

## 7. *The Holocaust*

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*The more we come to know about the Holocaust,  
how it came about, how it was carried out, etc., the greater the  
possibility that we will become sensitized to inhumanity  
and suffering whenever they occur.*

EVA FLEISCHNER

### OVERVIEW

Chapter 7 focuses on the deliberate murder of one third of all the Jews in the world. The Nazis singled out children, women, and men for destruction solely because of their ancestry. Winston Churchill called that act “a crime without a name.” In the years that followed people have given that crime various names. In the United States, it is referred to as the Holocaust, a word people have been using since ancient times. “The word ‘*holocaust*’ means complete destruction by burning; all matter is totally *consumed* by the flames,” writes Paul Bookbinder. “Although the word is of Greek origin, it has become synonymous with the destruction of European Jews by the Germans during the Second World War. The crematoria of Auschwitz brought the word ‘holocaust’ to mind, and in its sound the enormity of the horror of those days was confirmed.”<sup>1</sup>

Over the years, Auschwitz has become a symbol of the Holocaust. It represents the thousands of camps through which millions of Europeans died. Israel Gutman, the Director of the Center for Holocaust Research at Yad Vashem in Israel, estimates that about 85 to 90 percent of all those murdered at Auschwitz were Jews. Among the others were Russian prisoners of war and “Gypsies.” Most were selected for immediate death. The rest were kept alive for slave labor. Surviving one selection was no guarantee that one would survive the next. Nothing in one’s previous existence prepared an individual for Auschwitz. Primo Levi, a Holocaust survivor, wrote that soon after arriving there, “we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man. In a moment, with almost prophetic intuition, the reality was revealed to us: we had reached the bottom. It is not possible to sink lower than this; no human condition is more miserable than this, nor could it conceivably be so.”<sup>2</sup>

Neither our vocabulary nor our standards for behavior can adequately imagine this history. In reading or hearing the accounts of survivors, Professor Lawrence Langer notes, “one is plunged into a world of moral turmoil that may silence judgment...but cannot completely paralyze action, if one still wishes to remain alive... As one wavers between the ‘dreadful’ and the ‘impossible,’ one begins to glimpse a deeper level of reality in the death camps, where moral choice as we know it was superfluous and inmates were left with the futile task of redefining decency in an atmosphere that could not support it.”<sup>3</sup> Facing that history is extraordinarily difficult, but it is necessary for one simple reason: The Holocaust *happened*. That in itself is a fact that we can neither erase nor evade. Many students use their journals to reflect on what they read and view. As one student wrote, “This history is grim and it can build up inside and make you feel ugly and hopeless. At times I did. My journal was a confidant that no person could have been because it was always there.”

## READING 1

### “Sanitary” Language

The Nazis used various euphemisms to refer to the killing of Jews, “Gypsies,” and others they considered “unworthy of life.”

<b>German Word</b>	<b>Literal Meaning</b>	<b>Real Meaning</b>
<i>Ausgemerzt</i>	exterminated (pest)	murdered
<i>Liquidiert</i>	liquidated	murdered
<i>Erfedigt</i>	finished (off)	murdered
<i>Aktionen</i>	actions	missions to seek out Jews and others and kill them
<i>Sonderaktionen</i>	special actions	special killing missions
<i>Sonderbehandlung</i>	special treatment	the death process in camp
<i>Saeuberung</i>	cleansing; purge	sent through the death process
<i>Ausschaltung</i>	elimination	murder of Jews and others
<i>Aussiedlung</i>	evacuation	murder
<i>Umsiedlung</i>	resettlement	murder
<i>Exekutivmassnahme</i>	executive measure	order for murder
<i>Entsprechend behandelt</i>	treated appropriately	murdered
<i>Leosung der Judenfrage</i>	solution of the Jewish question	murder of Jewish people
<i>Judenfrei gemacht</i>	made free of Jews	all Jews in area killed
<i>Spezialeinrichtungen</i>	special installations	gas chambers and crematoria
<i>Badeanstalten</i>	bath installations	gas chambers
<i>Leichenkeller</i>	corpse cellar	crematorium
<i>Endloseung</i>	the Final Solution	the decision to commit genocide

## CONNECTIONS

Compare the literal meanings of each word with its actual meaning. What differences seem most striking? What effect do euphemisms have on a listener or reader? On the speaker or writer? On perpetrators?

There is something odious about playing the numbers game. Every single human life is precious, as the rabbis of old remind us. But we can attain universality only through particularity; there are no short cuts.

Euphemisms are used to distance oneself from an event, deny it, camouflage it, or trivialize it. How do these euphemisms reflect those aims? How do they differ from others you have encountered?

Euphemisms masked not only the Holocaust itself but also the way people viewed individual deaths. Eva Fleischner, a Catholic theologian and educator, has said of the emphasis people place on the number of Jews that were murdered:

There is something odious about playing the numbers game. Every single human life is precious, as the rabbis of old remind us. But we can attain universality only through particularity; there are no shortcuts. The more we come to know about the Holocaust, how it came about, how it was carried out, etc., the greater the possibility that we will become sensitized to inhumanity and suffering whenever they occur. If we take shortcuts we are in danger of losing all distinctions, of what Yosef Yerushalmi calls the “debasement of our vocabulary.” We may soon, then, have simply one more word which for a short time was a new and powerful symbol, but which quickly became empty of meaning.<sup>4</sup>

How do we “attain universality” through “particularity”? How does “their” history become “our” history? Why are there no shortcuts? Many African Americans have labeled their experiences with slavery and dehumanization a “holocaust.” When is the word *holocaust* a useful metaphor for other events? What power do words have to shape our views of the past?

## READING 2

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### *A War within a War*

The war against the Jews took place within the context of the larger war. Otto Ohlendorf, the leader of *Einsatzgruppe D*, said his troops would “enter a village or a city [in occupied Soviet territory] and order the prominent Jewish citizens to call together all Jews for the purpose of resettlement. They were requested to hand over their valuables to the leader of the unit and shortly before execution to surrender their outer clothing. The men, women, and children were led to a place of execution which in most cases was located next to a more deeply excavated anti-tank ditch. Then they were shot, kneeling or standing, and the corpses thrown into the ditch.”<sup>5</sup> Leslie Gordon, one of eleven thousand forced laborers at Kamenets Podolsk, recalls:

I was taken to a group of young men, about twenty-five or thirty young men. We were first given food and then we were given shovels and other tools and were taken about two or three kilometres out of the town beyond the hills.

We had been taken up there and they told us to start digging ditches. We believed that this was for the tanks, that perhaps the Russians were coming back, and the size of the ditches had almost convinced us that this is what was going to be.

We finished one of the trenches at about late evening, I don't know the time. The size of that trench was about twenty metres long on both sides and about five metres wide and about two to two-and-a-half metres deep. That night we were sent to our place to sleep. Before going to sleep they gave us some food.

Next day we started to dig another trench until about late forenoon when we saw two cars coming to the place. Stepping out were very high ranking SS officers, about six or seven of them. They were talking to our commanders and to our guards. We could not hear what they were saying but they pointed to our trenches we had dug.

Shortly after this we saw the people coming up also with shovels and different tools in their hands and they had been ordered to lay down their tools.

These people they ordered to take off all their clothes, they were put in order, and then they were all naked. They were sent to these ditches and SS men, some of them drunk, some of them sober, and some of them photographing, it seems, these people numbering about three hundred to four hundred, I don't know the exact number, were all executed and most of them only got hurt and got buried alive. Quicklime was brought there too, four or five trucks of quicklime.

Firstly, after the shooting we were ordered to put some earth back on the bodies, some of them were still crying for help. We put the earth back on the bodies and then the trucks were emptied of the quicklime.

I am talking about people who are all Jews, no exception. There were some Christians who were trying to hide some Jews and they were hanged.<sup>6</sup>

Ask any survivor; he will tell you, he who has not lived the event will never know it. And he who went through it will not reveal it, not really, not entirely. Between his memory and his reflection there is a wall – and it cannot be pierced.

In larger cities, the Nazis could not kill everyone at once. Instead they collected hundreds at a time for “resettlement in the East.” Abba Kovner, a young Lithuanian Jew, said of one such roundup in Vilna:

People were taken out of their flats, some carrying a few of their possessions, some without any possessions, out of all the courtyards, out of all the flats, they were driven out with cruel beatings. I don't know whether out of wisdom or instinct or momentary weakness I found myself in a stairway, in a dark recess there and I stood there. Out of a small window I saw what was happening in that narrow street.

Until one o'clock A.M., past midnight, this operation was still in progress. During those hours, at midnight I saw from the other

courtyard on the other side of the street, it was 39 Ostrashun Street, a woman was dragged by the hair by two soldiers, a woman who was holding something in her arms. One of them directed a beam of light into her face, the other one dragged her by her hair and threw her on the pavement.

Then the infant fell out of her arms. One of the two, the one with the flashlight, I believe, took the infant, raised him into the air, grabbed him by the leg. The woman crawled on the earth, took hold of his boot and pleaded for mercy. But the soldier took the boy and hit him with his head against the wall, once, twice, smashed him against the wall.<sup>7</sup>

The *Einsatzgruppe* then trucked the victims to open pits where they were slaughtered. Those who remained in the ghetto had no way of knowing what had happened. While some suspected the worst, most hoped for the best. A few British spies did manage to learn the truth, however. In August of 1941, Winston Churchill shared that information with the British people. In a radio address, he reported that “whole districts are being exterminated. Scores of thousands – literally scores of thousands – of executions in cold blood are being perpetrated by the German police-troops upon the Russian patriots who defend their native soil.” He did not specifically refer to the slaughter of Jews but Churchill did note that “we are in the presence of a crime without a name.”

## CONNECTIONS

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Professor Lawrence Langer pushes the reader to make distinctions between memoirs by survivors that help one cope and those writings that encourage confrontation with the Holocaust experience. Do the memories included in this reading help the reader cope with the Holocaust? Or do they encourage the reader to confront the Holocaust experience?

Langer believes that literature of the Holocaust is not a history of survival but of mass extermination, and that makes knowing impossible. Elie Wiesel agrees. “Ask any survivor; he will tell you, he who has not lived the event will never know it. And he who went through it will not reveal it, not really, not entirely. Between his memory and his reflection there is a wall – and it cannot be pierced.”<sup>8</sup> What is the wall to which Wiesel refers? Why can’t it be pierced?

So far in this book, the emphasis has been on choice and decision-making. But now, the victims are faced with what Lawrence Langer refers to as “choice-less choices.” In *Versions of Survival*, he describes these as decisions made in the “absence of humanly significant alternatives – that is, alternatives enabling an individual to make a decision, act on it, and accept the consequences, all within a framework that supports personal integrity and

self-esteem.” What distinguishes a “choice-less choice” from other decisions? Why does Langer believe that normal standards for judging behavior will not apply to all of the “choices” of victims?

Some teachers use simulation games to engage students emotionally or stimulate affective experiences and learning. Such games tend to oversimplify an event or series of events. To imply, for example, that students can “experience the existence of a person victim to the Holocaust” is unfair. It is also unfair to even try to re-create the feelings of participants in this history without carefully preparing students for the experience by helping them view the world from other perspectives. It may be helpful to keep in mind the comments of the boy at Auschwitz who wrote: “If heaven was full of paper and the oceans full of ink – I could not express my pain.”

### READING 3

#### *Reserve Police Battalion 101*

**W**ho were the perpetrators? What kind of person massacres civilians? Slaughters old people? Murders babies? To find answers to such questions, historian Christopher Browning studied interrogations made in the 1960s and early 1970s of 210 men in Reserve Police Battalion 101. The battalion was originally formed from the German equivalent of city policemen and county sheriffs. After 1939, it and other Order Police battalions also served as occupation forces in conquered territory. Battalion 101 was assigned to the district of Lubin in Poland.

