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Without A Trace: The Obligation of Memory

AUSCHWITZ ALBUM

Description and Handouts

Without A Trace: The Obligation of Memory

THE AUSCHWITZ ALBUM is a photographic record of the Holocaust during the Second World War. The album documents the arrival and processing of an entire transport of Jews from Carpatho-Ruthenia (a region annexed in 1939 to Hungary from Czechoslovakia) at Auschwitz-Birkenau in May 1944. These rare photos provide both moving and painful documentation of the entire process - arrival, *selektion*, confiscation of property, and preparation for the murder - except for the gassing itself.

The *Auschwitz Album* is the only surviving visual evidence of the process leading to the mass murder at Auschwitz-Birkenau. The photos were taken at the end of May or beginning of June 1944, either by Ernst Hofmann or by Bernhard Walter, two SS men whose task was to take ID photos and fingerprints of the inmates (not of the Jews who were sent directly to the gas chambers). The purpose of the album is unclear. It was not intended for propaganda purposes, nor does it have any obvious personal use. One assumes that it was prepared as an official reference for a higher authority, as were photo albums from other concentration camps.

The album's survival is remarkable given the strenuous efforts made by the Nazis to keep the "Final Solution" a secret. Also remarkable is the story of its discovery. Lili Jacob (later Lili Jacob-Zelmanovic Meier) was selected for work at Auschwitz-Birkenau, while the other members of her family were sent to the gas chambers. The Auschwitz camp was evacuated by the Nazis as the Soviet army approached. Lili Jacob passed through various camps, finally arriving at the Dora concentration camp, where she was eventually liberated. Recovering from illness in a vacated barracks of the SS, Jacob found the album in a cupboard beside her bed. Inside, she found pictures of herself, her relatives, and others from her community. The coincidence was astounding, given that the Nordhausen-Dora camp was over 640 km (400 mi) away, and that over 1,100,000 people were killed at Auschwitz.

The album's existence had been known publicly since at least the 1960s, when it was used as evidence at the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials. Nazi-hunter Serge Klarsfeld visited Lili in 1980 and convinced Lili Jacob to donate the album to Yad Vashem. The album's contents were first published that year in the book *The Auschwitz Album*, edited by Klarsfeld. This Album is a valuable resource to explore important themes in Holocaust education and memory: documentation and testimony, creating and perpetuating the human face of the victim, honoring the memory of the victims, and sustaining Holocaust memory for present and future generations.

Auschwitz Album

Handout 1: "The Album has its Own Destiny"

Abundant information about the Auschwitz Album was publicized during the trial of Adolf Eichmann, which took place in Jerusalem in 1961. Eichmann was a senior SS officer who played a major role in the organization and logistics of the attempted annihilation of European Jewry, known as the "Final Solution." He was found guilty and sentenced to death.

As the case against Eichmann was being prepared, articles were published in the press in the United States and Europe which mentioned the album, and Lili Jacob was interviewed several times.

The album also received coverage in the press during the trials of German criminals who served in Auschwitz, that took place in Frankfurt, Germany between 1963 and 1965. Dr. Erich Kulka was the first witness to mention the album in court and describe how Lili found it. During the course of the trial, the identities of the two SS photographers who took the pictures—Bernhard Walter and Ernst Hoffmann— were revealed. They were the official Auschwitz camp photographers and were among the few in the camp who were permitted to take pictures there. Even though he appeared in several sessions of the trial over the course of a year and a half, Bernhard Walter succeeded in deceiving the court, leaving the question of the identity of the photographers uncertain. His deputy, Ernst Hoffmann, had already disappeared after the war, so it was impossible to interrogate anyone else about this album.

Based on Dr. Kulka's recommendation, the Frankfurt court invited Lili Jacob-Zelmanovic, then living in the United States, to testify. On December 3, 1964, Lili appeared on the witness stand holding the original album. The album was submitted as evidence, and she described its discovery and referred to certain SS-men seen in the pictures. The court requested that she leave the album as evidence, but she refused, and it remained in her possession until it was presented to Yad Vashem.

Handout for the Teacher: The "Final Solution"

Introduction

Although the Nazis came to power in 1933, it was not until the second half of 1941 that Nazi policy began to focus on the annihilation of the Jewish people. The evolution in policy coincided with Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. Historians still debate about the meaning of the order that authorized the "Final Solution of the Jewish Question" given by Herman Goering to Reinhard Heydrich in July 1941. Research shows that the mass killing of men began in June 1941 but proceeded to that of women and children in August. There is no surviving written order from Hitler for the expansion of the murders, but it is believed to have been issued by the autumn of 1941, or in early 1942.

