


Personal Stories

Preparation

This pack contains 24 Personal Stories. These are to be used in Lesson 1 and Lesson 2 of the resource 'What happened to the Jews of Europe? The Holocaust and the persecution of other victim groups'. Ideally, each story should be printed on white A5 card.

It is recommended that the Personal Stories are grouped into six groups, with each group containing four stories. The recommended grouping is as follows:

Group	Stories
A	Ossi, Father Piotr, Janusz, Michael
B	Settela, Xaver, Mordecai, Leopold
C	Robert Olbermann, Josef Muller, Selma, Bedzin
D	Robert Odeman, Helene Gotthold, Pitel family, Josef Tarantov
E	Elfriede, Ronnie, Edith, Ludwig
F	Helene Lebel, Bayume, Barney, Mendel

Mass murder in Bedzin

9 September 1939

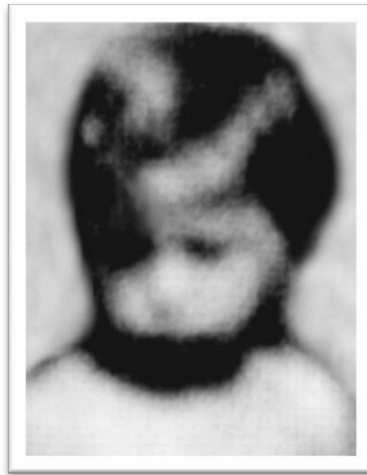


Jewish men and their German guards in the ruins of the Great Synagogue of Bedzin, set on fire by German soldiers in September 1939. Credit: Yad Vashem

A few days after invading Poland German soldiers locked a group of Jewish people inside the Great Synagogue in the town of Bedzin. The soldiers poured petrol onto the building and then set the **synagogue** and the surrounding homes on fire.

Those who tried to escape the fire were shot. Up to a hundred people were murdered that day. Most of the bodies were so badly burnt they could not be identified.

Ossi Stojka



Credit: USHMM

Ossi Stojka was born in Austria in 1936, the youngest of six children. His family were Roma (so-called 'gypsies'). They earned their living buying and selling horses. During the winter the Stojkas lived in the Austrian capital of Vienna. In the summer they travelled around the Austrian countryside in their wooden caravan.

When Ossi was two years old, Austria became part of Germany. To stop Roma from travelling from place to place, they were ordered to stay on a campground in Vienna. The Stojka family were forced to turn their caravan into a small wooden house.

After war broke out in 1939, Nazi **persecution** of Roma people got even worse. Eventually Ossi and his family were **deported** to the 'Gypsy Camp' at Auschwitz-Birkenau. The camp was overcrowded and filthy, there was also little food. Many people caught diseases which spread quickly throughout the camp.

In 1944, Ossi became seriously ill with **typhus**. He was not given the medical help that he needed. Shortly afterwards Ossi died in the Nazi camp. He was just seven years old.

Edith Stein



Credit: Edith Stein House

Edith Stein was the youngest of eleven children. She grew up in a large Jewish family in the German city of Breslau. When she was a young adult, Edith stopped believing in God altogether. Later she became a Christian and eventually a Catholic nun. She took on a new name: Teresa Benedicta of the Cross.

Teresa saw herself as Christian, not as someone who was Jewish or who believed in Judaism. But how Teresa saw herself did not matter to the Nazis, they wrongly believed that human beings were defined by their 'race'.

'Race', as they saw it, was decided by someone's blood – by their **inheritance**. This was incorrect, of course. Yet the Nazis still believed some human races were better or more important than others.

So in the Nazi view of the world, Teresa was not who she thought she was. She was not Teresa, the Catholic nun. Instead, she was Edith – a Jew. And as a Jew she was part of the Jewish 'race' which the Nazis considered to be the enemies of Germany.

In 1942, in response to the protest by the Dutch church about the treatment of Jews, the Nazis arrested Teresa and some other Jewish-born Catholics. They were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau as Jews to be murdered in a gas chamber.

Selma Zwienicki



Credit: USHMM

On the night of the 9 November 1938, Jewish homes, businesses and **synagogues** were attacked in towns and cities across Nazi Germany and Austria.

Almost 100 Jewish people were murdered on this one night of terror. Shop windows were smashed and synagogue buildings were burned. More than 20,000 Jewish men were rounded up that night and forced into concentration camps.