Like the National Guard in the United States, battalions were organized regionally. Most of the soldiers in Battalion 101 came from working and lower-middle-class neighborhoods in Hamburg, Germany. They were older than the men who fought in the front lines. The average age was thirty-nine with over half between thirty-seven and forty-two. Most were not well-educated. The majority had left school by the age of fifteen. Very few were Nazis and none was openly antisemitic. Major Wilhelm Trapp, a 53-year-old career police officer who rose through the ranks, headed the battalion. Although he became a Nazi in 1932, he was not a member of the SS, although his two captains were.

The unit’s first killing mission took place on July 13, 1942. Browning used interrogations to piece together the events of that day.

Just as daylight was breaking, the men arrived at the village [of Jozefow] and assembled in a half-circle around Major Trapp, who proceeded to give a short speech. With choking voice and tears in his

A few who admitted that they had been given the choice and yet failed to opt out were quite blunt. One said that he had not wanted to be considered a coward by his comrades. Another – more aware of what truly required courage – said quite simply: “I was cowardly.”

eyes, he visibly fought to control himself as he informed his men that they had received orders to perform a very unpleasant task. These orders were not to his liking, but they came from above. It might perhaps make their task easier, he told the men, if they remembered that in Germany bombs were falling on the women and children. Two witnesses claimed that Trapp also mentioned that the Jews of this village had supported the partisans. Another witness recalled Trapp's mentioning that the Jews had instigated the boycott against Germany. Trapp then explained to the men that the Jews in Jozefow would have to be rounded up, whereupon the young males were to be selected out for labor and the others shot.

Trapp then made an extraordinary offer to his battalion: if any of the older men among them did not feel up to the task that lay before him, he could step out. Trapp paused, and after some moments, one man stepped forward. The captain of 3rd company, enraged that one of his men had broken ranks, began to berate the man. The major told the captain to hold his tongue. Then ten or twelve other men stepped forward as well. They turned in their rifles and were told to await a further assignment from the major.

Trapp then summoned the company commanders and gave them their respective assignments. Two platoons of 3rd company were to surround the village; the men were explicitly ordered to shoot anyone trying to escape. The remaining men were to round up the Jews and take them to the market place. Those too sick or frail to walk to the market place, as well as infants and anyone offering resistance or attempting to hide, were to be shot on the spot. Thereafter, a few men of 1st company were to accompany the work Jews selected at the market place, while the rest were to proceed to the forest to form the firing squads. The Jews were to be loaded onto battalion trucks by 2nd company and shuttled from the market place to the forest.

Having given the company commanders their respective assignments, Trapp spent the rest of the day in town, mostly in a schoolroom converted into his headquarters but also at the homes of the Polish mayor and the local priest. Witnesses who saw him at various times during the day described him as bitterly complaining about the orders he had been given and "weeping like a child." He nevertheless affirmed that "orders were orders" and had to be carried out. Not a single witness recalled seeing him at the shooting site, a fact that was not lost on the men, who felt some anger about it. Trapp's driver remembers him saying later, "If this Jewish business is ever avenged on earth, then have mercy on us Germans."<sup>9</sup>



In describing the massacre, Browning notes, “While the men of Reserve Battalion 101 were apparently willing to shoot those Jews too weak or sick to move, they still shied for the most part from shooting infants, despite their orders. No officer intervened, though subsequently one officer warned his men that in the future they would have to be more energetic.”

As the killing continued, several more soldiers asked to be relieved of their duties. Some officers reassigned anyone who asked, while others pressed their men to continue despite reservations. By midday, the men were being offered bottles of vodka to “refresh” them. As the day continued, a number of soldiers broke down. Yet the majority continued to the end. After the massacre ended, the battalion was transferred to the north part of the district and the various platoons were divided up, each stationed in a different town. All of the platoons took part in at least one more shooting action. Most found that these subsequent murders were easier to perform. Browning therefore sees that first massacre as an important dividing line.

As one man admitted, it was not until years later that he began to consider that what he had done had not been right. He had not given it a thought at the time.

Even twenty-five years later they could not hide the horror of endlessly shooting Jews at point-blank range. In contrast, however, they spoke of surrounding ghettos and watching [Polish “volunteers”] brutally drive the Jews onto the death trains with considerable detachment and a near-total absence of any sense of participation or responsibility. Such actions they routinely dismissed with a standard refrain: “I was only in the police cordon there.” The shock treatment of Jozefow had created an effective and desensitized unit of ghetto-clearers and, when the occasion required, outright murderers. After Jozefow nothing else seemed so terrible.<sup>10</sup>

In reaching conclusions from the interviews, Browning focuses on the choices open to the men he studied. He writes:

Most simply denied that they had any choice. Faced with the testimony of others, they did not contest that Trapp had made the offer but repeatedly claimed that they had not heard that part of his speech or could not remember it. A few who admitted that they had been given the choice and yet failed to opt out were quite blunt. One said that he had not wanted to be considered a coward by his comrades. Another – more aware of what truly required courage – said quite simply: “I was cowardly.” A few others also made the attempt to confront the question of choice but failed to find the words. It was a different time and place, as if they had been on another political planet, and the political vocabulary and values of the 1960s were helpless to explain the situation in which they found themselves in 1942. As one man admitted, it was not until years later that he began to consider that what he had done had not been right. He had not given it a thought at the time.<sup>11</sup>

The men who did not take part were more specific about their motives. Some attributed their refusal to their age or the fact that they were not “career men.” Only one mentioned ties to Jews as a reason for not participating. Browning therefore notes:

What remains virtually unexamined by the interrogators and unmentioned by the policemen was the role of anti-Semitism. Did they not speak of it because anti-Semitism had not been a motivating factor? Or were they unwilling and unable to confront this issue even after twenty-five years, because it had been all too important, all too pervasive? One is tempted to wonder if the silence speaks louder than words, but in the end – the silence is still silence, and the question remains unanswered.

Was the incident at Jozefow typical? Certainly not. I know of no other case in which a commander so openly invited and sanctioned the nonparticipation of his men in a killing action. But in the end the important fact is not that the experience of Reserve Battalion 101 was untypical, but rather that Trapp’s extraordinary offer did not matter. Like any other unit, Reserve Police Battalion 101 killed the Jews they had been told to kill.<sup>12</sup>

## CONNECTIONS

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What part did peer pressure play in the massacre? What part did opportunism play? Antisemitism? What other factors may have influenced participation? Compare the massacre to others you have read about. What differences seem most striking?

The officers described in the reading were concerned for their own psychological well-being and that of their men. Yet they showed no concern for their victims. What does this suggest about their sense of morality – of right and wrong?

What does Browning mean when he writes, “After Jozefow, nothing else seemed so terrible”?

What insights does Stanley Milgram’s research (Chapter 5, Reading 1) offer in understanding the massacre at Jozefow? In Chapter 5, Philip Zimbardo was quoted as saying: “The question to ask of Milgram’s research is not why the majority of normal, average subjects behave in evil (felonious) ways, but what did the disobeying minority do after they refused to continue to shock the poor soul, who was so obviously in pain?” How do his comments apply to the soldiers who refused to take part in the killing? To Major Trapp?

Browning writes of the men who took part in the murders, “A few who admitted that they had been given the choice and yet failed to opt out were quite blunt. One said that he had not wanted to be considered a coward by

his comrades. Another – more aware of what truly required courage – said quite simply: ‘I was cowardly.’” Write a working definition of the word *coward*.

→The film *Genocide*, available from the Facing History Resource Center, shows Heinrich Himmler visiting a pit during an *Einsatzgruppen* action. As he bent forward to see what was happening, he “had the deserved good fortune to be splattered with brains.” According to witnesses, he was more shaken by the damage to his uniform than by the murders. How do you account for his response?

## READING 4

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### *Mechanizing Death*

On December 7, 1941 – the same day the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor – the Nazis transported seven hundred Jews from Kolo, a village in Poland, to the nearby town of Chelmno. There, groups of eighty were herded into vans previously used in the Nazis’ “euthanasia program.” By the end of the day, all seven hundred were dead.

Six weeks later, in January, 1942, the Nazis ordered the 1,600 Jews in the Polish town of Izbica Kujawska to assemble in the town square. Suspicious of the order, the community’s *Judenrat* (or Jewish Council) urged people to flee to nearby forests. Hundreds took their advice. In retaliation, the Nazis shot members of the *Judenrat*. Then they shipped every Jew they could round up to Chelmno. One of them, Yakov Grojanowski, recalled:

We didn’t have to wait long before the next lorry (bus) arrived with fresh victims. It was specially constructed. It looked like a normal large lorry, in grey paint with two hermetically closed rear doors. The inner walls were of steel metal. There weren’t any seats. The floor was covered by a wooden grating, as in public baths, with straw mats on top. Between the driver’s cab and the rear part were two peepholes. With a [flashlight] one could observe through these peepholes if the victims were already dead.

Under the wooden grating were two tubes about fifteen centimetres thick which came out of the cab. The tubes had small openings from which gas poured out. The gas generator was in the cab, where the same driver sat all the time. He wore a uniform of the SS death’s head units and was about forty years old. There were two such vans.

When the lorries approached we had to stand at a distance of five metres from the ditch. The leader of the guard detail was a high-ranking SS man, an absolute sadist and murderer.

He ordered that eight men were to open the doors of the lorry. The smell of gas that met us was overpowering. The victims were gypsies from Lodz. Strewn about the van were all their belongings: accordions, violins, bedding, watches and other valuables.

After the doors had been open for five minutes orders were screamed at us, "Here! You Jews! Get in there and turn everything out!" The Jews scurried into the van and dragged the corpses away.

The work didn't progress quickly enough. The SS leader fetched his whip and screamed, "The devil, I'll give you a hand straight away!" He hit out in all directions on people's heads, ears and so on, till they collapsed. Three of the eight who couldn't get up again were shot on the spot.

When the others saw this they clambered back on their feet and continued the work with their last reserves of energy. The corpses were thrown one on top of another, like rubbish on a heap. We got hold of them by the feet and the hair. At the edge of the ditch stood two men who threw in the bodies. In the ditch stood an additional two men who packed them in head to feet, facing downwards.<sup>13</sup>

When Grojanowski learned that everyone in his family had been killed, he made an important decision. He told an interviewer:

On Monday the 19th January we again boarded the bus in the morning. I let all the others get on in front of me and was the last one aboard. The gendarme sat in front. On this day no SS men rode behind us. To my right was a window which could be opened easily. During the ride I opened the window. When fresh cold air streamed in I caught fright and quickly shut the window again. My comrades, among them Monik Halter in particular, encouraged me, however.

After I made a decision I softly asked my comrades to stand up so the draught of cold air shouldn't reach the gendarmes. I quickly pulled the windowpane out of its frame, pushed my legs out and turned round. I held on to the door with my hand and pressed my feet against the hinges. I told my colleagues they should put the windowpane back immediately after I had jumped. I then jumped at once.

When I hit the ground I rolled for a bit and scraped the skin off my hands. The only thing that mattered to me was not to break a leg. I would hardly have minded breaking an arm. The main thing was that I could walk in order to get to the next Jewish settlement. I turned round to see if they had noticed anything on the bus but it continued its journey.

I lost no time but ran as fast as I could across fields and woods. After an hour I stood before the farm of a Polish peasant. I went inside and greeted him in the Polish manner: "Blessed be Jesus Christ." While I warmed myself I asked cautiously about the distance to Chelmno. It was only 3 kilometres. I also received a piece of bread which I put in my pocket. As I was about to go the peasant asked me if I was a Jew –

which I absolutely denied. I asked him why he suspected me, and he told me they were gassing Jews and Gypsies at Chelmno. I took my leave with the Polish greeting and went away.<sup>14</sup>

On his way to Warsaw, Grojanowski stopped in Grabow where he told the rabbi his story. The rabbi, in turn, wrote to friends in Lodz. But the news came too late to save the Jews of Grabow. They were gassed at Chelmno shortly after the letter was written.