From the Soviet Union, the killings spread to Poland and to the rest of European Jewry.

The Einsatzgruppen

Beginning on June 22, 1941, four mobile killing squads (Einsatzgruppen) consisting of SS and German police, in conjunction with German army units, began the systematic annihilation of Jews of Eastern Poland and the Soviet Union. Their job was to search for opponents of the Reich, including communists and Jews, and execute them.

Initially, the method of killing was by gathering the victims along the edges of ravines, mines, ditches, or pits dug specifically for this purpose. Jews were forced to relinquish their possessions, undress, and were then shot and their bodies thrown into the ditches, which in many cases had been dug by Jewish victims themselves.

In the southern regions of the occupied Soviet Union tens of thousands of Jews were murdered by Romanian army units. In the autumn of 1941, the systematic murder of Jews began in Yugoslavia as well. Alongside the mobile killing squads, there were cases where local antisemites also took part in the killing. By spring 1943, the Einsatzgruppen and their collaborators had killed 1.25 million Jews and hundreds of thousands of others, including Soviet prisoners of war and Sinti-Roma.

The Extermination Camps

From the German point of view, the use of the *Einsatzgruppen* presented several problems. This method of killing involved the participation of many people, and there was a psychological reluctance among some of the killers. In addition, the secrecy of the operation was jeopardized by the presence of the local populations. Military officials decried the use of so much ammunition, needed for the ongoing war.

Therefore, a new method was designed that would reduce the connection between the killers and their victims, along with establishing killing sites, so the victim would be brought to the killer, rather than bringing the killer to the victim.

Chelmno, the first extermination camp, began operating in December 1941. Hundreds of thousands of Jews from Western Poland (the Wartegau, which had been annexed to Germany), were killed.

The Wannsee Conference held in Berlin in January 1942 was a milestone in the evolution of the "Final Solution." Senior Nazi officials discussed its implementation in the Pan-European context, with various agencies coordinating their actions in order to set it in motion.

Deportation operations encompassed several stages. First, arrests were made in *Aktions* (i.e., manhunts). Then the victims were concentrated at transit points. From there, thousands of Jews were transported to various extermination camps. In some cases, they were brought to an interim stage, such as ghettos or transit camps. In Eastern Europe, hundreds or even thousands of Jews were indiscriminately rounded up in each *Aktion*, to fill the quota of deportees set by the Nazis, and were deported on freight trains. The train journey sometimes lasted several days under harsh conditions without water, food, or sanitary facilities and many Jews perished during the course of the journey.

Three extermination camps were built in the *Generalgouvernement* area (occupied Poland): Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka. It was in these extermination camps that the vast majority of Polish Jewry were murdered during 1942 and the first months of 1943, as well as Jews of other European nationalities. At these three camps more than 1.5 million Jews from Poland were murdered.

In late 1943, Jews from these regions who had survived previous deportations were sent to their deaths, primarily at the Majdanek extermination camp.

Beginning in 1942, Jews from all over Europe were deported mainly to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration and extermination camp. This complex became the primary site for the annihilation of European Jewry after the other extermination camps were closed. Activity in Auschwitz reached its peak in the summer of 1944, when hundreds of thousands of Jews from the Lodz Ghetto, Slovakia, and Hungary were murdered. The Nazis murdered in this camp at least 1.1 million European Jews.

The last victims of the Final Solution were about a quarter of a million Jewish camp inmates who died on the death marches—the mass evacuation of prisoners from Poland and the Baltic states to Germany as a result of the Red Army's advance.

Auschwitz Album

Handout 2: Auschwitz-Birkenau: History of the camp

The Auschwitz-Birkenau complex, located 37 miles west of Krakow, was the largest Nazi extermination and concentration camp. One sixth of all Jews murdered by the Nazis were gassed at Auschwitz.

In April 1940, SS chief Heinrich Himmler ordered the establishment of a new concentration camp near Oswięcim, a town located within the portion of Poland that was annexed to Germany at the beginning of World War II. The first Polish political prisoners arrived in Auschwitz in June 1940, and by March 1941 there were 10,900 prisoners, the majority of whom were Polish. Auschwitz soon became known as the most brutal of the Nazi concentration camps.

In March 1941, Himmler ordered a second, much larger section of the camp to be built 1.9 miles from the original camp. This site was to be used as an extermination camp and was named Birkenau, or Auschwitz II. Eventually, Birkenau held the majority of prisoners in the Auschwitz complex, including Jews, Poles, Germans, and Gypsies. Furthermore, it maintained the most degrading and inhumane conditions—and included the complex's gas chambers and crematoria.

