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Felix Nussbaum was born in 1904 in Osnabrueck, Germany. Recognized as a true talent by his parents (his father, Phillip Nussbaum himself was a talented amateur artist), Felix Nussbaum was allowed to pursue his art and enroll in art school in Hamburg in 1922. The young artist then went on to study in Berlin, where he received recognition and acclaim by critics and artists alike. This led to a scholarship in 1932 to paint and study in Rome, under the auspices of the Berlin Academy of Arts. He traveled to Rome together with his girlfriend, the Polish-Jewish artist, Felka Platek.

When the Nazis came to power in January, 1933, the reach of Nazi culture and policy extended all the way to Rome, and a new type of art—an art that extolled the virtues of the Aryan race—became the only art tolerated in the new Germany. Nussbaum was no longer seen as a young artist on the rise. He was, according to Nazi doctrine, first and foremost a Jew. Nussbaum and Platek fled Rome in 1933, beginning a life as exiles, first in Italy, and eventually in Belgium, where they married in 1937.

With the German occupation of Belgium in 1940, Felix's fears of discovery became a reality. He was arrested and sent to the internment camp of Saint Cyprian in southern France, along with other aliens. After applying as a German to be sent back to Germany, Nussbaum managed to escape while en route, and eventually was reunited with Felka in Brussels. There the two were forced into hiding, relying on the goodness of friends to shelter them from discovery, and to supply Nussbaum with art supplies. From this point, Nussbaum's artwork began to express his overwhelming feelings of dread, melancholy, persecution, and the approach of death, although occasionally portraying symbols of a fragile optimism.

This optimism was not to be realized. In July, 1944, Felka Platek and Felix Nussbaum were arrested, sent to Mechelen transit camp and then to Auschwitz, where they were both murdered.