After establishing the first mechanized death camp at Chelmno, the Nazis built three more along rail lines near the former border between Poland and Germany: Belzec, Treblinka, and Sobibor. The only workers in these camps were those who disposed of the corpses. Many of them were previously employed at “euthanasia centers.” There are few written accounts of the four death camps. Only two people survived Belzec and three came through Chelmno alive. Fewer than forty people lived through Treblinka, while sixty-four survived Sobibor.

## CONNECTIONS

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In his letter to his friends in Lodz, Jacob Schulmann, the rabbi of Grabow, wrote, “Do not think that this is being written by a madman. Alas, it is the tragic, horrible truth.” Why are those who bring terrible news often dismissed as “mad”?

→For background on understanding oral testimonies, see Lawrence Langer’s essays in *Elements of Time*, pages 291-316. See also the video, *Imagining the Unimaginable*, available from the Facing History Resource Center and described in *Elements of Time*, pages 180-189.

## READING 5

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### *Blueprint for the “Final Solution”*

In January 1942, representatives from the SS, the SS Race and Settlement Office, the SD, the *Einsatzgruppen*, the Party Chancellery, the Interior Ministry, the Office of the Four-Year Plan, the Justice Ministry, the Office of the Governor General of Poland, the Foreign Office, and the Reich Chancellery met in the Berlin suburb of Wannsee. They had come together to discuss the “Final Solution of the Jewish Question.” It was an official meeting. So minutes were taken and distributed to those who could not attend.

The conference did not mark the start of the Holocaust. Jews were being killed long before the meeting. It was significant, mainly because it turned the “final solution” over to the bureaucrats.

At the beginning of the meeting the Chief of Security Police and the SD, SS Obergruppenfuehrer [Reinhard] Heydrich, announced his appointment by the Reich Marshal [Hermann Goering], as Plenipotentiary for the Preparation of the Final Solution of the European Jewish Question, and pointed out that this conference had been called to clear up fundamental questions. The Reich Marshal's request to have a draft sent to him on the organizational, functional, and material concerns on the final solution of the European Jewish question necessitates prior joint consideration by all central agencies directly concerned with these questions, with a view to keeping policy lines parallel...

In the course of the practical implementation of the final solution, Europe is to be combed from west to east. The Reich area, including the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, will have to be handled in advance, if only because of the housing problem and other sociopolitical necessities.

The evacuated Jews will be brought, group by group, into so-called transit ghettos, to be transported from there farther to the east.<sup>15</sup>

Heydrich argued that there were more than eleven million European Jews if strict racial definitions were applied. The participants then established a complicated set of rules to determine who was and who was not a Jew. The conference did not mark the start of the Holocaust. Jews were being killed long before the meeting. It was significant, mainly because it turned the "final solution" over to the bureaucrats. The murder of Jews would now be carried out in a systematic way. It would be done according to "rules and regulations."

The murder of Jews would now be carried out in a systematic way. It would be done according to "rules and regulations."

## CONNECTIONS

Note the language used in the minutes of the Wannsee Conference. How you account for the way the task is described?

→ The notes taken at the Wannsee Conference, only a small portion of which are included in this reading, are the basis for a feature-length film called *The Wannsee Conference*. The film, available from the Facing History Resource Center, shows how murder can be discussed without ever using the word.

Historical events do not follow a neat timeline. For the most part, mass shootings ended after the Wannsee Conference. But ghettos were enlarged in some places, even as others were destroyed and their inhabitants shipped to death camps.

## READING 6

### *Obedying Orders*

The Wannsee Conference made the “Final Solution” a matter of bureaucratic policy. It was now up to the clerks, administrators, guards, and other employees to enforce it. After the war, journalist Bernt Engelmann listened as a friend described one of those administrators, his cousin Klaus-Gunter. According to Engelmann’s friend, Klaus-Gunter later claimed, “I didn’t harm a hair on anyone’s head and none of us believed in that racial nonsense anyway. We were just little cogs in a huge machine – important cogs, true, but on the whole we did nothing different from any general staff officer.”

Engelmann’s friend went on to say, “Imagine he showed me an old-fashioned gold cigarette case shortly before his chauffeur came for him. ‘The woman to whom this belonged was someone I got an exit visa for – it almost cost me my life,’ he told me. ‘You see, we weren’t monsters.’ I looked at the cover, which had the words engraved, ‘In memory of Lieutenant Helmut Lilienfeld,’ or something like that, and then his date of birth, his regiment, and the day on which he fell ‘for his beloved Fatherland.’...” When Engelmann expressed surprise that Klaus-Gunter kept the case, his friend replied:

[None] of it would have taken place if it hadn’t been ordered from “on high,” if there hadn’t been experts, most of them with university educations,... They sat in their offices and dealt with issues of “political necessity.” They dictated telegraph messages and signed lists and special orders.

No – I’m convinced that Klaus-Gunter thinks of himself as not only competent and hardworking, but even decent and kindhearted. I suppose that’s why he always has the cigarette case on him – as a piece of evidence, so to speak. After all, he didn’t save the woman’s life because of the gold cigarette case. He could have simply kept it and shipped her off to Auschwitz. No, there were other reasons: first of all, this was not an anonymous victim, but a living human being standing before him. Somehow the woman had managed to get in to see him. And then she showed him the cigarette case that had belonged to her dead husband, to prove that she was a war widow. Then he helped her, and he kept the case only to have a memento of his own decency...

Types like my cousin can cold bloodedly murder tens of thousands from their desks, issuing orders on official stationery in standard memorandum form; and they take great pride in their efficiency. But don’t think for a moment Klaus-Gunter would have been capable of beating an old man unconscious and dragging him onto the streetcar tracks, or attacking women and children and driving them into the streets... [Yet none] of it would have taken place if it hadn’t been ordered from “on high,” if there hadn’t been experts, most of them with university educations, organizing everything so that the “operation” could be carried out with split-second timing... They sat

in their offices and dealt with issues of “political necessity.” They dictated telegraph messages and signed lists and special orders – like Klaus-Gunter.”

Engelmann agreed, adding “And girls like my cousin Gudrun, from solid middle-class families, assisted them. They sat there with their chic hairdos and pretty white blouses and typed neat lists of the victims – an important service for *Fuehrer*, *Volk*, and *Vaterland*.”<sup>16</sup>

## CONNECTIONS

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Draw an identity chart for Klaus-Gunter. What did he mean when he said “I didn’t harm a hair on anyone’s head.” Was he lying? Rationalizing? Or did he truly believe he was innocent? How could he and his co-workers send Jews to their deaths and yet argue that “none of us believed in that racial nonsense anyway”? Why do you think he needed “a memento of his own decency”?

Is there a difference between murdering “tens of thousands from their desks” and “shooting Jews at point-blank range” as the men of Reserve Police Battalion 101 did? Compare Klaus-Gunter with the men described in Reading 4. How are they alike? What differences seem most striking? Review Milgram’s experiment (Chapter 5, Reading 1). How does proximity to the victim affect participation? How does the source of the order? For example, are people more obedient to orders if they come from someone who seems to be in authority?

The Germans used the best data-processing device available to help them identify and ultimately deport Jews and other victims. The German-made and American-engineered machine was the forerunner of today’s computer. Herman Hollerith, the inventor, developed the device to help the U.S. government with the 1890 census. He later founded his own company, known today as International Business Machines (IBM). An almost wholly owned German subsidiary manufactured the machines needed to compile deportation lists, prepare concentration camp records, and identify conscript laborers. How did those machines help people like Klaus-Gunter preserve the illusion that they had nothing to do with the murders? Did the fault lie in the technology or the way it was used?

Compare Gudrun’s role to that of her bosses. How is her role similar to theirs? What differences seem most striking? Is she as responsible as they are?



## READING 7

### *The “Final Solution” Accelerates*

At the time the first death camp opened, most Polish Jews lived in ghettos. There they desperately struggled to survive and keep their culture alive. Yet by the spring of 1942, one-fourth of all Jews who would be killed by the Nazis had already died. Just eleven months later – by February, 1943 – three-fourths were dead. In 1961, a survivor named Rivka Yosselevska testified about that eleven-month period. She painfully focused on events in Zagorodski, a Polish town that was home to five hundred Jewish families on a Sabbath day in August 1942.

The Nazi purpose was to obliterate the victim, not merely punish or defeat him: to nullify his spirit, grind up his bones, disperse his ashes, until he literally vanished from the face of the earth.

I remember that day very well. Jews were not allowed to go to pray, yet they would risk their lives and go into a cellar in the ghetto...the only Jews left in the ghetto would endanger their very lives to go into the cellar to pray – very early, before dawn. On that night, there was too much commotion in the ghetto. There was always noise in the ghetto. Germans would be coming in and leaving the ghetto during all hours of the night. But the commotion and noise on that night was not customary, and we felt something in the air.

...We saw that the place was full of Germans. They surrounded the ghetto. We went down and asked – there were some of the police that we knew – and we asked what was going on. Why so many Germans in the ghetto?...

[The policemen] told us that there was a partisan woman trying to get into the ghetto and mix with us. A group of partisans, and if they succeed in mixing amongst us, they hope not to be caught. [The partisans were men and women who engaged in guerilla warfare against the Germans.] This was not true. Our Father came up from the cellar, after his prayer. He could not speak to us. He only wished us “a good month.” This was the first day of the month. I remember very well – this was the first day of the month of Elul – the month of prayer before the Jewish New Year. We were told to leave the houses – to take with us only the children. We were always used to leave the ghetto at short order, because very often they would take us all out for a roll-call. Then we would all appear. But we felt and realized that this was not an ordinary roll-call, but something very special. As if the Angel of Death was in charge. The place was swarming with Germans. Some four to five Germans to every Jew.<sup>17</sup>

According to Yosselevska, the Germans “began saying that he who wishes to save his life could do so with money, jewels and valuable things. This would be ransom, and he would be spared. Thus we were held until

the late afternoon, before evening came.” But she noted, “We had nothing to hand over. They already took all we had before.”

Toward sunrise, “[The] children screamed. They wanted food, water. This was not the first time. But we took nothing with us. We had no food and no water, and we did not know the reason. The children were hungry and thirsty. We were held this way for 24 hours while they were searching the houses all the time – searching for valuables.”

While the Nazis searched, a large truck arrived to take the Jews away. Before loading the truck, the Germans made sure that everyone was accounted for. Yosselevscka explained that she and others who could not be fit on the truck were forced to run after it.

I had my daughter in my arms and ran after the truck. There were mothers who had two or three children and held them in their arms – running after the truck. We ran all the way. There were those who fell – we were not allowed to help them rise. They were shot – right there – wherever they fell. All my family was amongst them. When we all reached the destination, the people from the truck were already down and they were undressed – all lined up. All my family was there – undressed, lined up. The people from the truck, those who arrived before us.

*Q:* Where was that?

*A:* This was some three kilometres from our village – to the place. There was a kind of hillock. At the foot of this little hill, there was a dugout. We were ordered to stand at the top of the hillock and the four devils shot us – each one of us separately.

*Q:* Now these four – to what German unit did they belong?

*A:* They were SS men – the four of them. They were armed to the teeth. They were real messengers of the Devil and the Angel of Death.

*Q:* Please go on – what did you see?

*A:* When I came up to the place – we saw people naked lined up. But we were still hoping that this was only torture. Maybe there is Hope – hope of living. One could not leave the line, but I wished to see – what are they doing on the hillock? Is there anyone down below? I turned my head and saw that some three or four rows were already killed – on the ground. There were some twelve people amongst the dead. I also want to mention that my child said while we were lined up in the Ghetto, she said, “Mother, why did you make me wear the Shabbat dress; we are being taken to be shot;” and when we stood near the dugout, near the grave, she said, “Mother, why are we waiting, let us run!” Some of the young people tried to run, but they were caught immediately, and they were shot right there. It was difficult to hold on to the children. We took all children not just ours, and we carried – we were anxious to get it all over – the suffering of the children was difficult; we all trudged along to come nearer to the place and to come

nearer to the end of the torture of the children. The children were taking leave of their parents and parents of their elder people...