A third section, Auschwitz III, was constructed in nearby Monowitz, and consisted of a forced labor camp called Buna-Monowitz. This complex incorporated 45 forced labor sub-camps. The name Buna was derived from the Buna synthetic rubber factory on site, owned by IG Farben, Germany's largest chemical company. Most workers at this factory, similar to other German-owned factories, were Jewish inmates. The intense labor would push inmates to the point of total exhaustion, at which time new laborers replaced them.

Auschwitz was first administered by camp commandant Rudolf Hoess, and was guarded by a cruel regiment of the SS "Death's Head" Units. The staff was assisted by several privileged prisoners who were given better food and conditions, and an opportunity to survive, if they agreed to enforce the brutal order of the camp.

Auschwitz I and II were surrounded by electrically-charged four-meter high barbed wire fences, guarded by SS men armed with machine guns and rifles. The two camps were further closed in by a series of guard posts located two thirds of a mile beyond the fences.

In March 1942, trains carrying Jews commenced arriving daily. In many instances, several trains would arrive on the same day, each carrying one thousand or more victims coming from the ghettos of Eastern Europe, as well as from western and southern European countries. Throughout 1942, transports arrived from Poland, Slovakia, the Netherlands, Belgium, Yugoslavia, and Theresienstadt. Jews, as well as Gypsies, continued to arrive throughout 1943. Hungarian Jews were brought to Auschwitz in 1944, alongside Jews from the remaining Polish ghettos.

By August 1944, there were 105,168 prisoners in Auschwitz, while another 50,000 Jewish prisoners lived in various satellite camps. The camp's population constantly grew, despite the high mortality rate caused by extermination, starvation, hard labor, and contagious diseases.

Upon arrival at the platform in Birkenau, Jews were thrown out of train cars without their belongings and forced to form two lines, separating men and women. SS officers, including the infamous Dr. Josef Mengele, would conduct selections, sending most victims to the same side, thus condemning them to death in the gas chambers (see also *Selektion*). A few were sent to the other side, destined for forced labor. Those who were sent to their deaths were killed that same day and their corpses were burned in the crematoria. Those not sent to the gas chambers were taken to "quarantine," where their hair was shaved, they received prison uniforms, and they were registered. The

registration numbers were tattooed onto their left arm. Most prisoners were then sent to perform forced labor in Auschwitz I, III, sub-camps, or other concentration camps, where their life expectancy was usually only a few months. Prisoners who stayed in quarantine had a life expectancy of a few weeks.

The prisoners' camp routine consisted of many duties. The daily schedule included waking at dawn, tidying one's sleeping area, the morning roll call, the trip to work, long hours of hard labor, standing in line for a pitiful meal, the return to camp, block inspection, and evening roll call. During roll call, prisoners were made to stand completely motionless and quiet, sometimes for hours, in extremely thin clothing, irrespective of the weather. Whoever fell or even stumbled was killed. Prisoners had to focus all their energy merely on surviving the day's tortures.

The gas chambers in the Auschwitz complex constituted the largest and most efficient extermination method employed by the Nazis. Four chambers were in use at Birkenau, each with the potential to kill up to 6,000 people daily. They were built to look like shower rooms in order to confuse the victims. New arrivals at Birkenau were told that they were being sent to work, but first needed to shower and be disinfected. They would be led into the shower-like chambers, where they were quickly gassed to death with the poisonous Zyklon B gas.

Some prisoners at Auschwitz, including twins and dwarfs, were used as the subjects of torturous medical experiments. They were tested for endurance under terrible conditions such as extreme heat and cold, or were sterilized.

Despite the horrifying conditions, prisoners in Auschwitz managed to resist the Nazis, including some instances of escape and armed resistance. In October 1944, members of the *Sonderkommando*, who worked in the crematoria, succeeded in killing several SS men and destroying one gas chamber. All of the rebels died, leaving behind diaries that provided authentic documentation of the atrocities committed at Auschwitz.

By January 1945, Soviet troops were advancing toward Auschwitz. In desperation to withdraw, the Nazis sent most of the 58,000 remaining prisoners on a death march to Germany, and most prisoners were killed en route. The Soviet army liberated Auschwitz on January 27, 1945. Russian soldiers found only 7,650 prisoners barely alive within the entire camp complex. In all, some one million Jews had been murdered there.

Auschwitz Album

Handout 3: Photographs as Historical Documents¹ - Nina Springer-Aharoni

The camera is a mighty tool. When it freezes a fraction of a visual second, that moment is preserved forever. Thus, historians consider the camera an important, powerful tool.