In the town of Bremen, Nazi **Stormtroopers** broke into the home of Selma Zwienicki. They demanded to know where they could find her husband. When Selma refused to tell them where her husband was the Nazis shot her dead.

Josef Tarantov



Credit: State Historical Museum. Russia

Josef Tarantov was born to a Jewish family in Simferopol, a town in the Crimea. Josef was studying to be a doctor. In 1941 Nazi Germany invaded his country and Josef joined the Soviet Army to fight them.

Josef was captured by the German army. Like all Soviet **prisoners of war** he suffered brutal treatment. More than 5 million Soviet soldiers were taken prisoner by the Germans and their allies during the war, and some 3.3 million died of disease, starvation, or other means.

Josef died in 1944.

Father Piotr Sosnowski

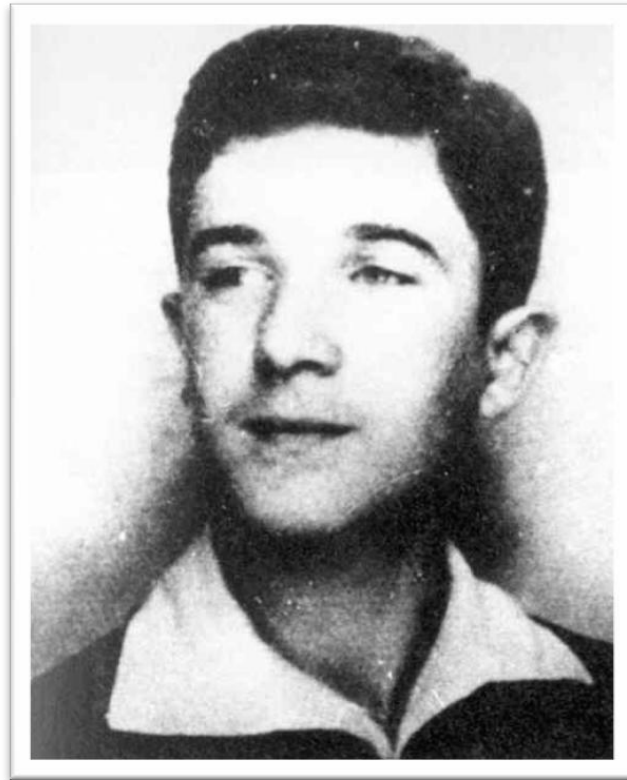


Credit: Wikimedia Commons

On the 27 October 1939, 45 Polish civilians were forced to dig their own grave by ethnic Germans living in a village in north Poland. Among them was Father Piotr Sosnowski – a Polish priest – who said prayers for the men before he and the others were shot dead.

The civilians were targeted after two barns, owned by the Germans, had been burnt down. The Germans killers were encouraged by the SS to take action to punish the community and send out a warning.

Mordecai Anielewicz



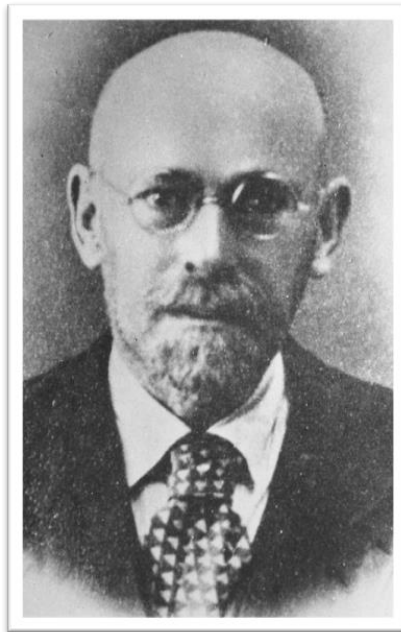
Credit: Yad Vashem

Mordecai Anielewicz led Jewish fighters who fought back against the Nazis in the Warsaw **ghetto** uprising of April 1943.

This was the first armed uprising against the Nazis in any town in occupied Europe. It was an act that startled the world and inspired others, Jews and non-Jews, to take up arms against the Nazis.

On 8 May 1943, Mordecai Anielewicz was among a group of about 100 resistance fighters trapped inside an underground hideout. They committed suicide rather than surrendering to the Nazis.