We were driven; we were already undressed; the clothes were removed and taken away; our father did not want to undress; he remained in his underwear. We were driven up to the grave, this shallow...

*Attorney-General:* And these garments were torn off his body, weren't they?

*A:* When it came to our turn, our father was beaten. We prayed, we begged with my father to undress, but he would not undress, he wanted to keep his underclothes. He did not want to stand naked.

*Q:* And then they tore them off?

*A:* Then they tore off the clothing off the old man and he was shot. I saw it with my own eyes. And then they took my mother, and she said, let us go before her; but they caught mother and shot her too; and then there was my grandmother, my father's mother, standing there; she was eighty years old and she had two children in her arms. And then there was my father's sister. She also had children in her arms and she was shot on the spot with the babies in her arms.

*Q:* And finally it was your turn.

*A:* And finally my turn came. There was my younger sister, and she wanted to leave; she prayed with the Germans; she asked to run, naked; she went up to the Germans with one of her friends; they were embracing each other; and she asked to be spared, standing there naked. He looked into her eyes and shot the two of them. They fell together in their embrace, the two young girls, my sister and her young friend. Then my second sister was shot and then my turn did come.

*Q:* Were you asked anything?

*A:* We turned towards the grave and then he turned around and asked "Whom shall I shoot first?" We were already facing the grave. The German asked "Who do you want me to shoot first?" I did not answer. I felt him take the child from my arms. The child cried out and was shot immediately. And then he aimed at me. First he held on to my hair and turned my head around; I stayed standing; I heard a shot, but I continued to stand and then he turned my head again and he aimed the revolver at me and ordered me to watch and then turned my head around and shot at me. Then I fell to the ground into the pit amongst the bodies; but I felt nothing. The moment I did feel I felt a sort of heaviness and then I thought maybe I am not alive any more, but I feel something after I died. I thought I was dead, that this was the feeling which comes after death. Then I felt that I was choking; people falling over me. I tried to move and felt that I was alive and that I could rise. I was strangling. I heard the shots and I was praying for another bullet to put an end to my suffering, but I continued to move about. I felt that

I was choking, strangling, but I tried to save myself, to find some air to breathe, and then I felt that I was climbing towards the top of the grave above the bodies. I rose, and I felt bodies pulling at me with their hands, biting at my legs, pulling me down, down. And yet with my last strength I came up on top of the grave, and when I did I did not know the place, so many bodies were lying all over, dead people; I wanted to see the end of this stretch of dead bodies but I could not. It was impossible. They were lying, all dying; suffering; not all of them dead, but in their last sufferings; naked; shot, but not dead. Children crying "Mother," "Father;" I could not stand on my feet.

*Presiding Judge:* Were the Germans still around?

*A:* No, the Germans were gone. There was nobody there. No one standing up.

*Attorney-General:* And you were undressed and covered with blood?

*A:* I was naked, covered with blood, dirty from the other bodies, with the excrement from other bodies which was poured onto me.

*Q:* What did you have in your head?

*A:* When I was shot I was wounded in the head.

*Q:* Was it in the back of the head?

*A:* I have a scar to this day from the shot by the Germans; and yet, somehow I did come out of the grave. This was something I thought I would never live to recount. I was searching among the dead for my little girl, and I cried for her – Merkele was her name – Merkele! There were children crying "Mother!" "Father!" -- but they were all smeared with blood and one could not recognize the children. I cried for my daughter. From afar I saw two women standing. I went up to them. They did not know me, I did not know them, and then I said who I was, and then they said, "So you survived." And there was another woman crying "Pull me out from amongst the corpses, I am alive, help!" We were thinking how could we escape from the place. The cries of the woman, "Help, pull out from the corpses!" We pulled her out. Her name was Mikla Rosenberg. We removed the corpses and the dying people who held onto her and continued to bite. She asked us to take her out, to free her, but we did not have the strength.

*Attorney-General:* It is very difficult to relate, I am sure, it is difficult to listen to, but we must proceed. Please tell us now: after that you hid?

*A:* And thus we were there all night, fighting for our lives, listening to the cries and the screams and all of a sudden we saw Germans, mounted Germans. We did not notice them coming in because of the screamings and the shoutings from the bodies around us.

*Q:* And then they rounded up the children and the others who had got out of the pit and shot them again?

*A:* The Germans ordered that all the corpses be heaped together into one big heap and with shovels they were heaped together, all the corpses, amongst them many still alive, children running about the place. I saw them. I saw the children. They were running after me, hanging onto me. Then I sat down in the field and remained sitting with the children around me. The children who got up from the heap of corpses.

*Q:* Then the Germans came again and rounded up the children?

*A:* Then Germans came and were going around the place. We were ordered to collect all the children, but they did not approach me, and I sat there watching how they collected the children. They gave a few shots and the children were dead. They did not need many shots. The children were almost dead, and this Rosenberg woman pleaded with the Germans to be spared, but they shot her.

*Attorney-General:* Mrs. Yosselevscka, after they left the place, you went right next to the grave, didn't you?

*A:* They all left – the Germans and the non-Jews from around the place. They removed the machine guns and they took the trucks. I saw that they all left, and the four of us, we went onto the grave, praying to fall into the grave, even alive, envying those who were dead already and thinking what to do now. I was praying for death to come. I was praying for the grave to be opened and to swallow me alive. Blood was spurting from the grave in many places, like a well of water, and whenever I pass a spring now, I remember the blood which spurting from the ground, from that grave. I was digging with my fingernails, trying to join the dead in that grave. I dug with my fingernails, but the grave would not open. I did not have enough strength. I cried out to my mother, to my father, “Why did they not kill me? What was my sin? I have no one to go to. I saw them all being killed. Why was I spared? Why was I not killed?” And I remained there, stretched out on the grave, three days and three nights.<sup>18</sup>

## CONNECTIONS

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According to Lawrence Langer, our usual vocabulary is inadequate when applied to the Holocaust.

All survivor accounts, and all narratives about survivors and their experience, are limited by a number of inescapable restrictions... They must depend on a vocabulary that finds little resonance in the universe of the death camps: “suffocation in the gas chamber” grates harshly against more consoling descriptions like “salvation through suffering” or “tragic insight.” But some writers on the Holocaust find it

so difficult to absorb this abrasive contradiction that instead of altering our perception of moral reality, they try to adapt the fact of extermination to ideas of suffering and heroism.”<sup>19</sup>

Langer goes on to say:

Many students of the Holocaust seem dismayed by how easily that event undermined men’s sense of their physical and spiritual worth. The Nazi purpose was to obliterate the victim, not merely punish or defeat him: to nullify his spirit, grind up his bones, disperse his ashes, until he literally vanished from the face of the earth. Although the full purpose miscarried, the attempt is still very much alive to the human imagination, which must now rebuild a sense of worth in a universe that was willing to see so many perish for nothing. But let us be honest about the implications of this process. Words can be used to strip the facade from atrocity, or to masquerade a dignified image of the humiliated self.<sup>20</sup>

## READING 8

### *The Jewish Councils*

In every ghetto, members of the *Judenrat* convinced themselves that there *was* a path to survival *if* they could only find it. The notes of their meetings reveal their agonized efforts to find the *right* solution. In Bialystok, for example, the minutes of August 15, 1942 read as follows:

[Engineer Ephraim] Barash takes the floor for a report.

The most important events in the ghetto lately have been the visits to our enterprises, and generally to the ghetto. They are important for our fate, our being or nonbeing hangs on these visits, says Eng. Barash...

The opinions which we heard both from them and their escorts prove that our way – to make the ghetto useful to the authorities – is the correct one.

The scope of the enterprises is unbelievable. They employ 1,700 persons. In knitwear the number of women at work has doubled. The new factories which we had planned to set in operation – of barrels and horseshoes – are already long at work...

About our fate? Everyone would gladly hear our opinions. In the ghetto people often spread different false rumors. That comes no doubt from the great fear which seizes the populace, and sometimes they may possibly be circulated with malice aforethought; perhaps someone wants to create panic among the Jews. Eng. Barash asserts that the rumors [presumably about imminent deportations] are complete and utter lies.

What is Bialystok's situation? I am convinced that our path is the only correct one. True, there have been such signals before, that the Bialystok ghetto is too large, too many Jews are here. This view is expressed especially by the new faces, just arrived, but the regularly stationed Germans here are for the ghetto, the local authorities appreciate us. And as long as there is no general decree from above, no peril awaits us.<sup>21</sup>

At another meeting, on October 11, Barash argued that people would be safe if they were useful to the Nazis. At the end of that meeting, Rabbi Rosenman closed the meeting with these words:

You have heard reports about the situation, mainly from Eng. Barash, and at the end I want to add: We always entreat and pray: "Stop the mouths of our enemies and detractors." But we ourselves, by our own behavior, open their mouths. We must conduct ourselves rightly, so they should not say that Jews are a gang of liars, parasites, loafers; we must prove that we are fit to work and honest people, and thereby we will be saved.<sup>22</sup>

Work did not save the Jews of Bialystok just as it failed to save those in other ghettos. Why did people continue to believe that there was a way out of the madness? The story of Adam Czerniakow, the head of the *Judenrat* in the Warsaw Ghetto, offers some clues. In July 1942, he heard rumors that deportations would soon begin. But Nazi officials assured him that only the unemployed would be affected. When the rumors persisted, he asked again and was again told that workers would be safe. Yet, just two days later, the Nazis came to him with a demand that six thousand Jews be deported from the ghetto each day. Czerniakow wrote in his diary, "When I asked for the number of days per week in which the operation would be carried out, the number was seven days a week." He concluded, "There is nothing left for me but to die." He committed suicide later that same day.

In every ghetto, members of the *Judenrat* convinced themselves that there was a path to survival if they could only find it. The notes of their meetings reveal their agonized efforts to find the right solution.

Soon after Czerniakow's death, Jan Karski, a Gentile member of the Polish resistance visited the Warsaw ghetto. Jan Karski was smuggled in just before he left the country so that he could tell the world what was happening to the Jews of Poland. He said of the ghetto:

It was not a world. This was not humanity. Streets full, full. Apparently all of them lived in the street, exchanging what was the most important, everybody offering something to sell – three onions, two onions, some cookies. Selling. Begging each other. Crying and hungry. Those horrible children – some children running by themselves or with their mothers sitting. It wasn't humanity. It was...some hell. Now in this part of the ghetto, the central ghetto, there were German officers. If the Gestapo released somebody, the Gestapo officers had to pass through the ghetto to get out of it. There were also Germans, German traffic. Now the Germans in uniform, they were

walking...silence! Everybody frozen until they passed. No movement, no begging, nothing. Germans...contempt. This is apparent that they are subhuman. They are not human...

But I reported what I saw. It was not a world. It was not a part of humanity. I was not part of it. I did not belong there. I never saw such things, I never... nobody wrote about this kind of reality. I never saw any theater, I never saw any movie... this was not the world. I was told that these were human beings – they didn't look like human beings. Then we left. [The man who brought me to the ghetto] embraced me then, "Good luck, good luck." I never saw him again.<sup>23</sup>

## CONNECTIONS

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Study the minutes of the meetings in Bialystok. Was Barash's reasoning logical? To disagree, what would you have had to believe?

In his memoir, *Night*, Elie Wiesel wrote that in the ghetto neither German nor Jew ruled. What does he mean? What evidence can you find to support his statement in this reading? In other readings?

