

Nathanel Peretz

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### The Unspeakable Memories Never Fade, Not Even in Maine

Hitler was a German politician who was responsible for one of the darkest moments in history of mankind – the Holocaust. Hitler was hired by a nationalist propaganda group and would become the leader of the National Socialist Party of German Workers, known as the Nazi Party.<sup>1</sup> The party's favorite themes were anti-Semitism, fascism, nationalism, and the desire for revenge in relation to the 1918 defeat of Germany during World War 2. Early on, Hitler introduced his Nazi ideology. His racial policy was based on a set of rules, policies, regulations, and laws implemented in Germany (later on, in other European countries) based on a specific racist doctrine that emphasized the superiority of the Aryan race.<sup>2</sup> Hitler believed that Jews and other “sub-races” were inferior and deserved to die. He often defined Jews not as a religious denomination, but a dangerous non-European “race.”

Racial anti-Semitism was a form of prejudice against Jews that was founded on the belief that Jews had distinct characteristics and that made them part of a different race. Many stereotypes were attributed to Jews which could be found in generalized representations and caricatures. Many attributed horns and big noses to Jews, to demonize them in those images. They also blamed Jews for the death of Christ and made them scapegoats for a multitude of

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<sup>1</sup> “Nazi Party,” Encyclopedia Britannica (Encyclopedia Britannica, inc.), accessed June 7, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Nazi-Party>.

<sup>2</sup> “Nazi Racism: An Overview | The Holocaust Encyclopedia,” accessed June 3, 2020, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/nazi-racism-an-overview>.

societal problems. This viewpoint was not unique to Hitler. He exploited the existing anti-Semitism in Europe and combined it with ideas of eugenics from the US.

This viewpoint was the foundation of the Nazi racial policy that was implemented to exterminate the Jews in the Final Solution.<sup>3</sup> Hitler introduced laws that limited the freedoms of Jews. The Nazis told the German public and other Europeans that Jews were enemies of the people. The Nazis encouraged harmful attitudes towards Jews by focusing on racial hatred. These anti-Semitic behaviors were prevalent in schools, in youth groups, and through radio, print, and film. The Nazis effectively used propaganda, to attract the support of millions of Germans to facilitate persecution and eventually genocide against the Jews.

By 1938, Hitler developed an extreme policy to eradicate the Jews throughout Europe. Hitler ordered round-ups of Jews, homosexuals, Roma, and the disabled. They were arrested, imprisoned in work camps where they were forced into slave labor, and lived in inhumane conditions. Millions died from starvation and disease. The Nazis also designed extermination camps to murder the Jews rapidly where those not fit to work were executed in gas chambers. The hostility and discrimination against Jews as a religious ethnic group throughout the centuries manifested in anti-Semitism against Jews who were accused of conspiring to harm humanity, blamed for wars, social, and economic problems, and finally led to the attempted annihilation of Jews in Europe.

When the war ended and the death camps were liberated, many survivors who lived through this hell were housed in Displaced Persons Camps and then moved to various countries. But the extraordinary violence of the Holocaust didn't put an end to anti-Semitism in Europe.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid

Some European Jews were unable or unwilling to return to Eastern Europe because of postwar anti-Semitism. Many who returned to their hometowns were attacked, beaten, and murdered.<sup>4</sup> Many refugees were denied access to various countries and waited for months in Displaced Persons Camps and Centers.<sup>5</sup> In many countries, including the United States of America, immigration restrictions strictly limited the number of refugees permitted to enter.<sup>6</sup> In the early 1920s, anti-Semitism increased in the United States of America. American Jews faced quotas, discrimination, restrictions and even faced acts of physical violence. Pro-Nazi supporters in America also propagated anti-Semitic beliefs. The 20<sup>th</sup> century immigration wave in the US led many people to condemn all immigrants, including Jews. Many immigration restrictions were imposed to limit the entry of “undesirable” groups, which included Italians, Jews, Slavs, etc. It is important to note that after the war, many countries continued to discriminate against Jews, despite the outcome of the war, and anti-Semitism affected the way Jews were treated everywhere. Feelings against Jews were especially strong in European countries who blamed them for the damages caused by the war. Some moved to the UK, to the United States of America, to Canada, and to other countries. Many Jews attempted desperately to enter Palestine.

