



Before their lives were destroyed at Auschwitz, Jews lived normal lives, like Binim Cukierman, (on the sled), who hiked and skied regularly.

Photos courtesy Ann Weiss, from *The Last Album*

# ‘The Last Album’

Book, lecture recollect lives before they were destroyed in the Holocaust

By JOSHUA COLE

What do you think about when you read about the Holocaust? Do you think about Hitler and Swastikas? About ghettos, concentration camps, gas chambers and mass graves? About people hiding in silence in attics and crawl spaces? About the numbers: 6 million European Jews wiped out, and between 5 and 12 million blacks, political prisoners, gypsies, gays and other oppressed minorities killed, and about as many others who were enslaved or had to flee?

If that’s all you think about the Holocaust, then the Nazis have won, according to scholar Ann Weiss. The Nazis didn’t just want to kill people, they wanted to destroy their existence. To dehumanize them.

Weiss has attempted to return the humanity to Holocaust victims. In her book *The Last Album: Eyes from the Ashes of Auschwitz-Birkenau* you’ll see hundreds of pictures from people who were sent to the most notorious concentration camp. But you won’t see what most other books and other media have shown. You won’t see skeletons dressed in black and white-striped prison uniforms. You won’t see mutilated bodies and piles of the dead.

No, instead you’ll see what

these people were like before going off to the camps. You’ll see weddings, first days of school, vacations on the beach, play days in the snow.

You’ll see people. Real people.

Weiss will share stories behind some of the pictures, March 14, for the annual Fred Marcus Memorial Lecture, in Glendale.

“I’m going to personalize this difficult history with some very personal stories of who these people were, what mattered to them, who they loved and how they lived. Unlike most talks about the Holocaust, my focus, rather than being on death, is on life,” Weiss said.

The stories and people are mundane. There’s nothing special about them, which makes the book and the lecture special.

“Nowhere among this debris do we find traces of what bound these people together into a civilization, a nation, a culture,” James E. Young wrote in *The Last Album* introduction. “Heaps of scattered artifacts belie the interconnectedness of lives that actually made these victims a people, a collective whole. The sum of these dismembered fragments can never approach the whole of what was lost.

“By including the quotidian images of day-to-day life, of vacations, weddings and other celebrations, Ann Weiss not only restores a measure of the victim’s human-

ity, but, more importantly, she preserves the contingency of daily lives as lived and perceived then – and not only as they are retrospectively freighted with the pathos and portent we assign them now.”

## Pictures worth more than 1,000 words

If you didn’t know where you were going, but you knew you weren’t coming home again, what would you take? Which photos would be most memorable to you? Those types of photos are what Weiss found when she visited Auschwitz for the first time, in 1986.

Before Facebook and digital cameras, photographs were on paper and couldn’t be copied so easily. So somebody could also destroy them more easily. Which is what the Nazis did.

When people came to concentration camps, the Nazis took all of their clothes, jewelry, money and other belongings and sorted them. Everything other Germans could use, they sent to Berlin, such as gold, jewelry and money and clothes for orphans. But personal effects, like pictures, were put in a separate pile to be destroyed.

When a group of Jews were brought in from a Polish ghetto near the German border in 1943, the photos were protected, probably smuggled out during the sorting. Those 2,400 photos are the only photos to survive the camps. Those 2,400 photos are what Weiss found in 1986 and what changed her perspective on the Holocaust.

“What comes across most powerfully in *The Last Album* is that in the vast majority of these images there is nothing outwardly ‘Jewish’ about most of the subjects,” an anonymous reviewer wrote on Amazon.com. “Nothing to help us understand why the Nazis marked them. They are middle class, working class and wealthy, and they look just like their neighbors (and most probably behaved like them, too). It was just this faith, no matter how they practiced it, or didn’t. Just an accident of birth for some.”

Weiss started her journey of putting names to pictures with a question: What happened to you? How did you die?

Soon, she was overwhelmed. And after looking at the photos of happy lives that were unexpectedly shattered, she started to ask something else: How did you live?