→Y. Rudashevski, a young Jew in the Vilna Ghetto, wrote on December 13, 1942, "Today the ghetto celebrated the circulation of the 100,000th book in the ghetto library... Hundreds of people read in the ghetto. The reading of books in the ghetto is the greatest pleasure to me. The book unites us with the future, the book unites us with the world." Samuel Bak, now an internationally-known artist, held his first art exhibition at the age of nine in the Vilna Ghetto. How do you account for such efforts to not only preserve but enrich Jewish culture amid the death and destruction of ghetto life? For additional information about Samuel Bak and his family, see *Elements of Time*, pages 4-10. Slides of his boyhood work are available from the Resource Center. One of his paintings appears on the cover of this book.

→How did Jan Karski describe the inhabitants of the Warsaw Ghetto? How did he account for what he saw? A video-taped interview with Karski is available from the Facing History Resource Center. (A summary of that interview can be found in *Elements of Time*, page 64.) The film, *Shoah*, is also available. It is the work of Claude Lanzmann who conducted 350 hours of interviews over a period of eleven years in fourteen nations. Although the video is too long for classroom use, many teachers use sections of the documentary in their classrooms.



## READING 9

### *Emptying the Ghettos*

Members of every *Judenrat* had to decide who in their community would be “resettled in the east.” It was the most painful choice each would ever make. Before carrying out a deportation order, Chaim Rumkowski, the head of Lodz *Judenrat*, told his fellow Jews, “Yesterday I received an order to send over 20,000 Jews out of the ghetto. ‘If you don’t do it, we will.’ And the question arose, ‘Should we do it or leave it to others?’ Even more important is the question of not how many will we lose but of how many can we save?” He then urged that the sick be sacrificed to save the healthy. But no one was willing to make such choices. So when the *Judenrat* did not supply enough Jews for deportation, the SS and the German police did the job for them. The same was true in other ghettos.

One of the most haunting deportations involved Henryk Goldsmit, a Warsaw physician and one of the most respected men in Poland. Known to Jews and Christians alike as Janusz Korczak, Goldsmit offered advice on child-rearing over the radio before the war. He also ran an orphanage in what became the Warsaw Ghetto. Once the war began, Goldsmit tried desperately to protect his young charges. Only his diary revealed the depths of his despair. In June, 1942, he noted that “the day began with the weighing of the children. The month of May showed a marked decline. The earlier months of this year were not too bad, and even May isn’t yet all that alarming. But we still have two months or more before the harvest... The children look dreamy. Only their outer skin looks normal. Underneath lurks fatigue, discouragement, anger, mutiny, mistrust, resentment, longing. The seriousness of their diaries hurts.”

I’ll never forget the sight to the end of my life. It wasn’t just entering a boxcar – it was a silent but organized protest against the murderers, a march like which no human eye had ever seen before.

When the Nazis ordered Goldsmit and his children deported, a number of Polish Gentiles offered to hide him. He refused, choosing instead to remain with his orphans. One observer wrote:

It was an unbearably hot day. I put the children from the home at the far end of the square, near the wall. I thought that I might manage to save them that way at least until the afternoon, and possibly until the next day. I suggested to Korczak that he come with me to the ghetto officials and ask them to intervene. He refused, because he didn’t want to leave the children for even a minute. They began loading the train. I stood by the column of ghetto police who were putting people in the boxcars and watched with my heart in my mouth in the hope that my stratagem would succeed. But they kept packing them in and there was still room left. Urged on by whips, more and more people were jammed into the cars. Suddenly Schmerling – the sadistic ghetto police officer whom the Germans had put in charge of the Umschlagplatz –

commanded that the children be brought to the cars. Korczak went at their head. I'll never forget the sight to the end of my life. It wasn't just entering a boxcar – it was a silent but organized protest against the murderers, a march like which no human eye had ever seen before. The children went four-by-four. Korczak went first with his head held high, leading a child with each hand. The second group was led by Stefa Wilczynska [Korczak's assistant]. They went to their death with a look full of contempt for their assassins. When the ghetto policemen saw Korczak, they snapped to attention and saluted. "Who is that man?" asked the Germans. I couldn't control myself any longer, but I hid the flood of tears that ran down my cheeks with my hands. I sobbed and sobbed at our helplessness in the face of such murder.<sup>24</sup>

## CONNECTIONS

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What options did the *Judenrat* think were open to them? For example, what did Rumkowski mean when he said that "I have to cut off limbs to save the body?" What were the "limbs?" The "body?" What were the likely results if Rumkowski and others refused to cooperate with the Nazis? What were the results if they agreed to go along?

Why were observers so moved by deportation of Goldsmit and the orphans? Why did the observer describe the event as "a silent but organized protest against the murderers, a march like which no human eye had ever seen before?" In what sense was it a protest? Record your thoughts in your journal.

→Roman Vishniac's book *The Life That Disappeared* contains photographs of Jewish life in Eastern Europe, just before the Nazi invasion of Poland. Vishniac's pictures "constitute the last pictorial record of a unique world that vanished only one year later." They also offer an interesting contrast to *The Camera of My Family*, a visual record of a German Jewish family that was wiped out in the Holocaust. The two sets of materials counter the image of the Jews found in *The Warsaw Ghetto*, a documentary made by the BBC from Nazi films and photographs. (See Connections in Chapter 6, Reading 17 for Lucy Dawidowicz's concerns about showing propaganda films.)

## READING 10

### *Deception, Terror, and Resistance*

**R**esistance was complicated by a variety of factors. Some victims were unable to believe what lay ahead. They were easily deceived by the slivers of hope the Nazis offered their victims. Sometimes it was the possibility of a ghetto run entirely by Jews; at others it was the hope of resettlement in the east. Often people were willing to believe on the strength of little more than the need to buy a railroad ticket. Surely people being shipped to their deaths would not have to buy a ticket!

The Nazis also used fear and intimidation to prevent resistance. Anyone who challenged them could expect immediate retaliation. In May 1942, for example, two Czech resistance fighters parachuted into their country from a British plane and assassinated Reinhard Heydrich. The Nazis executed not only the two soldiers but also five other members of the Czech resistance. Then claiming that Lidice had served as a base for Heydrich's killers, the Nazis murdered every male in the town and set fire to every building. When the fire burned out, they dynamited the ruins and leveled the rubble. Czechs were not the only ones to pay. The day Heydrich died, the Nazis executed 158 Jews in Berlin and shipped three thousand others from Theresienstadt, a concentration camp in Czechoslovakia, to death camps farther east.

The question is not why all the Jews did not fight, but how so many of them did. Tormented, beaten, starved, where did they find the strength – spiritual and physical – to resist?

Resistance was also complicated by the way many non-Jews regarded Jews. In 1944, Isabelle Leitner was a teenager living in Kisvarda, an Hungarian town of about 20,000. She recalls her last day.

On Monday morning, May 29, 1944, the ghetto was evacuated. Jews, thousands upon thousands of Jews – every shape and form, every age, with every ailment, those whose Aryan blood was not Aryan enough, those who had changed their religion oh, so long ago – dragged themselves down the main street toward the railroad station for what the Germans called “deportation.” Upon their backs, bundles and backpacks – the compulsory “50 kilos of your best clothing and food” (which the Germans could later confiscate in one simple operation).

And the Hungarian townspeople, the gentiles – they were there too. They stood lining the streets, many of them smiling, some hiding their smiles. Not a tear. Not a good-bye. They were the good people, the happy people. They were the Aryans.

“We are rid of them, those smelly Jews,” their faces read. “The town is ours!”  
Main Street, Hungary.<sup>25</sup>

Leitner later wondered, “You could have thrown a morsel of sadness our way but you didn't. Why?” Similar scenes were repeated throughout

Europe. Yet Jews in every part of Europe fought back. Even in places where resistance seemed impossible, it occurred. In the Vilna ghetto, where the Nazis had been killing Jews since the fall of 1941, Abba Kovner issued this call in January 1942:

Let us not be led like sheep to the slaughter!  
Jewish youth!  
In a time of unparalleled national misfortune we appeal to you!  
We do not yet have the words to express the whole tragic struggle which transpires before our eyes. Our language has no words to probe the depths to which our life has fallen...  
Let us defend ourselves during a deportation!  
For several months now, day and night, thousands and tens of thousands have been torn away from our midst, men, the aged, women, and children, led away like cattle – and we, the remainder, are numbed. The illusion still lives within us that they are still alive somewhere, in an undisclosed concentration camp, in a ghetto.  
You believe and hope to see your mother, your father, your brother who was seized and has disappeared.  
In the face of the next day which arrives with the horror of deportation and murder, the hour has struck to dispel the illusion: There is no way out of the ghetto, except the way to death!  
No illusion greater than that our dear ones are alive.  
No illusion more harmful than that. It deadens our feelings, shatters our national unity in the moments before death.  
Before our eyes they led away our mother, our father, our sisters – enough!  
We will not go!  
Comrades! Uphold this awareness and impart to your families, to the remnants of the Jerusalem of Lithuania.  
--Do not surrender into the hands of the kidnappers!  
--Do not hand over any other Jews!  
--If you are caught, you have nothing to lose!  
--Let us defend ourselves, and not go!  
Better to fall with honor in the ghetto than to be led like sheep to Ponary!<sup>26</sup>

To succeed, the Jews of Vilna needed weapons. Yet their efforts to secure arms were repeatedly blocked. Many gentile resistance groups refused to help them, arguing that the Jews had a different agenda. Resistance also required an organization and a people united in the belief that there was no other alternative. Jews could not agree on much. They were divided politically, economically, and religiously. Still, the Jews of Vilna were eventually able to put aside these differences and work together. So did Jews in Warsaw, Kovno, Bialystok, Bedzin-Sosnowiec, Cracow, and eleven other cities.

## CONNECTIONS

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Elie Wiesel has observed, “The question is not why all the Jews did not fight, but how so many of them did. Tormented, beaten, starved, where did they find the strength – spiritual and physical – to resist?” How might Kovner answer Wiesel’s question? How would you answer it?

In Reading 9, a witness saw the march of the orphans as testimony to the human spirit. Here Kovner likens a similar march to “sheep being led to slaughter.” Which view comes closest to your own?

Because of Nazi reprisals, anyone who resisted put others at risk. Does one have the right to endanger others in this way?

In France and other western nations, many Jews joined non-Jews in the Resistance – the fight to free their country from the Nazis. In the East, resistance groups were often reluctant to accept Jews. How do you account for the difference? How do you think the Germans took advantage of the difference?

## READING 11

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### *The Uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto*

When the Nazis began to deport Jews from Warsaw in the summer of 1942, many Jews there called for open resistance. That fall, some of them organized the ZOB (its initials in Yiddish stand for the Jewish Fighting Organization). When the Nazis began a new round of deportations in January 1943, the ZOB struck back. Surprised by the move, the Nazis stopped deportations for a time, but the Jews had no reason to rejoice. It was only a matter of time until they began again.

On April 19, 1943, the first day of the Jewish holiday of Passover, General Juergen Stroop arrived in Warsaw. He came prepared to wipe out all opposition by the following day, Hitler’s birthday. Stroop had 2,100 soldiers with 13 heavy machine guns, 69 hand-held machine guns, 135 submachine guns, several howitzers, and 1,358 rifles. The 1,200 Jewish resisters had 2 submachine guns and 17 rifles. A week later, Stroop reported to his superiors in Berlin:

Some have called resistance a choice Jews made about how to die rather than about how to live. Others argue that resistance is more about the will to live and the power of hope than it is about death.

