’ written on it.
- The Polish armbands had to be worn on the right sleeve of the outermost garment that a person wore; the yellow badge had to be sewn onto the front of the person’s clothing, to clearly identify them as Jews.

Before the War, escaping persecution was tricky. Jews could only travel to certain countries, in certain numbers, at certain times of the year. However, when the Second World War started, escaping from Nazi tyranny became almost impossible. It wasn’t just a matter of getting in a car or on a train or hot-footing it across the countryside. Jews had to pass checkpoints, border-patrols and Military Police. To do this safely, they required the necessary travel-documents, which were not easy to obtain. Many Jews were aided in their escapes by various resistance and underground groups and organizations, from the German Resistance, the French Resistance, Partisan groups and the Danish Resistance. Countries such as Sweden, Denmark and England were the most instrumental in helping Jews escape.

For those who could not contact Resistance Movements, for those who could not escape from the Nazis on their own, they had no choice but to either wait around and be arrested and rounded up and dragged off to God-knows-where, or they had to go into hiding. To go into hiding was an ambitious and scary thing to do, as evidenced by the most famous example of this: The Frank Family in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.
Going into hiding wasn’t just a matter of pretending you weren’t home. It meant pretending you didn’t exist at all. One has to disappear completely from society. Many Jews were aided in their hidings by sympathetic (and incredibly brave!) non-Jewish friends, who sheltered them and provided them with food, drink, clothing and other necessities. Resistance-movements also aided Jews who went into hiding, or who joined the Resistance to fight back against the Nazis.

One method which the Germans used to keep an eye on Jews was the creation of ghettos, or as Władysław Szpilman referred to them, “Jewish Districts”. The ghettos were walled-off areas of town where the Jews were forced to live in so that the Nazis and their collaborators could keep an eye on them. Famous cities with ghettos included Warsaw, Lodz and Krakow in Poland, which held tens of thousands of Jews between them.

To start off with, food was far from plentiful. While transports of food, clothing and other necessities were allowed to be driven, carted or carried through the gates that led into the ghettos, there was never enough for everyone and throughout the years that the ghettos operated, there was a chronic shortage of essentials. And it wasn’t as easy as one might think, to get out of the ghetto to go and get more food. The walls that were built around all ghettos were topped with all kinds of nasty things, from barbed wire, sharp rocks and jagged pieces of smashed up glass, to cut up the hands of anyone brave or stupid enough to try and climb over them. But people still found ways. In the Warsaw Ghetto, for example, drainage-sluices had been made in the bottoms of some of the walls to allow rainwater to drain away so that the ghetto wouldn’t flood. The smallest of children used to slip through these holes and scurry off to find food in the dark of night.

Apart from the shortages of food, there was also the constant threat of disease. The ghettos were ‘advertised’ as places of safety for the Jews where they could practice their Jewish ways and live their Jewish lives away from the pure-bred Aryans. But they were also there to prevent the spread of “Jewish diseases”, one of the most prominent of which was typhus.

Due to the significant lack of medical aid, medicine and surgeons and hospitals in the ghettos, epidemic diseases (such as typhus) were serious killers and hundreds of Jews died from outbreaks. Władysław Szpilman, the Polish-Jewish pianist, wrote of how he used to go home from work each night in the ghetto. He had to be careful where he walked to prevent tripping over the corpses in the streets, which were there either from death from disease, starvation or rioting. Life in the ghetto was far from easy. Raids by the Gestapo and military
Police were common and Jews could be dragged out of their houses and shot in the streets for absolutely no reason at all. And it wasn’t always the Gestapo who did it, either.

To maintain law and order in the ghettos, the Jewish Ghetto Police were created. They were there, on the surface, to protect the Jews and look after them, being Jews themselves. But being a ghetto policeman meant getting various privileges such as more food, better clothes and more money. This could lead to serious corruption, and did, in many cases. Ghetto policemen aided the Gestapo in rounding up transports of Jews to be taken to the death-camps, with the provision that if they did so, their own families would not be hurt.

Liquidation of ghettos started in about 1943 and every few days, more and more Jews were rounded up, driven to stations, dumped on trains and sent by rail to the various death-and-labour-camps around Poland and Germany. For many people, this would be the last train-ride they ever took.

One of the most enduring images of the Holocaust is the death camps. Names like Auschwitz I, Sobibor, Treblinka, Bergen-Belsen and Mauthausen. And of course, the most famous camp of all Auschwitz-Birkenau. The camps were a combination of slave labour and extermination camps and millions of Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, POWs and political prisoners were sent through their gates to come out as ashes or as skeletons. Life in these camps was horrific at the very best of times, with chronic shortages of food, warm clothing, medical care and almost everything else necessary for survival. Families were separated on arrival and the elderly, infirm and children were gassed almost the moment that they got off the trains, in massive gas-chambers, where they would be told that they were having a shower.

Those left alive were worked to death. They were housed in cramped, freezing, overcrowded and filthy barracks, as many as three or four people to a bunk, with no fires to keep them warm. Epidemics of typhus, typhoid and dysentery killed thousands and bodies were burned or buried as fast as possible, which was never fast enough. Chances of survival were few in Auschwitz. In Poland, where winters sent temperatures plummeting solidly into the negative digits, many people died from hypothermia.

The Holocaust brought out the best and worst in everyone. Some people became famous because they survived, some became famous for what they did, or what they did not do. Some became famous for providing incredible records of an amazing period in human history. Here are just a few of the more famous people associated with the Holocaust – The
Bielski Brothers (Tuvia, Asael, Alexander, Aron), The Frank Family (Otto, Edith, Margot, Anne), Captain Wilhelm Hosenfeld, Oskar Schindler, Wladyslaw Szpilman etc.

References