When World War I ended, the British took control of Palestine from the Ottoman Empire. Britain was granted a Mandate for Palestine and it was approved by the League of Nations in 1922. From then on, Britain controlled that area. Early on, the British government had announced support for the establishment of a “national home for the Jewish people” in

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<sup>4</sup> “United States Holocaust Memorial Museum,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum), accessed May 26, 2021, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/displaced-persons>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

Palestine.<sup>7</sup> They took time in allowing and implementing the measures to create the State of Israel and eventually it was accomplished by force. On May 14, 1948, Ben-Gurion, the head of the Jewish Agency, proclaimed the establishment of the State of Israel and President Harry S. Truman recognized the new nation on the same day. Truman was clearly an advocate of hope and believed after the tragic consequences of the Holocaust, Jews should be granted a Jewish State. Furthermore, it led US president Truman to pressure Britain into admitting Jewish refugees into Palestine.

In this research paper, I will discuss the immediate post-war period, describe how Maine Jewish communities flourished and welcomed survivors after the war, introduce the stories of refugees who arrived in Maine and give a description of the general community response to the Holocaust and founding of Israel in Maine. Many Jews were welcomed in the state of Maine shortly after the Holocaust. Many arrived with very few personal effects. They had no homes and no possessions because their property had been stolen by the Nazis or other fascist governments, or even by their neighbours. The survivors struggled with nightmares and the long term affects of what they witnessed. They embraced new cultures, and a new life but still carried the pain of the Holocaust in their hearts. For many, anti-Semitism was still very present in their daily lives but they worked hard to integrate society and succeeded in becoming successful members of their communities.

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<sup>7</sup> "Balfour Declaration," Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc.), accessed May 26, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Balfour-Declaration>.

## Experiences of European Jews after World War 2

By the end of World War II, six million Jewish men, women, and children died in the Holocaust. They suffered at the hands of Nazis with the complicity of their own countrymen and collaborators simply because they were Jewish. After liberation, many Jewish survivors feared to return to their homes because of the anti-Semitism that persisted in many parts of Europe. Some returned to their homes seeking family members and friends, but they feared for their lives because of a number of violent pogroms (anti-Jewish riots) that took place. As an example, in 1946, in the town of Kielce in Poland, 42 Jews were killed, and hundreds were beaten by Polish rioters.<sup>8</sup> Refugees had nothing since most of their belongings and property were confiscated by Nazis and other collaborators. Some Jews returned to their hometowns and found their neighbours living in their apartments. They refused to return the homes to the survivors and also kept personal belongings, including art, gold, furniture, and music instruments. Because of this reality, many labored for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine, where Jews would be allowed to practice their religion and live peacefully.

After the end of World War II, liberation brought some level of freedom to the persecuted Jews, but it was also a time of confusion and difficulty. The ones who survived the Holocaust had to face the loss of their family, their homes, their friends, their businesses, and had very few personal belongings. They had been left with terrifying memories. Some suffered from health issues because of the inhumane conditions in concentration camps. Jewish refugees wanted to emigrate and start new lives abroad, but unfortunately this option was often closed to survivors.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> "United States Holocaust Memorial Museum," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum), accessed May 26, 2021, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/displaced-persons>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

Many countries closed their borders and refused access to the Jews. Many Jewish refugees were moved to Displaced Persons Camps in European countries.<sup>10</sup> Various Jewish agencies worked hard to provide Holocaust survivors with food, clothing, and vocational training, since they had few personal belongings or resources. The United Kingdom voiced its support to allow the immigration of European Jews to Palestine. They agreed that the Nazi Holocaust proved anew the urgency of the establishment of the Jewish State, which could solve the problem of Jewish homelessness.<sup>11</sup> This also solved the worldwide issue of Jewish refugees, and dismissed other nations from taking them in. Yet, many were still unwilling to commit and recognize a Jewish state.