Janusz Korczak



Credit: USHMM

Janusz Korczak was a Jewish doctor, teacher and children's author.

Before the war he had a weekly radio programme, giving advice to millions of Polish listeners on how to look after children. Janusz set up two orphanages in the city of Warsaw – one for Jews, the other for Christians – which the children themselves were involved in running. He started a national newspaper, written by and for young people. Janusz was also the first to write about the 'Rights of the Child'.

In 1940, the Nazis forced Janusz and the children in his Jewish orphanage to move into the Warsaw **ghetto**. There Janusz did all he could to shelter his children from the horrors of overcrowding, death and disease that existed all around them.

Despite offers from non-Jewish friends to save him, Janusz refused to leave the children in his care. On a hot summer's day in August 1942, Janusz, his staff and some 200 Jewish children were marched from the Warsaw ghetto orphanage to the train that would carry them to the death camp of Treblinka. All were murdered in the gas chambers there.

Helene Gotthold



Credit: USHMM

The woman in this family photo, smiling with her children on a summer's day in 1936, is a German nurse called Helene Gotthold.

One year later after this picture was taken, Helene – then pregnant – was arrested by the Nazis because she was a **Jehovah's Witness**. She was beaten so badly that she had a miscarriage. She was then put in prison for 18 months.

In February 1944 Helene was arrested again and imprisoned for a second time. Six months later the Nazi People's Court found Helene and five other Jehovah's Witnesses guilty for holding illegal Bible meetings and 'undermining the nation's morale'. For these 'crimes' they were all sentenced to death.

Helene was beheaded on a guillotine on 8 December 1944.

Helene Lebel



Credit: USHMM

Helene Lebel was a young Catholic woman. She lived in the Austrian city of Vienna. When she was 19 years old, Helene began to show the first signs of mental illness. As her condition worsened she had to give up her law studies and her job as a legal secretary. In 1936 she was diagnosed with **schizophrenia** and went to a **psychiatric hospital**.

By the time that Nazi Germany joined with Austria two years later, Helene's condition had improved and her parents were told that she would soon be moved to a hospital in a nearby town.

Instead, Helene was sent to a former prison in Brandenburg, Germany in 1940. There she was undressed, given a physical examination, and told that she would take a shower. But the room that Helene was led to was actually a gas chamber. Helene was one of 9,772 disabled people secretly murdered that year in the Brandenburg 'euthanasia' centre.

Settela Steinbach



Still from film: Nederlands Instituut voor Beeld und Geluid
Credit: Yad Vashem

Settela Steinbach was born into a Sinti (so-called 'gypsy') family in 1934. The family lived in the south Netherlands in a wagon. They would travel around from village to village, town to town, looking for work. Frequently the Steinbachs – like other so-called gypsies – faced **prejudice** and hostility.

In 1940, the Nazis invaded the Netherlands. The country quickly fell under occupation. But for a Sinti like Settela, life carried on as normal. Then, in July 1943, the Nazis made it illegal for wagons to move around. Eventually, all wagons had to stay in guarded assembly camps.

On 14 May 1944, the Dutch police were ordered to transfer all 'gypsies' to Westerbork transit camp. Over the following days 574 'gypsies' were taken to the camp – including the Steinbachs. Five days later, Settela and her family were put onto a cattle wagon and taken to Auschwitz. There Settela was put into the 'Gypsy Family Camp' where she survived for the next two and a half months. She was then murdered in a gas chamber when the camp was destroyed in August 1944.

Robert Ölbermann



Credit: USHMM

Robert Ölbermann was a German **imprisoned** by the Nazis in 1936 because he was gay. Later Robert was sent to Dachau **concentration camp**, where he was made to wear a pink triangle on his uniform to mark him out as a gay man.

Gay men were hated by many of the other prisoners in the concentration camps and were often kept in separate barracks. They were treated particularly brutally by the guards. In 1941, Robert Ölbermann died in Dachau concentration camp, aged 44.

The Pitel family



Credit: Yad Yashem Hall of Names

This photograph shows 26 members of the Pitel family. It was taken in Parczew, Poland, in 1938. Soon after it was taken, Yosef Pitel – the young man furthest on the right – left home to live in Palestine.