World War II and the Holocaust period left us many photographed moments and scenes. Some of them, such as the picture of the boy from the Warsaw ghetto, are so familiar and well known that it seems as though we could not do without them; we think of them as hallmarks of a dark era in the history of the European continent.

The National-Socialist regime of Germany recognized the power of the camera and both the positive and negative opportunities that it presented. Throughout their rule, Nazi leaders took full advantage of this instrument. They distributed hundreds of thousands of antisemitic photographs in an effort to mold German public opinion and include ideological antisemitism in the German people from the very beginning of the anti-Jewish actions. Throughout the enactment of the Nuremberg Laws, the Aryanization of Jewish property, the establishment of ghettos, the deportation to concentration camps, and even the implementation of the "Final Solution" itself, the camera was the Nazis' faithful assistant.

The camera also served the liberators. The Allied soldiers used it a great deal to document what they saw when they liberated the death camps. After the war, photographs were used extensively as eyewitness testimony and as incriminating documents against Nazi criminals when many of the leaders of the regime were prosecuted in the Nuremberg trials, the Eichmann trial, and other trials over the years.

A photograph creates a sense of direct access to reality. Even if this reality has already passed, the photograph captures a cross-section of time from the past and documents it in print. Time etched in print leaves an indelible impression on the individual's memory and remains a public legacy for the future. While observing the visual fragment of time, one can go back and concentrate on the details, which then may evoke thoughts and memories. Photographs are powerful, and they retain a respected place even in the age of the motion picture.

Nevertheless, despite the inherent power of photographs, they are also vulnerable. After all, while they may be regarded as the product of mere technical activity, they are not necessarily objective. Like all historical documents, photographs have a personal perspective. The photographer chooses the time and angle and has the technical means to manipulate by means of light and shadow, blurring or emphasis, reduction or enlargement. Even after the photographer's job is finished, other factors come into play that can influence and change things. The thematic setting of the photograph, the context in which it is printed, the wording of the caption can all produce different interpretations and alter the historical truth. Historians must, therefore, examine the details of the photograph as critically as if they were studying a historical document. Paramount importance must be ascribed to identifying the people in the photograph, the photographer, the date of the photograph, names, and as many details as possible.

The Use of the Camera during the Nazi Period

The years preceding the Nazis' rise to power constituted a peak in the development of photojournalism. Photographs achieved special recognition due to the manufacture of the commercial camera and its widespread use by the general public. The availability of the portable, compact Leica camera, which replaced the static studio cameras, opened up new photographic

options, as it became possible to take spontaneous outdoor photographs from many different angles.

The Nazi authorities, who took advantage of the camera as a means of glorifying the Reich and its leaders, persuading people, molding public opinion, and disseminating their racial doctrine, were aware that cameras could offer evidence against them. Therefore, laws were enacted forbidding photography inside the ghettos, camps, and other sensitive areas. Professional Nazi photographers worked under government supervision. The photographers in the propaganda units that operated at the front, press photographers, and independent photographers working for the foreign press in Germany were all subject to strict censorship.

There were, however, other people who could take pictures freely and were more difficult to supervise. These were German civilians who owned cameras with and German soldiers who carried their private cameras with them and documented the period in personal albums. Hundreds of photographs, some of them in color, document the lives of the Jews in large ghettos such as Warsaw and in small ghettos as well. Photo series and personal albums of German soldiers and policemen immortalize “Jewish types,” against the backdrop of poverty, hunger, and crowded ghetto conditions, and document the abuse of Jews, *Aktionen*, and deportations. In some cases, German soldiers even took pictures of the murders carried out by the soldiers of the *Einsatzgruppen*. Concern that this evidence might circulate prompted army commanders to forbid photography and to issue orders to confiscate photographs of the activities of the *Einsatzgruppen*.

Jewish photographers in Germany also documented the period with their cameras. The most prominent ones, who worked for the German press during the period of the Weimar Republic, were dismissed in the wake of the Nuremberg Laws. A few were hired by the Jewish press, which remained active until the deportations; with the aid of their cameras, they left important documentation on the life of the Jewish community in Germany. Photographers such as Mendel Grossman in the Lodz ghetto and Zvi Hirsch Kadushin (Gorge Kadish) in the Kovno ghetto used their cameras to document ghetto life. Collections of their photographs are now in archives, serving as testimony and historical documentation for future generations.

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- [1](#). Israel Gutman and Bella Gutterman, eds., *The Auschwitz Album—The story of a Transport* (Yad Vashem and Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, December 2002).