Years before the Holocaust, in 1896, political Zionist, Theodor Herzl appealed to the Ottoman state for a Jewish country. He supported the maintenance and preservation of the state of Israel as a Jewish homeland, on account of the fact that the Jewish people had a historical bond with the land. For years, Herzl and other Zionists began the movement towards establishing political independence and safety for the Jews. Even after his death, in 1904, Jewish leaders continued Zionist efforts to establish a Jewish state. They actively built in Palestine political and economic infrastructures for the eventual birth of a Jewish state. The Holocaust was not the only justification of the Jews existential need for statehood, it was a long-held objective, but the Holocaust did make them more determined, less patient, and more dedicated in fulfilling their dream. The solution appealed to the rest of the world because it would take care of the refugee problem and compensated Jews for anti-Semitism and their negative experiences

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

in the world. In the years after the establishment of Israel, immigration increased, and many survivors helped build the wealthy and technologically advanced country that it is today.

### **The Resettlement of Jewish Refugees in Maine**

Other Jews arrived in the United States of America. Maine welcomed many survivors of the genocide. The newcomers gravitated toward work in the state's factories.<sup>12</sup> Others went into business in the retail industry selling clothes and other items. Many became prominent contributors to the downtown economy in cities like Portland, Bangor, Old Town, and Bath.<sup>13</sup> Many Jewish refugees came to Maine because they heard of the state's booming factories and they knew that they could find work easily.

Furthermore, the present community encouraged them to move there and provided support. In Abraham J. Peck's essay *In The Land of Limitless Opportunities: Holocaust Survivors Meet the Jerusalem of the North*, he describes arriving in Portland with ten other Displaced Persons families. He confirms that Portland's Jewish community bore the responsibility for these new arrivals. The organizational structure for social welfare in the Jewish community was already in place, by the United Hebrew Charities and the National Council of Jewish Women, which coordinated relief and charitable work for several groups in need. The arrival of the survivors created a new challenge for the community and its volunteers.<sup>14</sup> It is interesting to point out that the Jewish community assumed the responsibility

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<sup>12</sup> "The Jews of Maine," Maine History Online, accessed June 4, 2021, <https://www.mainememory.net/sitebuilder/site/1888/page/3104/display>.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> *In the Land of Limitless Opportunities : Holocaust Survivors Meet Jerusalem of the North*, <https://web.colby.edu/jewsinmaine/files/2011/04/Peck-Land-of-Limitless-Opportunities>

for the arriving Jewish refugees and little help was provided by other members of the community and the State.

These Jewish refugees had social and psychological issues and needed great support beyond physical needs. As Selma Black recalled, “all of the refugees had some sickness, whether it was physical or emotional. A Medical Committee was formed, headed by Drs. Benjamin Zolov, Gisela Davidson, and Henry Pollard.”<sup>15</sup> They needed psychological help, support networks to learn the language, assistance to integrate the communities, and adapt to their new lives. Selma Black and Clarice Shur were responsible at the time to find them homes and employment. They personally prepared the apartments for the refugee families by cleaning them and arranging the furniture.<sup>16</sup> They actively welcomed these families and gave them assistance and care.

The children of these Jewish immigrants loved sports and other aspects of the American culture. They went on to study in universities and became professionals, especially lawyers, doctors, teachers, such as Gerda Haas and Judith Magyar Isaacson. A wide variety of Jewish community institutions were established in Maine’s largest cities, such as Greater Bangor, Portland, and Lewiston. The members of the Portland’s vibrant Jewish community supported the local B’nai Brith Lodge Community Center, the Northwest Campus of Jewish Life Beth Chabad for students, various congregations, and elementary schools. Many Jews in Maine made significant contributions to the state throughout the twentieth century. Some became elected officials and civil servants, artists, cultural icons, philanthropists, and community leaders.