The photo shows Yosef Pitel's parents, Chaim and Ester, with their ten children, three daughters-in-law, one son-in-law and eight grandchildren. Also pictured are Chaim's 95 year-old father, Leibish Pitel, and Ester's 70 year-old mother, Sarah Eidelman.

By 1943 Yosef was the only person in this photograph who was still alive. Everyone else in the picture – Yosef's family – were dead. Some had died in ghettos, others had been murdered by gas in the death camp at Treblinka.

Xaver Franz Stützing



Credit: USHMM

Xaver Franz Stützing, was an active member of Germany's Communist Party. Arrested by the Nazis as part of their crushing of political opposition, Stützing was **imprisoned** in Dachau **concentration camp**.

Although tortured by the SS, Stützing refused to give them the names of his fellow **Communists**. He died in Dachau in May 1935.

Mendel Grossman



Mendel Grossman in his photographic laboratory inside the Lodz ghetto. Credit: Vad Yashem

Mendel Grossman worked as a photographer in the Lodz **ghetto**. He took pictures of the goods produced for the Germans in the ghetto workshops. Secretly, he also recorded life and death in the ghetto.

With his camera hidden in the lining of his coat pocket, Mendel would go out into the ghetto and photograph the conditions that people lived in. He cut holes in his coat pockets to allow him to operate the camera, opening the coat a little so as to point his lens at what he was photographing. Mendel packed many of his photographic negatives in a wooden crate that he then hid behind a wall beneath a window sill in his apartment. Mendel continued to photograph inside the Lodz ghetto up to its **liquidation** in September 1944.

As the Soviet Army approached Lodz, Mendel was deported to a small camp near Berlin. Then, at the end of April 1945, he was forced with thousands of other camp inmates on a **death march** where he walked many miles, deeper into German territory.

Huge numbers died of exhaustion, starvation and shooting on these marches. Mendel, still carrying his hidden camera, was one of these. He collapsed and died. He was 32 years old.

Professor Leopold Silberstein



Credit: Hall of Names, Yad Vashem

Leopold was born in Berlin, Germany, in 1900. He was Jewish, very academic, and by 1922 became a Doctor of Philosophy.

Soon after the Nazis came to power in 1933 Leopold moved to Prague with his wife and young daughter. In Prague the family had another child, a young boy, in 1935. Meanwhile Leopold's academic career continued to progress. However, in March 1939 what was left of Czechoslovakia was broken up into areas under German control. With his marriage also ending, Leopold moved to Tartu, a city in Estonia, to teach at a university.

After the German invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941, most people in Tartu were evacuated. Leopold and his heavily pregnant new wife remained. Their baby was born on 10 July. Fifteen days later, members of the **Einsatzgruppen** entered Tartu. With the help of local **collaborators**, all remaining Jews were rounded up.

Leopold tried to escape but was captured. On 23 July he was driven to an anti-tank ditch outside the city. He was forced to undress and then shot dead. His body, and those others alongside him, were covered in sand.

Barney Greenman



On 17 March 1940 Barney was born in Rotterdam – a city in the Netherlands. Barney's parents were Leon and Else. They had moved to Rotterdam in 1935, shortly after getting married in the East London Synagogue. Once he was born, Barney's parents registered him as a British citizen. This meant that his legal nationality was British. His parents were able to do this because they both had British citizenship.

On 10 May 1940, the German army invaded the Netherlands. Just five days later, the Dutch army formally surrendered. Nazi Germany now occupied the Netherlands. Laws started to be passed which persecuted Jewish people.

Life for the Greenmans became harder. Leon tried to use their British nationality to protect the family. However, he gave their passports to a friend for safekeeping and the friend, scared of being caught with "Jewish documents", burned the passports. The Greenmans could no longer prove they were British. Then one night in early October when Barney was asleep police visited their home. The family were ordered outside and were eventually taken to a camp called Westerbork.

In January 1943, the family were put on a train with 700 Jewish people. They were being taken to Auschwitz. For the three days they travelled, Barney was held all the time by Leon or Else. When they arrived, Barney and Else were separated from Leon. Cuddling Barney, Else waved to Leon. Then they were put onto a truck and driven into Auschwitz-Birkenau. They were taken to a gas chamber and murdered.

Elfriede Lohse-Wächtler



Self-portrait, c.1930. Credit: [Wikipedia](#)

Elfriede was born in 1899 in Dresden, Germany. As a teenager she studied fashion design and graphics, but soon became more interested in painting. By the 1920s she was part of a famous group of artists in Dresden.