The resistance put up by the Jews and bandits could be broken only by relentlessly using all our force and energy by day and night. On 23 April 1943 the Reichsfuehrer SS issued through the higher SS and Police Fuehrer East at Cracow his order to complete the combing out of the Warsaw Ghetto with the greatest severity and relentless tenacity. I therefore decided to destroy the entire Jewish residential area by setting every block on fire, including the blocks of residential buildings

near the armament works. One concern after the other was systematically evacuated and subsequently destroyed by fire. The Jews then emerged from their hiding places and dug-outs in almost every case. Not infrequently, the Jews stayed in the burning buildings until, because of the heat and the fear of being burned alive they preferred to jump down from the upper stories after having thrown mattresses and other upholstered articles into the street from the burning buildings. With their bones broken, they still tried to crawl across the street into blocks of buildings which had not yet been set on fire or were only partly in flames. Often Jews changed their hiding places during the night, by moving into the ruins of burnt-out buildings, taking refuge there until they were found by our patrols. Their stay in the sewers also ceased to be pleasant after the first week. Frequently from the street, we could hear loud voices coming through the sewer shafts.<sup>27</sup>

Simha Rottem, a survivor, later told filmmaker Claude Lanzmann.

During the first three days of fighting, the Jews had the upper hand. The Germans retreated at once to the ghetto entrance, carrying dozens of wounded with them. From then on, their onslaught came entirely from the outside, through air attack and artillery. We couldn't resist the bombing, especially their method of setting fire to the ghetto. The whole ghetto was ablaze. All life vanished from the streets and houses. We hid in the cellars and bunkers. From there we made our sorties. We went out at night. The Germans were in the ghetto mostly by day, leaving at night. They were afraid to enter the ghetto at night...

I don't think the human tongue can describe the horror we went through in the ghetto. In the streets, if you can call them that, for nothing was left of the streets, we had to step over heaps of corpses. There was no room to get around them. Besides fighting the Germans, we fought hunger and thirst. We had no contact with the outside world; we were completely isolated, cut off from the world. We were in such a state that we could no longer understand the very meaning of why we went on fighting. We thought of attempting a breakout to the Aryan part of Warsaw, outside the ghetto.

Just before May 1 Sigmund and I were sent to try to contact Antek [second-in-command of the Jewish Combat Organization, whose real name was Itzhak Zuckermann] in Aryan Warsaw. We found a tunnel under Bonifraterska Street that led out into Aryan Warsaw. Early in the morning we suddenly emerged into a street in broad daylight. Imagine us on that sunny May 1, stunned to find ourselves in the street, among normal people. We'd come from another planet. People immediately jumped on us, because we certainly looked exhausted, skinny, in rags. Around the ghetto there were always suspicious Poles who grabbed Jews. By a miracle, we escaped them. In Aryan Warsaw, life went on as naturally and normally as before. The cafes operated

normally, the restaurants, buses, streetcars, and movies were open. The ghetto was an isolated island amid normal life.<sup>28</sup>

The Jews managed to hold out for nearly a month. When the Nazis finally put down the uprising on May 16, they destroyed the ghetto and killed many of the rebels. Others took their own lives before the Nazis could reach them. Only a few managed to escape through the sewers that lay beneath the ghetto to join other Polish resistance fighters.

## CONNECTIONS

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Some have called resistance a choice Jews made about how to die rather than about how to live. Others argue that resistance is more about the will to live and the power of hope than it is about death. Which view is closest to your own?

Compare Rottem's description of the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto with Stroop's. What differences are most striking?

→ "I was very immature, a very sheltered little girl. And when the world war came I grew up overnight. I really did." recalls Helen K., a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and Majdanek. What do you think she means when she says that she grew up overnight? Helen's experiences as a teenager in the Warsaw Ghetto are available on videotape from the Facing History Resource Center and are described in *Elements of Time*, pages 35-39.

→ Jan Karski, the Polish courier who visited the Warsaw Ghetto, recalls how difficult it was for Jews to escape from the ghetto, because the Poles refused to help them. A videotape of Karski's testimony is available from the Facing History Resource Center and is summarized in *Elements of Time*, pages 64-65.

## READING 12

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### *In Hiding*

Historian Deborah Dwork believes that uprisings like the one in the Warsaw Ghetto were "spectacular, awe-inspiring, and monumentally courageous." Yet in her mind there were other forms of courage and resistance in the ghettos that were equally spectacular. What were they?

The policy, for example, of Czerniakow in Warsaw and Gens in Vilna to educate, feed, and protect children out of proportion to their ghettos' resources was another way in which Jews opposed the press of Nazism and held fast to their principles and responsibilities. The activities of Jewish networks throughout Nazi-occupied Europe to save

the children is also too frequently forgotten. And, most poignant, the decisions taken by the children's parents on behalf of their daughters and sons is an overwhelmingly painful form of courage and resistance. It cannot be stressed too fervently that it was the parents who took the first step and the most terrifying step in the protection of their children, as it was they who had to determine whether it was best to send them into hiding, to try to smuggle them out of the country, or to keep them at their side.<sup>29</sup>

Among those who went into hiding was the Frank family in the Netherlands. Otto and Edith Frank chose to "disappear" with their two daughters soon after Margot, their eldest child, received a deportation notice. In the summer of 1942, Otto Frank led the family into a hiding place in his business. His youngest daughter, thirteen-year-old Anne, called it the "Secret Annex" in her diary. The Franks were later joined by the van Pels family and later still by a dentist, Dr. Pfeffer. (In the diary, the van Pelses became the van Daans and Pfeffer became Dussel.) The eight remained hidden for twenty-five months. In her diary, Anne poured out her feelings to Kitty, an imaginary friend:

As you can easily imagine we often ask ourselves here despairingly: "What, oh, what is the use of the war, why can't people live peacefully together, why all this destruction?" The question is very understandable, but no one has found a satisfactory answer to it so far, yes, why do they still make more gigantic planes in England, still heavier bombs and then prefabricated houses for reconstruction? Why are millions spent daily on the war and not a penny on medical services, artists or on poor people? Why do some people have to starve while there are surpluses rotting in other parts of the world? Oh, why are people so crazy? I don't believe the big men, the politicians and the capitalists alone are responsible for the war, oh no, the little man is just as guilty, otherwise the people of the world would have risen in revolt long ago! There's in people an urge simply to destroy, an urge to kill, to murder and rage and until all mankind without exception undergoes a great change wars will be waged, everything that has been built, cultivated and grown will be cut down and disfigured to begin all over after that!<sup>30</sup>

The policy, for example, of Czerniakow in Warsaw and Gens in Vilna to educate, feed, and protect children out of proportion to their ghettos' resources was another way in which Jews opposed the press of Nazism and held fast to their principles and responsibilities.

Anne and the others stayed alive with help of four former employees of Otto Frank: Miep Gies (born Hermine Santrouschitz), Victor Kugler, Johannes Kleiman, and Elli Voskuijl.

They have pulled us through up till now and we hope they will bring us safely to dry land. Otherwise, they will have to share the same fate as the many others who are being searched for. Never have we heard one word of the burden which we certainly must be to them, never has one of them complained of all the trouble we give. They all come upstairs every day, talk to the men about business and politics, to the women about food and wartime difficulties, and about newspapers and books with the



children. They put on the brightest possible faces, bring flowers and presents for birthdays and bank holidays, are always ready to help and do all they can. That is something we must never forget; although others may show heroism in the war or against the Germans, our helpers display heroism in their cheerfulness and affection.<sup>31</sup>

For those who sheltered Jews, finding a safe hiding place was only a part of the problem. Food was rationed during the war. So rescuers had to find extra ration books or buy supplies on the “black market.” Illness posed a special risk. Miep Gies later wrote that by the winter of 1943, “all Jews in Amsterdam were gone. About the only way a Jew was seen now was floating face down in a canal. Jews were thrown there by the very people who had hidden them, for one of the worst situations that could arise for us helpers was if someone in hiding died. What to do with the body? It was a terrible dilemma, as a Jew could not properly be buried.”<sup>32</sup>

Anne followed the course of both wars: the one between the Nazis and the Allied troops and the one against the Jews. Some events gave her nightmares. Others offered hope. On July 15, 1944, she wrote.

That’s the difficulty in these times: ideals, dreams, and cherished hopes rise within us, only to meet the horrible truth and be shattered. It’s really a wonder that I haven’t dropped all my ideals, because they seem so absurd and impossible to carry out. Yet I keep them, because in spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart. I simply can’t build up my hopes on a foundation consisting of confusion, misery and death. I see the world gradually being turned into a wilderness, I hear the ever approaching thunder, which will destroy us too, I can feel the sufferings of millions and yet, if I look up into the heavens, I think that it will all come right, that this cruelty too will end, and that peace and tranquillity will return again.

In the meantime, I must uphold my ideals, for perhaps the time will come when I shall be able to carry them out.<sup>33</sup>

Three weeks later, on the morning of August 4, 1944, the Nazis marched into the “Secret Annex” and captured everyone. Only Miep Gies, a native of Vienna, was not arrested – possibly because the officer in charge was also Viennese. All eight Jews were shipped to death camps. Only Otto Frank survived. When he returned to Amsterdam after the war, Miep Gies gave him some papers found after the arrests. Anne’s diary was among them.

The Franks were not the only ones to go into hiding. In the Netherlands alone, twenty-five thousand people tried to find a safe place. Most hid alone and few stayed in one place longer than a few weeks. Max Gosschalk recalls:

I came from a safe home. I had to understand so many things which I could not understand. You had left all your safety, all your security. You had to grow up in a week; it’s not possible. But you felt so insecure. If you took something with you it was always fear; fear of being caught, fear of being tortured, fear of betraying other people.

Those are three of the worst. You never got any love from anyone. As a young person, I've been in the houses of wonderful people. And I never could trust them because today I was there – how long? One week, two weeks, nobody ever said anything. Then suddenly, something new. Never a chance of getting attached to someone.<sup>34</sup>

## CONNECTIONS

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How does historian Deborah Dwork define *courage*? *Resistance*? How does she expand our understanding of both words?

Why do you think Anne Frank has become a symbol of the millions of men, women, and children who died in the Holocaust?

What did Frank mean when she differentiated between the “big men” and the “little men”? Do you agree?

A man hidden as a boy describes the experience as “all of a sudden a way of life without life.” What is he saying about the experience? Would Anne Frank agree? Max Gosschalk?

→Paul D., then a child in Moldava, recalled his first memory of the horror of deportation. “We [my family and I] went into hiding and I remember we were in the attic of a gentile friend of the family. And I saw through a little crack in a window Jews being herded toward the railroad station.” Paul was only five years old at the time. His story and that of Menachem S. appear in the video montage *Childhood Memories* available from the Facing History Resource Center.

→Rachel G., a Jewish girl from Belgium, recalls the day her father took her into hiding with a priest. “My mother could not take me to those people. Of course, I couldn't understand. My mother crying and only my father could take and explain to me, ‘Don't forget, you're a Jewish little girl and we're going to see you again. But you must do that, you must go away. We are doing this for your best.’” How could this action be for Rachel's best since she and her parents were so unhappy and desperate? For Rachel's story and others, see the video montage *Stories of Separatism* available from the Facing History Resource Center and described in *Elements of Time*, pages 198-206.

→The film *So Many Miracles* explores the experiences of Jews hidden in Poland; *Weapons of the Spirit* examines how several thousand Jewish children were hidden among Christians in the French town of Le Chambon. Both films are available from the Facing History Resource Center with accompanying study guides.

→The Facing History Resource Center has a study guide to accompany the exhibition “Anne Frank in the World, 1929-1945” Also available from the center are videos about the Frank Family – *Dear Kitty*, *Just a Diary*, and an interview with Otto Frank from the film *Avenue of the Just*. A videotaped lecture entitled “The World of Anne Frank: Historical Background” by Paul Bookbinder is also available.

## READING 13

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### *The “Model” Concentration Camp*

At the Wannsee Conference in January 1942, SS Chief of Security Reinhard Heydrich had discussed the idea of creating a “privileged camp.” It would be a propaganda tool to deceive Jews about the dangers of deportation and fool the world about what was really happening to the Jews. The Nazis chose Theresienstadt, a prison camp forty miles north of Prague, Czechoslovakia, for the purpose. The Nazis promoted it as a “model” camp where elderly Jews, much decorated veterans of World War I, and prominent individuals whose murder might raise awkward questions could live and work in “comfortable circumstances.” The inmates included a number of famous poets, painters, musicians, composers, and scholars.