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid

<sup>16</sup> “Portraits of the Past: The Jews of Portland: Jewish Oral History Collections: Portland Public Library,” Site, accessed June 7, 2021, [https://digitalcommons.portlandlibrary.com/jewish\\_oral\\_history/](https://digitalcommons.portlandlibrary.com/jewish_oral_history/).



However, it is important to emphasize that during the 1950s, many Jews were unable to participate as equals in Maine's life, because of anti-Semitism.<sup>17</sup> Jews faced discrimination in the workplace, in certain neighborhoods where they couldn't purchase homes, and they were denied membership in many clubs and resorts.<sup>18</sup> As described by David M. Freidenreich, "Many Jews who grew up in Maine during the 1950s recounted being called "dirty Jew" or "Christ-killer" and being excluded from pick-up games in the schoolyard."<sup>19</sup> It is reported that two-thirds of Maine's resorts refused access to Jewish guests, which was the highest percentage of any other state.<sup>20</sup> Even after the atrocities of the Second World War, discrimination and anti-Semitism were still very present in various countries around the world.

Despite anti-Semitism, the Maine Jewish community grew, and the members continued to be prosperous. They founded resorts and camps, they built synagogues and established community centers, Jewish organizations, and Jewish fraternities in colleges. It is important to note that the newcomers who arrived in Maine felt that America had given them a new opportunity, perhaps that's why they considered themselves American first and Jewish second.<sup>21</sup> As expressed by Freidenreich, "Being American, however, was the top cultural priority of these Jews. In the words of a report issued by the Jewish Community Council of Bangor in 1951,

'The individual American Jew is identified with every phase of American life and is politically, economically, culturally and intellectually a part and parcel thereof. In addition, he recognizes certain aspects of life which concern him as a Jew. Maine's Jews

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<sup>17</sup> "The Jews of Maine," Maine History Online, accessed May 21, 2021, <https://www.mainememory.net/sitebuilder/site/1888/page/3104/display>.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> David M. Freidenreich, "Making It in Maine: Stories of Jewish Life in Small-Town America," Digital Commons @ Colby, accessed June 7, 2021, [https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/faculty\\_scholarship/73/](https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/faculty_scholarship/73/).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

may choose, as an add-on, to identify with the Jewish community, but they identify as Americans as a matter of course.’<sup>22</sup>

Maine’s Jews were very committed to the Jewish community, but they also expressed their dual commitment to the communities they lived in, through volunteer activities, charitable contributions, and civic duties.

Amongst them, a small number of survivors in Maine still bear witness to the atrocities of the Holocaust. They are dedicated to telling their stories and seeking a younger audience to keep these stories from being forgotten.<sup>23</sup> Maine has encouraged survivors to share their stories and commemorate the Holocaust. As an example, Charles Rotmil is a Holocaust survivor born in Strasbourg, France.<sup>24</sup> In 1938, he moved with his family to Vienna. Early on, anti-Semitic ideas, facts, and allegations were spread deliberately about Jews. He remembers being forced to wear a yellow star to identify him as a Jew and being expelled from school. Rotmil and his brother became orphans after his father was arrested in Belgium in 1943, taken by train to Auschwitz, and killed in a concentration camp along with everyone else on the train.<sup>25</sup> His mother and sister died in a train wreck. Rotmil and his brother were hidden by Catholic priests and later taken in by a monk. He went by other names and denied being Jewish to avoid dying at the hands of the Nazis. Rotmil survived and owes his life to the courageous people who hid him during the war. Over thirty years ago, with the encouragement of the former director of Maine’s

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> Maine Public Robbie Feinberg, “‘It Can Come Here. We Have to Watch out’: Maine Survivors Recall Holocaust on 80th Anniversary of Kristallnacht,” Bangor Daily News, November 8, 2018, <https://bangordailynews.com/2018/11/09/news/it-can-come-here-we-have-to-watch-out-maine-survivors-recall-holocaust-on-80th-anniversary-of-kristallnacht/>.