Elfriede married in 1921. Her work was the main source of income for the newlyweds, but this created pressure and tensions. By 1925 the marriage had ended.

The next six years saw Elfriede's artistic reputation flourish. However, her mental health was getting worse. In 1929 she suffered a breakdown and spent two months in a **psychiatric hospital**. As her money worries increased and she became homeless, she moved back in with her parents in 1931. Soon afterwards, she was diagnosed with **schizophrenia** and admitted into a mental hospital, however she continued to paint.

In 1935 was labelled as having 'incurable insanity'. Later that year, despite strong protests from Elfriede and her family, she was **sterilised** by force. After the event, she stopped painting completely. In 1937 her artwork was labelled as 'degenerate' by the Nazis and banned and partly destroyed.

In 1940, Elfriede was moved from the mental hospital near Dresden. She was relocated to Sonnenstein Castle. There on 31 July she was murdered under the 'Euthanasia programme'. Her family, however, were told she had died of pneumonia and a heart attack.

Bayume Muhammed Husen



Credit: Marianne Bechhaus-Gerst

Bayume was born in 1904 in what is today called Tanzania. At that time Tanzania was part of the German empire, and was called German East Africa. In 1914 when the First World War began Bayume was just 10 years old. He joined the German army in Tanzania as a child soldier fighting the Allies.

In 1929 Bayume decided to move to Berlin. He married a German woman, worked as a waiter, and became a language teacher at Berlin University. After the Nazis came to power in 1933, Bayume did not try and hide away. Instead, whenever he had the opportunity, he would highlight his record of fighting for the German army in the war. Although he was unsuccessful, he approached the authorities twice to ask for medals for his military service. He would also publicly demonstrate his support for the idea that Germany needed to reclaim its empire.

It was in 1934 that Bayume took up a new career. He began to work as an actor – going on to perform 23 films between 1934 and 1941. Usually he would perform in small roles, often in films about Germany's former empire in Africa.

When the Second World War broke out, Bayume tried to join the army. He was rejected. In 1941 he was denounced for having a relationship with a white German woman. He was arrested and put into the Sachsenhausen **concentration camp**. He died there in 1944.

Joseph Muscha Müller



Credit: USHMM

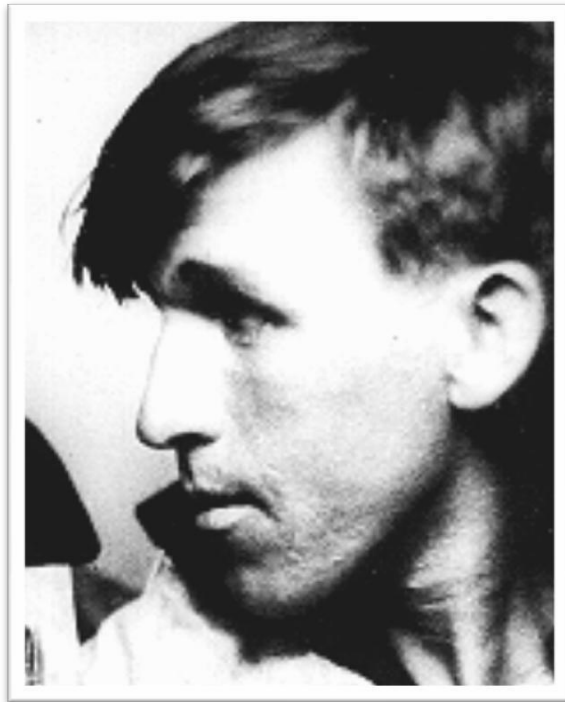
Joseph was born in Bitterfeld, Germany, in 1932. His parents were Roma (so-called 'gypsies'). When he was 18 months old Joseph was fostered by a family living in Halle, a city some 20 miles from Bitterfeld.

At school, Joseph was often blamed for any of his class's bad behaviour and was beaten by his teacher. He was also bullied by his classmates. Out of school, members of the Hitler Youth movement called Joseph a 'bastard' and directed racist insults at him.

In 1944, when he was 12 years old, Joseph was taken from his classroom by two strangers who said he had appendicitis and needed immediate surgery. Joseph refused to go but was beaten and taken to a surgery by force. He was **sterilised**, meaning he would never be able to have children.