German officials often referred to the camp as Theresienbad. (*Bad* is the German word for *spa*). They claimed that it was a “paradise ghetto” and forced inmates to create propaganda that supported that image. In real life, Terezinstadt was no paradise. Peter Fischel, a fifteen-year-old who died at Auschwitz, wrote of the camp.

We have gotten used to getting up at 7 o'clock in the morning, standing in a long line at midday, and at 7 o'clock in the evening, holding a plate into which they pour some hot water tasting a trifle salty, or perhaps with a suggestion of coffee, or to get a small portion of potatoes. We have got used to sleeping without beds, to greeting any person wearing a uniform, to keeping off the footpaths. We have got used to have our faces slapped for no reason whatsoever, to getting hit, and to killings. We have got used to seeing people wallowing in their own excrement, to seeing coffins full of dead people, to seeing the sick lying in filth and stench and to seeing the doctors powerless.<sup>35</sup>

In the summer of 1943, the Nazis allowed a committee from the German Red Cross to tour the camp for the first time. The group's refusal to speak about their visit did not serve the Nazis' purpose, however. So in 1944, they invited the Danish Red Cross, the Danish foreign minister, and

the International Red Cross to inspect the camp. This time, the Nazis were prepared. Before the visitors arrived, they ordered the prisoners to pave streets, repair housing, build a playground, and even plant twelve hundred rosebushes. The Nazis also deported seventy-five hundred young men and women to Auschwitz to make the camp seem less crowded and to substantiate their claim that it was a ghetto for old people. The visitors were suitably impressed.

Flushed with their success, the Nazis decided to create a “documentary-style” film about Terezinstadt in the summer of 1944. Kurt Geron, an inmate who had been a well-known actor and director, was put in charge of the filming of *The Fuehrer Gives a City to the Jews*. But he was not allowed to edit the film or even view the developed footage. Two weeks after the movie was completed, he and other participants were sent to Auschwitz. Geron was gassed soon after his arrival.

During World War II, over 150,000 Jews passed through Terezinstadt. About 33,000 died there from malnutrition, disease, and overwork. Many of the rest were shipped to death camps. Fewer than 16 percent survived. After the war, some Germans claimed that all they knew of the concentration camps was what they had heard about Theresienstadt.

## CONNECTIONS

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Why did the Nazis create a “model” concentration camp? Why did they want outsiders to see it? How important was it to deceive the Red Cross? Why?

→The Facing History Resource Center has an educational packet on Terezinstadt which includes slides of art prepared for the Nazi propaganda as well as art prepared secretly to document camp life. The packet also includes video interviews with survivors of the camp. Of particular interest is the testimony of Helga, a young artist who tried to paint what she saw – not what she thought she saw or wanted to see.

## READING 14

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### *Auschwitz*

Within months of the invasion of the Soviet Union, Heinrich Himmler, who oversaw the “Final Solution,” transformed what had been a camp for Polish political prisoners into a larger version of a camp in Poland called Majdanek. Auschwitz, known in Polish as Oswiecim, was chosen because even though it was on a major rail line, it was far enough from the battlefields that there was little danger of bombing. Rudolf Hoess, the commandant of Auschwitz, later described the role the camp played in the “Final Solution.”

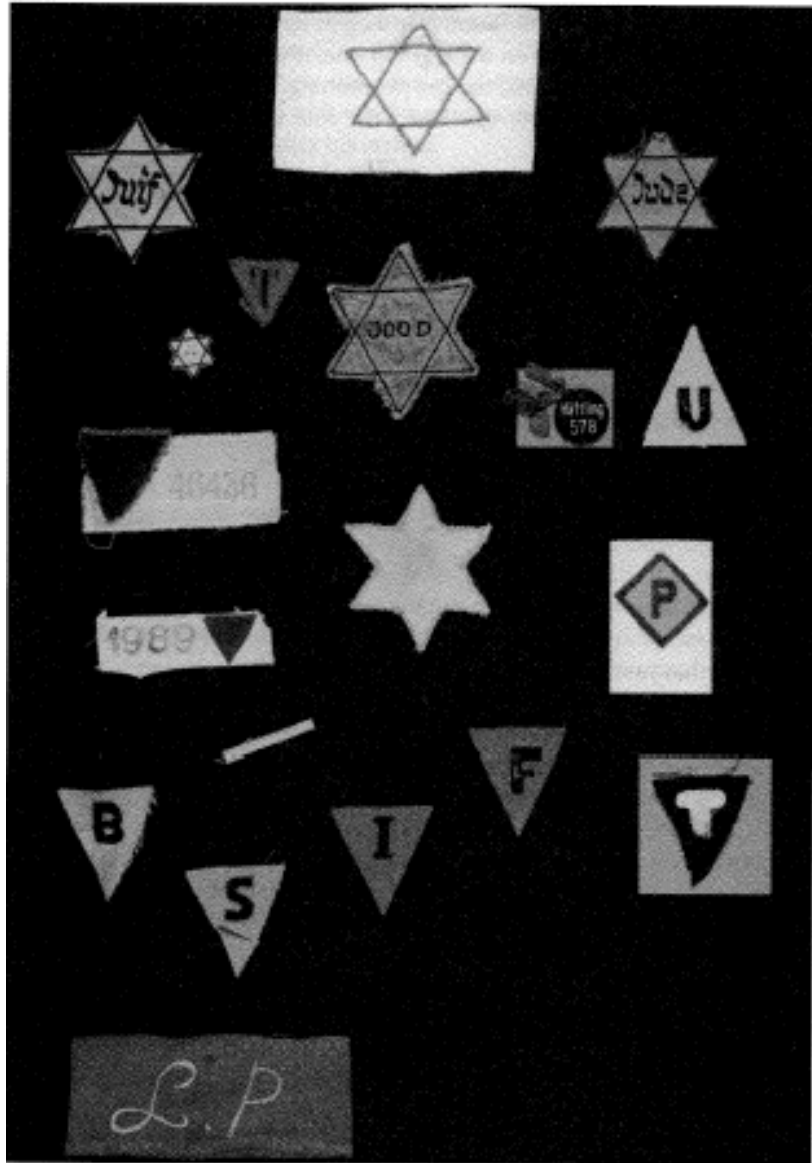
The extermination procedure in Auschwitz took place as follows: Jews selected for gassing were taken as quietly as possible to the crematoriums, the men being separated from the women, in the undressing rooms, prisoners of the Special Detachment, detailed for this purpose, would tell them in their own language that they were going to be bathed and deloused, that they must leave their clothes neatly together and above all remember where they had put them, so that they would be able to find them again quickly after the delousing. The prisoners of the Special Detachment had the greatest interest in seeing that the operation proceeded smoothly and quickly. After undressing, the Jews went into the gas chambers, which were furnished with showers and water pipes and gave a realistic impression of a bathhouse.

The women went in first with their children, followed by the men who were always the fewer in number. This part of the operation nearly always went smoothly, for the prisoners of the Special Detachment would calm those who betrayed any anxiety or who perhaps had some inkling of their fate. As an additional precaution these prisoners of the Special Detachment and an SS man always remained in the chamber until the last moment.

The door would now be quickly screwed up and the gas immediately discharged by the waiting disinfectors through vents in the ceilings of the gas chambers, down a shaft that led to the floor. This insured the rapid distribution of the gas. It could be observed through the peephole in the door that those who were standing nearest to the induction vents were killed at once. It can be said that about one-third died straight away. The remainder staggered about and began to scream and struggle for air. The screaming, however, soon changed to the death rattle and in a few minutes all lay still. After twenty minutes at the latest no movement could be discerned. The time required for the gas to have effect varied according to the weather, and depended on

whether it was damp or dry, cold or warm. It also depended on the quality of the gas, which was never exactly the same, and on the composition of the transports which might contain a high proportion of healthy Jews, or old and sick, or children. The victims became unconscious after a few minutes, according to their distance from the intake shaft. Those who screamed and those who were old or sick or weak, or the small children, died quicker than those who were healthy or young.

*Every prisoner was labeled. Badges became part of one's identity.*



The door was opened half an hour after the induction of the gas, and the ventilation switched on. Work was immediately begun on removing the corpses. There was no noticeable change in the bodies and no sign of convulsions or discoloration. Only after the bodies had been left lying for some time, that is to say after several hours, did the usual death stains appear in the places where they had lain...

The special detachment now set about removing the gold teeth and cutting the hair from the women. After this, the bodies were taken up by the elevator and laid in front of the ovens, which had meanwhile been stoked up. Depending on the size of the bodies, up to three corpses could be put into one oven retort at the same time. The time required for cremation also depended on this, but on an average it took twenty minutes.

During the period when the fires were kept burning continuously, without a break, the ashes fell through the grates and were constantly removed and crushed to powder. The ashes were taken in trucks to the Vistula, where they immediately drifted away and dissolved.<sup>36</sup>

Himmler later ordered the original camp enlarged so that it could contain thirty thousand people (Auschwitz I). He also established a second camp in nearby Birkenau, which was to hold one hundred thousand prisoners-of-war (Auschwitz II). And he called for the construction of a labor camp to provide workers for a factory run by I. G. Farben, one of Germany's leading industrial firms (Auschwitz III). By the summer of 1942, Auschwitz had grown beyond Himmler's original plans. Rita Kesselman recalled her first view of the camp:

For three days and three nights, we were taken. Destination unknown. Trains were stopping in villages and train stations, in cities. We were screaming through the windows, "Water, water." We were hungry. The pail in the corner filled up very quickly. And then people went on the floor. The stink, the smell, in the cattle car was terrible. People were changing positions. One was standing up, and one was sitting down. I was alone. I didn't have my parents to cuddle up with. I was sitting there by myself.

After three days and three nights, we arrived in a big field. And that was Auschwitz. Auschwitz was a city, and Birkenau was a suburb. In Birkenau went on all the killing, gassing, and burning the people. There were four crematoriums in Birkenau. When I came into Auschwitz, the trains didn't go to Birkenau. They came into Auschwitz. And we were made, the people that were selected..., they made us come off the train. In front of us, SS men with guns and dogs. And on trucks, more SS men with guns, watching us.

And we saw people in striped clothes, helping the people coming off the train. At the time, we didn't know who they were. They were like mutes. They didn't talk. They weren't allowed to talk. They were Jews, most of them, that helped the people come off the train. They were prisoners that had to help the Germans.

We were told to separate the men from the women. On the side were empty trucks waiting. The women and children were told to go on the trucks. And older people. And then, from the younger people were selected, people to go to the right and to the left. At the time, we did not know that the people who were selected to go to the right, would live and the rest would die. About one hundred people were picked from the women to go to work. And we envied the others, because we thought that they would go on the trucks. And after three nights being exhausted and hungry, we had to walk.

It was smoggy and raining. We walked for miles, and as we came closer, we saw like a camp with barbed wires. A band was playing at the gate. And the SS men were watching the camp from towers. A band of women played at the gate. They brought us inside. There were barracks – twenty-five barracks. They put us in an empty barrack on the floor. And we waited all night, not knowing what is going to happen to us.

In the morning, the SS came, women and men SS, and they took us to another barracks. It was a bathhouse. We were made to undress, leave the clothes on one side, and they took us to the other side. Every person was given a tattoo. My number was thirty thousand seven hundred seventy-five...