<sup>24</sup> Author: Samantha Sugeran, “Stories from the Holocaust Live on in Maine through Survivors, Bill,” newscentermaine.com, April 29, 2019, <https://www.newscentermaine.com/article/news/local/augusta-waterville/stories-from-the-holocaust-live-on-in-maine-through-survivors-bill/97-df3ba982-8507-4677-8acc-2372471253c1>.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

Holocaust Center, he decided to share his story publicly.<sup>26</sup> Rotmil has spoken to hundreds of teenagers around Maine about living in Nazi Germany as a Jewish child. He has also given dozens of interviews in Augusta to attract attention to his survival story and to educate younger generations. Rotmil is one of the Holocaust survivors living in Maine who is in favor of a bill going through the legislature which would encourage schools to teach Maine students about the Holocaust.<sup>27</sup> Rotmil believes that it's so important to teach the Holocaust because it teaches students what happens when people fail to accept other people's differences.

Many Mainers who survived WWII concentration camps came together in 1994 to recount their terrifying stories in a documentary produced by the Holocaust Rights Center of Maine.<sup>28</sup> In the short film, *Maine Survivors Remember the Holocaust (1994)*, Ava Tebbs (Poland), Walter Ziffer (Poland), Rochelle Blechman Slivka (Lithuania), Judith Magyar Isaacson (Hungary), Sonja Kolbetsky Messerschmidt (Germany), and Cantor Kurt Messerschmidt (Germany) remember growing up in Europe as children. When anti-Semitism was on the rise in 1939, they were ostracized by neighbourhood friends. They had to wear a yellow star to identify themselves and they began to experience severe racial discrimination. They all described in details how their lives changed drastically when Hitler came into power. Their family members were taken away to death camps, their homes and property confiscated by the Nazis, and their communities completely destroyed.

Ava Tebbs and Walter Ziffer both lived in Poland when Germans invaded their country. They describe the chaos that came with the SS officers. They were violently forced out of their

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> MPBN, "Maine Survivors Remember The Holocaust (1994)," YouTube (YouTube, March 17, 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OIEnb20rjI8>.

homes and taken to urban ghettos. Later, they were taken to concentration camps to be murdered, and miraculously both survived. Rochelle Blechman Slivka lived through a similar nightmare. Her neighbours in Lithuania would point out where the Jewish families lived. The Germans established a ghetto in her hometown and Jews from everywhere were relocated. On various nights, she describes SS officers taking men out to the outskirts of the city to shoot them. That was the fate of her father and brother. Later, the rest of her family was sent to a death camp in cattle cars to be executed in gas chambers and then cremated in furnaces. Judith Magyar Isaacson was born in Hungary and also remembered the terrible conditions she lived through. She remembered having her head shaved and standing naked in front of Dr. Mengele, nicknamed the Angel of Death.<sup>29</sup> Mengele was the infamous doctor who performed painful medical experiments at the Auschwitz death camp.<sup>30</sup> She lost her entire family in the Holocaust.

All these courageous survivors share a common goal: to tell their lifetime stories and expose the atrocities of the Holocaust. They all feel that their duty is to educate the younger generation and put their life experiences on paper or film, giving a purpose to their survival. Each one of them live in Maine and have dedicated time and effort to write about the Holocaust and talk to audiences about their past. The anguish and pain are embedded in their hearts but they are grateful to have gotten a second chance in life and the opportunity to live in the beautiful state of Maine.

