

Performance Guide

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Recommended Grade Levels: 5-12

Suggested Curriculum: Holocaust Education, Language Arts, Social Studies, Theater

TAKEN AWAY is set in Germany, 1937. That may seem like a long time ago in a place far away, but what happened there has lessons for every person who is alive now. Many of you have heard the word “Holocaust”—a term to describe the mass murder of Jewish people in Europe, as well as others who were considered undesirable. Our play takes you to the time in Germany before the systematic murder began. How could something so terrible happen? Our play might help you understand how things—so strange as to be hard to believe—began.

The play is set during a real time and a real place, but we made up the events; still, they are events that could have happened. As the Narrator states in the play's introduction: "The play you are about to see is not a true story. But it might as well be." Students will understand *Taken Away* better if their teachers share the historical background of Nazi Germany."

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

World War I, 1914-1918: This devastating global war was not called World War I at the time—that came later. People called it the Great War ("great" not as in good, but as in huge) or The War to End All Wars (because it was so terrible, people thought no one would ever go to war again). Germany's defeat took the civilian population by surprise. Approximately 2 million German soldiers died, many more were injured; virtually every German family was affected, as were families around the world. Because the German people thought they were winning the war, the defeat affected them deeply. Later they would look for people to blame.

The 1920s: The harsh peace treaty that officially ended the Great War is known as the Treaty of Versailles. The treaty's conditions penalized Germany in many ways, but, most devastatingly to the nation were penalties involving financial payments, reducing the armed forces, and assignment of blame. The economic consequences were severe because Germany was forced to pay money (reparations) to the victorious nations. Germany was a nation proud of its military, but the treaty forced Germany to scale back its army, navy, and air force. Psychologically, the treaty had a negative impact because Germany was blamed for the war and was assigned total war guilt. That is, in a global war in which some 16 million people died and perhaps 20 million were injured, Germany was held responsible. Throughout the 1920s, the German government was unstable. The government printed money to pay their war debts but that caused the economy to collapse. A loaf of bread that cost 163 marks (the "mark" is the German unit of money) in 1922 cost 1 ½ million marks in 1923. At the worst point in the hyperinflation, a loaf of bread cost 200 trillion marks. People would race to the store before the cost of goods would go up. Those on a fixed income could not keep up with the pace of rapid rises in costs. People were hungry, unemployment grew, and many people struggled to survive.

Rise of the Nazi Party: A political group is known as a "party." The word *Nazi* is a shortened form of the long full name for the political party; its full name was the "Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei" - the National Socialist German Workers' Party. Adolf Hitler rose to fame and power in the Nazi party throughout the 1920s and was elected to be a member of German government on January 30, 1933. Hitler's public speaking skills caused audiences to cheer and adore him. In his rise to power, Hitler emphasized the unfairness of the Versailles Treaty and he assured the people that he alone had the ability to return Germany to its former glory. He stirred up the people by assigning blame for Germany's defeat to other groups he particularly disliked—above all, the Jews. Hitler argued that Germany's many problems were

racial. He hated the Jews and other people whom he thought were inferior or defective, and he insisted that his followers hate them too.

The Third Reich: Once Hitler consolidated his dictatorial power over Germany, he called the land “the third Reich.” *Reich* means “realm” or “empire” in German; Hitler saw his Germany as the third in a series of great German empires, and he promised it would reign for 1,000 years—by which he meant, forever. Instead, his regime lasted 12 years, at the expense of millions of lives at home and around the world.

Nazi Racial Policy: The Nazis believed that the classic German appearance was the most beautiful in the whole world, and the German people were the most intelligent. The Nazis called this biological heritage Aryan (which does not exist); they argued that the Aryan ideal was a white person who had blonde hair, blue eyes, and was lean and strong. Ironically, none of the Nazi leaders looked like that at all. The Nazis believed that Aryans should take over the world; people they believed to be inferior were to be killed and any others were to be slaves. The group the Nazis hated the most was the Jewish people.

The Nuremberg Laws, 1935: Jews had long lived in Germany and made up less than 1% of its population. Hitler stirred up his followers to hate the Jews and blame all German problems on them. To the Nazis, a person’s Judaism was not a matter of faith or religious practice; they believed that Jews were a biological race. In 1935, a group of top Nazi leaders and legal minds gathered to write laws that would take away German citizenship from the Jewish people. People who were Jewish through their parents and grandparents were considered inferior and unwanted in the Nazi Reich. Jews—even people who did not know they had Jewish heritage or who did not practice that faith—were expelled from schools and fired from their jobs. In *Taken Away*, the Hoffmann family discovers what can happen to ordinary Germans when the Nuremberg laws are applied to them.

Pre-Performance Activities:

- 1) Using a map: a) Find modern Germany as it is today. b) Then, find Germany as it existed in 1933.
- 2) Look at how Nazi Germany expanded throughout the 1930s and 1940s. In what ways did Nazi Germany take over other countries?
- 3) Austria and Poland are specifically mentioned in the play. What happened to those countries in connection with Nazi Germany?
- 4) Why are Norman Rockwell paintings seen as particularly American?