“When we see them as emaci-



Siblings Renia and David Kohn, in the summer of 1939, weeks before Germany attacked Poland. Ann Weiss’s “Last Album” is a way to memorialize lives like theirs and memories that would have otherwise been forgotten. Weiss plans to tell some of the stories of the photos she found at Auschwitz, March 14.

ated skeletons, we can distance from them. It’s a tragedy, but it’s a tragedy that doesn’t have anything to do with us because we don’t look like those people; we don’t live like those people,” Weiss said. “However, those images, those devastating images of brutality are not really who these Jews were. These were not really who these people were. These are the images that the Nazis put in our minds because of the dehumanized treatment of these people, who they did not consider human beings, but vermin, subhuman.

“The more I looked at these photos and the more I looked at the beauty and the lives of the photographs – the people sharing beautiful times with their loved ones, going on vacations, dancing, school outings, weddings, picnics – when I would look at the pictures and see how their lives throbbed with vitality, it became an even more powerful message of life, not death.”

Weiss toured the world with the photos and copies of the photos. In 2001, she published the first edition of her book. She regularly gives lectures and speeches. She teaches other teachers ways to teach this material in school, including a workshop in Lakewood in February to metro English and social studies teachers. Her Web site, [www.thelastalbum.org](http://www.thelastalbum.org), and the connected nonprofit is another way to spread awareness, show the photos, tell the stories and identify the people whose lives were cut short.

“The Nazis and the other slaughterers of the Jews sought not a conquest, but an erasure,” Leon Wieseltier wrote in *The Last Album’s* foreword. “We do not know the names of the people, in these photographs, but we know something just as precious, just as bidding: we know the objects of their devotion, who and what they loyally loved. We have been initiated

by their deaths into their intimacies. We remember what they wished to remember; and in the memory of their memory, they live.”

Teaching and learning about the Holocaust is still important today. Even though the Nazis weren’t the last group of people to attempt to commit genocide against another group of people, the rest of the world hasn’t been in as much denial or defiance as it was in the 1930s and early 1940s.

The Holocaust also has parallels to Haiti and how people, all people, need to respond to help people who can’t help themselves, Weiss wrote in her blog.

“I feel that, when things are at their worst, that’s the time to try to find the best that is within us,” Weiss wrote. “And if your best connects to my best, connects to his best and her best – then we’re better able to make a difference. The more I learn about the Holocaust – and what evil people are capable of perpetrating upon other people – the less I understand. However, together with the horror, I have been blessed to see the greatness of individuals as well.”

Intolerance, bigotry and abuse happen every day with individuals and groups at school, work, neighborhoods and cities, and people need to understand the choices that were made during the Holocaust.

“The Holocaust shows us a chapter of history when evil triumphed over good,” Weiss said. “It’s my hope to help create a world where that’s no longer possible because there are enough people – I’m hoping to empower people to be this kind of human being – that there are enough people who have seen what happens when we don’t speak up and act so that this really won’t happen again to any people in any place.”

[josh@villagerpublishing.com](mailto:josh@villagerpublishing.com)



Many Jewish women headed businesses, including Josefina Luftig, as seen in front of her clothing store.

## 2010 Fred Marcus Memorial Lecture

“The Last Album: Eyes from the Ashes of Auschwitz-Birkenau,” By Ann Weiss  
March 14, 4 p.m. at Infinity Event Center, 4400 E. Kentucky Ave, Glendale (near East Mississippi Avenue and South Colorado Boulevard). \$15 per person. No charge for students and Holocaust survivors. RSVP by Feb. 28, [www.alumni.du.edu/fredmarcus](http://www.alumni.du.edu/fredmarcus) or 303-871-3097

Information on the Weiss’s project and nonprofit:  
[www.thelastalbum.org](http://www.thelastalbum.org) or [annweiss@thelastalbum.org](mailto:annweiss@thelastalbum.org)  
Ann Weiss, PO Box 1136, Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania 19010