After he had recovered from the operation, Joseph was to be sent to the Bergen-Belsen **concentration camp**. However, his foster father managed to smuggle Joseph out of the hospital before this could happen and took him into hiding. Joseph survived the rest of the war by hiding for five months in a garden shed.

Robert T. Odeman



Credit: USHMM

Robert T. Odeman was a German actor and musician. A classical pianist, Robert gave concerts throughout Europe until an injury to his hand ended his concert career and he turned to stage acting.

In 1937, after Robert's boyfriend was pressured by the **Gestapo** into saying that Robert was gay, he was arrested and sentenced to more than two years in prison. Robert was released from prison in 1940 but was banned from certain jobs, was not allowed to perform in public, and was watched closely by the police.

In 1942, Robert was arrested again and sent to Sachsenhausen **concentration camp**. There he was fortunate to be given an office job. As the Allied armies advanced on Hitler's Germany and the Nazi forces retreated, inmates of the concentration camps were forced to march deeper into Nazi territory. It was while on one of these forced marches that Robert, then aged 40, managed to escape with two other gay prisoners.

After the war Robert returned to Berlin where he worked as a writer and composer. He died in 1985.

Michael Siegel



Credit: Bundesarchiv/[Wikipedia](https://www.wikipedia.org/)

Michael Siegel was a respected Jewish lawyer. In early March 1933, Michael went to the police headquarters in Munich – he wanted to make a formal complaint after one of his clients had had their property attacked by Nazi **Stormtroopers**.

When he arrived at the station, Michael found it was now staffed not with policeman but with stormtroopers. The stormtroopers immediately went for Michael. He was badly beaten, with teeth smashed out and an eardrum damaged. The stormtroopers cut the legs off his trousers, and took away his shoes.

The stormtroopers hung a sign around his neck and wrote the words 'I will never again complain to the police'. Then they took him outside and forced him to walk through the city streets. When they reached the train station they threatened to kill him but then turned away.

Michael jumped in a taxi and raced back to his house. He finally left Germany in 1940 and lived in Peru until he died in 1979.

Ronnie Roberts



Ronnie, his mother and his sister, in the early 1920s.

Credit: [The Wiener Library](#)

Ronald ('Ronnie') Roberts was born in Wiesbaden, Germany in 1921. His mother, Alma, was German. His father, Henry, was British from Barbados.

In the late 1920s, Ronnie and his family increasingly suffered racist abuse. Once the Nazis came to power in 1933 this became increasingly common. When Ronnie was 13 he was forced to leave his school because of the colour of his skin. He had to go to a new one for 'undesirables'. After being bullied by his new teachers, Ronnie went to a music academy.

When Ronnie was 15 years old, the **Gestapo** confronted him. He was accused of breaking the law by holding hands with a white girl. He was ordered to report to a hospital, but on the day decided not to follow the order. Had he gone, he would have been sterilised.

Ronnie decided to apply for a British passport in the belief this might one day give him protection. He was proved right. During the war he was arrested, but because of his British passport he was put into an **internment camp**. Life was tough, but because of his passport Ronnie did not have to work in **labour camps** like some Black Germans. He survived the war, moving to Britain in the 1950s.

Ludwig Neumann



Credit: Wiener Library

The man in the photograph above is Ludwig Neumann – a German-Jewish businessman. Ludwig was arrested after Kristallnacht in November 1938 and taken to a **concentration camp** called Dachau. The picture was taken when Ludwig was released a few months later.

Ludwig inherited his father's famous clothing business, Neumann and Mendel, in 1923. However, at the start of 1938 the Nazis introduced new laws aimed at preventing Jewish people from owning businesses. Ludwig was eventually forced to sell his company at a knock-down price to a non-Jewish man – Joseph Hebring – in October 1938.

Ludwig was only allowed to leave Dachau if he agreed to leave Germany at once. He agreed and travelled to Britain. With the outbreak of war in 1939, the British authorities became suspicious of Ludwig and other civilians born in Germany and Austria and decided to put them into special camps for surveillance. The photograph above was taken during Ludwig's detention in 1940. Ludwig was soon released, and served as an anti-aircraft gunner.

After the war, Ludwig returned to Germany to try and reclaim what was stolen from him. He had little success.