5) Make a list of all the things that the Nazis demanded that the Jews turn in to local authorities, such as radios, bicycles, and even pets. These are the items that the Nazis took away from their rightful owners.

6) Although not identified by name in the play, visit a trustworthy website to learn more about the Nazi policy of *Night and Fog*. This is how the Nazis caused people they did not like to “disappear” prior to the creation of the death camp system we now know as the Holocaust.

Vocabulary

These terms are associated with Nazi Germany and are used in the play. Terms used in one definition that are defined elsewhere in the glossary are italicized.

1) Anschluss: the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany.

2) Dachau: the first concentration camp built by the Nazis, begun only weeks after Adolf Hitler took political power in 1933. Dachau was used to imprison political prisoners (those who disagreed with the Nazis), intellectuals, journalists, and others whom the Nazis condemned to hard labor.

3) Dreidl: a four-sided, toy-sized object that can spin; traditionally played with by children as part of the Hanukkah celebration.

4) Faith and Beauty Society: a Nazi program designed to be a stepping stone for young German girls as they transition out of the *League of German Girls* to the adult version for women.

5) Führer: German for “Leader,” Adolph Hitler was the supreme leader and dictator of the Third Reich.

6) Gestapo: the secret police who inflicted torture upon those whom they arrested. In a culture where friends, neighbors, and children were expected to denounce people for causes—either real or imagined—the Gestapo was deeply feared.

7) Heil Hitler: the Nazi greeting that was at first recommended to show loyalty to Hitler but soon became compulsory. “Heil” means “Hail”—to praise, to offer tribute.

8) Hitler Youth: a Nazi program for young boys that was originally recommended but became required.

9) League of German Girls: in German, the BDM: the girls’ branch of Hitler Youth; activities encouraged girls to think of serving their Führer by eventually becoming good mothers.

10) Menorah: a candlestick holder used in Jewish households to commemorate Hanukkah, an 8-night miracle that happened in ancient times. Often called the Celebration of Light, the candleholder has 9 placeholders for candles—8 (one for each day of the miracle) and, in the middle, a raised portion for the 9th candle that is used to light the others. The holiday is annually remembered in mid-winter (usually December).

11) Mischling: mixed blood. When the 1935 Nuremberg Laws established a criteria of pure blood Germans to be the only people allowed to have German citizenship, a complicated chart was created to categorize people depending on whether they were fully Jewish (considered a racial or “blood” classification) and then by degrees of “Mischling” depending on the racial status of parents and grandparents.

12) Night and Fog (not mentioned in the play but the policy is implied): the Nazi policy, particularly early in its regime, where people were arrested in the middle of the night and were taken away, sometimes never to be seen again.

13) Sieg Heil: the Nazi chant used, particularly in large political rallies. It literally means, “Hail Victory” and implies total confidence in Nazi policy.

14) SS: an elite branch of the Nazi soldier/police state. SS officers were expected to have pure Aryan blood (not a *Mischling*) and were known for their ruthless dedication to Hitler and his policies.

15) Strength through Joy: a Nazi program that gave Germans who were deemed racially acceptable the chance to enjoy leisure activities, such as a cruise. Emerging from the economic collapse of the previous years, the opportunity to have a vacation was an unusual pleasure for many people. Free to the Germans, their daily activities were highly organized and were designed to promote Nazi propaganda.

16) Swing Kids: in the 1930s, some German young people (teenagers and those in their 20s) enjoyed American music and the dance styles popular with that music. Because the music was called “swing,” the German youth who gravitated to this were known as Swing Kids. The Nazis, already in power, took a dim view of the popularity of American popular culture.

Post-performance questions:

1) In what ways is Elfie like any person you know?

2) In what ways is Gisella like someone you know?

3) In what ways did the Nazi racial laws affect Elfie and her family?

4) In what ways did Elfie’s parents try to protect her from the Nazi racial laws that affected their family?

- 5) Why do you think Gisella decided that the Nazis were to be admired?
- 6) What do you think happened to Dr. Hoffmann? To his wife? To Elfie?

Post-performance research activities:

- 1) What happens to the Hoffmann family in the play occurs before the systematic murder of the Jews and other “undesirables”; using a trust-worthy web site, find out when the Nazi policy of sending people to concentration camps and extermination camps began.
- 2) Make a list of all the types of people whom the Nazis planned to eliminate through mass murder. Do you know anyone who belongs to any of those groups?
- 3) Using a reliable web source, such as the US Holocaust Memorial Museum or Yad Vashem, find out how many people were sent to concentration camps. (The number will be approximate, as we still do not know the whole truth.)
- 4) How many people survived the concentration camps?
- 5) Write a letter to Elfie and tell her how seeing all that she loved was “taken away” from her makes you feel.

Teacher Resources:

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: www.ushmm.org

Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center: www.yadvashem.org

Jewish Virtual Library: www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org