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<sup>29</sup> "Josef Mengele, Known as the 'Angel of Death,' Dies," History.com (A&E Television Networks, November 5, 2009), <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/the-angel-of-death-dies>.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid

## Memorialization

The Maine Jewish Museum is located in Portland and is housed in the Etz Chaim Synagogue. The museum displays historical exhibitions about Jewish history and art exhibits featuring Jewish artists in Maine. The museum also recognizes members of the Jewish community who have become leaders and have brought distinction and honor to the state of Maine and to America. The museum also displays a year-round exhibition of Maine Holocaust survivors and their stories.<sup>31</sup> Many of them have recounted their experiences during the Holocaust. They all survived the Second World War and arrived in America to build a better life. This initiative demonstrates how successful and supportive the state of Maine has been towards the Jewish community, its history, art, and culture.

The Slivka Holocaust Memorial at Temple Beth El in Portland is another initiative honoring the lives of the Jews murdered during the Holocaust. Robert Katz, a Maine artist built a granite memorial in memory of the six million Jews who were exterminated in Europe during World War II.<sup>32</sup> Jerry Slivka and his wife, arrived in Maine in the 1950s as refugees, and have been involved citizens, working with newly arriving immigrants, volunteering, helping establish the Holocaust Human Rights Center of Maine, and speaking to children about the Holocaust. They were honoured throughout the naming of this memorial site for their involvement and great dedication to the Holocaust cause.

*Were the House Still Standing* is another project in which Katz created an exhibition at the Holocaust and Human Rights Center of Maine. By using an innovative approach to

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<sup>31</sup> Bob Keyes, "Maine Jewish Museum Hosts Online Art Auction," Press Herald, April 14, 2021, <https://www.pressherald.com/2021/04/19/maine-jewish-museum-hosts-online-art-auction/>.

<sup>32</sup> Deseret News, "Maine Dedicates Holocaust Memorial," Deseret News (Deseret News, August 23, 2003), <https://www.deseret.com/2003/8/23/19743416/maine-dedicates-holocaust-memorial>.

storytelling, he incorporated images, texts and sounds, to create a documentary and a visual poetic experience to commemorate the six million Jews who perished during the war and preserve the oral testimonies of the courageous Holocaust survivors and liberators that live in Maine.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, the Holocaust and Human Rights Center of Maine continues to promote universal respect for human rights through outreach and education. Using the lessons of the Holocaust and other events past and present they encourage individuals and communities to reflect and act upon their moral responsibilities to confront prejudice, intolerance, and discrimination.

Through various partnerships and grants, the state of Maine has supported the education about the Holocaust because it connects to civics and human rights education. It impels its citizens to reflect on the fragility of democracy, the importance of participation as citizens and the necessity to remember the genocide of the Jewish people due to racism, discrimination, and hatred.<sup>34</sup> Maine has worked closely with survivors and recognizes the importance of this part of history, showing immense respect to the survivors who live in the area by amplifying their stories.

To conclude, despite the horrors of the concentration camps and the agony of the death marches, many men, women, and children survived and moved to America to start new lives. Remarkably determined, they faced a new culture, and challenges. They were welcomed in various states, including Maine and were able to adjust to a new life in America with the support and encouragement of state officials and fellow citizens. Those who moved to Maine describe

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<sup>33</sup> "Were the House Still Standing," Holocaust and Human Rights Center of Maine, December 8, 2017, <https://hhrcmaine.org/art-were-the-house-still-standing/>.

<sup>34</sup> "The Holocaust, Anti-Semitism, and Genocide," The Holocaust, Anti-Semitism, and Genocide | Department of Education, accessed May 27, 2021, <https://www.maine.gov/doe/learning/content/socialstudies/resources/DEI/holocaust>.

America as a welcoming place. Many of them have thrived and done well, enjoying freedom of religion and peace. The state of Maine has made many efforts to commemorate the Holocaust and help students and adults develop knowledge and awareness of this genocide. Maine has encouraged the survivors living in Maine to disclose their stories and has funded various organizations and museums to create a lasting and powerful insight into history. Through exhibitions, news articles, televised interviews, Maine continues to show support and encourage them to tell their heroic stories. It has offered them the opportunity to commemorate their loved ones who perished and share their heart wrenching stories to educate future generations about the negative impacts of discrimination and its devastating results.

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