Our hair was shaved and we were given striped clothes and wooden shoes. And that was our uniform for the two years I was in Auschwitz. I never bathed. I never saw water. I never had water to drink.<sup>37</sup>

Primo Levi, an Italian Jew who fought in a resistance unit in Italy, was deported to Auschwitz in 1944. He recalled his first days there:

Then for the first time we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man. In a moment, with almost prophetic intuition, the reality was revealed to us: we had reached the bottom. It is not possible to sink lower than this; no human condition is more miserable than this, nor could it conceivably be so. Nothing belongs to us any more; they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair; if we speak, they will not listen to us, and if they listen, they will not understand. They will even take away our name: and if we want to keep it, we will have to find ourselves the strength to do so, to manage somehow so that behind the name something of us, of us as we were, remains.

We know that we will have difficulty in being understood, and this is as it should be. But consider what value, what meaning is enclosed even in the smallest of our daily habits, in the hundred possessions which even the poorest beggar owns: a handkerchief, an old letter, the photo of a cherished person. These things are part of us, almost like limbs of our body; nor is it conceivable that we can be deprived of them in our world, for we immediately find others to substitute the old ones, other objects which are ours in their personification and evocation of our memories.



Imagine now a man who is deprived of everyone he loves, and at the same time of his house, his habits, his clothes, in short, of everything he possesses: he will be a hollow man, reduced to suffering and needs, forgetful of dignity and restraint, for he who loses all often easily loses himself. He will be a man whose life or death can be lightly decided with no sense of human affinity, in the most fortunate of cases, on the basis of a pure judgement of utility. It is in this way that one can understand the double sense of the term “extermination camp,” and it is now clear what we seek to express with the phrase: “to lie on the bottom.”

Haftling: I have learnt that I am Haftling. My number is 174517; we have been baptized, we will carry the tattoo on our left arm until we die.

The operation was slightly painful and extraordinarily rapid; they placed us all in a row, and one by one, according to the alphabetical order of our names, we filed past a skillful official, armed with a sort of pointed tool with a very short needle. It seems that this is the real, true initiation: only by “showing one’s number” can one get bread and soup. Several days passed, and not a few cuffs and punches, before we became used to showing our number promptly enough not to disorder the daily operation of food-distribution; weeks and months were needed to learn its sound in the German language. And for many days, while the habits of freedom still led me to look for the time on my wristwatch, my new name ironically appeared instead, a number tattooed in bluish characters under the skin.<sup>38</sup>

And for many days, while the habits of freedom still led me to look for the time on my wristwatch, my new name ironically appeared instead, as numbers tattooed in bluish characters under the skin.

One day, Levi broke off an icicle that hung outside a window. A guard immediately took it away from him. Levi knew enough German to ask why. The guard replied, “There is no why here.”

## CONNECTIONS

In describing “improvements” to the camp, Hoess noted that the first cremations took place in the open and then explained why a change was needed.

During bad weather or when a strong wind was blowing, the stench of burning flash was carried for many miles and caused the whole neighborhood to talk about the burning of Jews, despite official counterpropaganda. It is true that all members of the SS detailed for the extermination were bound to the strictest secrecy over the whole operation, but, as later SS legal proceedings showed, this was not always observed. Even the most severe punishment was not able to stop their love of gossip.<sup>39</sup>

What is missing from his discussion? Where is the moral point of view? Hoess’s complete description of the killing procedures at Auschwitz are available from the Facing History Resource Center.

What did Levi mean when he said that “our language lacks words to express this offence”? What did the guard mean when he told Levi, “There is no why here”? How are the two comments related?

Levi said of the language used to describe life in the camps:

Just as our hunger is not that feeling of missing a meal, so our way of being cold has need of a new word. We say “hunger,” we say “tiredness,” “fear,” “pain,” we say “winter” and they are different things. They are free words, created and used by free men who lived in comfort and suffering in their homes. If the [camps] had lasted longer, a new, harsh language would have been born; and only this language could express what it means to toil the whole day in the wind with the temperature below freezing, and wearing only a shirt, underpants, cloth jacket and trousers, and in one’s body nothing but weakness, hunger and knowledge of the end drawing nearer.<sup>40</sup>

Richard Rubenstein, author of *The Cunning of History*, sees Auschwitz as the “arch-creation of the Nazi genius.” He writes: “The death-camp system became a society of total domination only when healthy inmates were kept alive and forced to become slaves rather than killed outright.” Novelist William Styron explained further:

There was ultimately systematized not only mass murder on a scale never known before but mass slavery on a level of bestial cruelty. This was a form of bondage in which the victim was forced to work for a carefully calculated period (usually no more than three months) and then through methods of deprivation calculated with equal care, allowed to die. As Rubenstein points out, only in a situation where human bodies were endlessly replaceable could such a form of slavery attempt to be efficient – but the Nazis, who aspired to be among the century’s leading efficiency experts, had no cause for concern on this count, supplied as they were with all the Jews of Europe, besides thousands of Poles, Russian prisoners of war, and others. These became victims of bureaucratic *modernization* of slavery. And although the concept was not entirely unique in the long chronicle of bondage (for a period in the West Indies the British, with a glut of manpower, had no qualms about working slaves to death), certainly no slaveholders had such a scale and with such absolute ruthlessness made use of human life according to its simple *expendability*. [It] is this factor of expendability, an expendability which in turn derives from modern attitudes toward the stateless, the uprooted and rootless, the disadvantaged and dispossessed – which provides still another essential key to unlocking the incomprehensible dungeon of Auschwitz. The matter of surplus population which Rubenstein touches upon again and again haunts this book like the shadow of a thundercloud.<sup>41</sup>



## READING 15

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### *“Hell Has No Bottom”*

Charlotte Delbo, a Catholic woman who fought in the French resistance before she was shipped to Auschwitz, recalled:

The projectors light the barbed wire strung between high white poles. Encircled by light, the camp lies in darkness and in this black abyss nothing can be distinguished  
nothing except darker shapes swaying  
ghostlike upon the ice.  
The roll-call siren has emptied the barracks. By swaying clusters, the women have all stumbled out, clinging to each other so as not to fall.  
And when one does fall, the whole cluster reels and falls and gets back up, falls again and rises, and in spite of it all moves on.  
Without a word.  
There is only the screaming of the furies who want the barracks to empty faster, want the reeling shades to move faster from the barracks to the space where the roll is called.  
In the darkness, for the beams of the projectors do not reach the spaces between the barracks. They light only the gate and the barbed wire enclosure so that the sentinels up in the watchtowers may spot those trying to escape and shoot  
as if one could escape  
as if one could cut through the fence of high-tension live barbed wire  
as if...<sup>42</sup>

Alexander Donat, a prisoner at Majdanek, said of daily routines:

Beating and being beaten was taken for granted at Majdanek, and was an integral part of the system. Everyone could beat an inmate and the more experienced inmates never questioned why. They knew that they were beaten merely because they happened to run into someone who wanted to beat them. In most cases, the beating did not even involve personal anger or hatred; the authorities hated their victims as a group because when you wrong people for no reason, sooner or later you must come to hate them. It is difficult for man to endure the idea he is a beast and maltreats another human being, without cause; therefore, he eventually discovers justification for his behavior and imputes the fault to his victim. Thus, beating was part of the system. Thus, also, the victim was expected to take his licks standing rigidly at attention. Attempts to avoid blows, to cover one's face or head, were

treated as additional offenses. Some made the mistake of smiling stupidly as if they understood the “joke” being played on them, as if they appreciated the authorities’ “sense of humor,” which served only to irritate the beaters further. Worst of all were the beatings undertaken for sheer distraction, for there the morbid imagination of the executioners knew no bounds. Some derived their greatest pleasure from refined torture and were delighted by the professional approval of their colleagues. Some were motivated by sadistic curiosity: they wanted to see how a man suffers and dies.<sup>43</sup>

Donat, a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto, was almost relieved to be sent to Majdanek. He thought that he had reached bottom. After a few days in the camp, he decided that “Hell has no bottom.”

## CONNECTIONS

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→Zezette Larsen, who was in her early teens when she was imprisoned at Auschwitz, says of herself, “I worked like hell to be as inconspicuous as possible... I think that I was probably trying to survive... I was ripped apart from my parents and I’m sure I was traumatized... I was probably completely traumatized.” Based on your readings, in what other ways did victims cope? Zezette Larsen’s testimony is found in the video montage *Childhood Memories* and is summarized in *Elements of Time*, pages 250-251.

## READING 16

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### “Choiceless Choices”

Nothing in one’s previous existence prepared an individual for the camps. Although some were luckier than others, no inmate had any control over his or her life. Primo Levi often thought about the pressures individuals faced in the camps. He reflected on those who became *kapos* – prisoners in charge of other inmates. He also wondered about another group of prisoners.

With this duly vague definition, “Special Squad,” the SS referred to the group of prisoners entrusted with running the crematoria. It was their task to maintain order among the new arrivals (often completely unaware of the destiny awaiting them) who were to be sent into the gas chambers, to extract the corpses from the chambers, to pull gold teeth from jaws, to cut women’s hair, to sort and classify clothes, shoes, and the contents of the luggage, to transport the bodies to the crematoria and oversee the operation of the ovens, to extract and eliminate the

ashes. The Special Squad in Auschwitz numbered, depending on the moment, from seven hundred to one thousand active members.

These Special Squads did not escape everyone else's fate. On the contrary, the SS exerted the greatest diligence to prevent any man who had been part of it from surviving and telling. Twelve squads succeeded each other in Auschwitz, each remaining operative for a few months, whereupon it was suppressed, each time with a different trick to head off possible resistance. As its initiation, the next squad burnt the corpses of its predecessors.<sup>44</sup>

Levi concluded that people in Special Squads were not collaborators but victims. They were not making choices in a world where individuals can choose among various options. Lawrence Langer agrees. He argues that behavior in the camps "cannot be viewed through the same lens we used to view normal human behavior since the rules of law and morality and the choices available for human decisions were not permitted in these camps for extermination. As important as it is to point out situations of dignity and morality which reinforce our notions of normal behavior, it is all the more important here to try to convey the 'unimaginable,' where surviving in extremity meant an existence that had no relation to our system of time and space and where physical survival under these conditions resulted in 'choiceless choices!'"<sup>45</sup>

As important as it is to point out situations of dignity and morality..., it is all the more important here to try to convey the "unimaginable," where surviving in extremity meant an existence that had no relation to our system of time and space and where physical survival under these conditions resulted in "choiceless choices!"

## CONNECTIONS

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What is a "choiceless choice?" Is it a choice?

→ Elie Wiesel's memoir *Night* relates what Auschwitz was like for him and his father. Accounts of incidents similar to those described in *Night* can also be found in *Elements of Time*, pages 15-35, along with suggestions for related reading. The video *Challenge of Memory*, available from the Facing History Resource Center, can be used to accompany a reading of *Night*. Each incident in the film highlights a complex moral issue that prisoners dealt with on a daily basis. See *Elements of Time*, pages 291-316 for additional comments and observations by Lawrence Langer.

## READING 17

### *A Commandant's View*

In an interview with journalist Gitta Sereny after his arrest in Brazil in 1971 and subsequent trial, Franz Stangl, the commandant of the death camp at Sobibor and later at Treblinka, responded to questions.

“You’ve been telling me about your routines,” I said to him. “But how did you feel? Was there anything you enjoyed, you felt good about?”

A. “It was interesting to me to find out who was cheating,” he said. “As I told you, I didn’t care who it was; my professional ethos was that if something wrong was going on, it had to be found out. That was my profession; I enjoyed it. It fulfilled me. And yes, I was ambitious about that; I won’t deny that.” “Would it be true to say that you got used to the liquidations?”

A. He thought for a moment. “To tell the truth,” he then said, slowly and thoughtfully, “one did become used to it.”

“In days? Weeks? Months?”

A. “Months. It was months before I could look one of them in the eye. I repressed it all by trying to create a special place: gardens, new barracks, new kitchens, new everything; barbers, tailors, shoemakers, carpenters. There were hundreds of ways to take one’s mind off it; I used them all.”

“Even so, if you felt that strongly, there had to be times, perhaps at night, in the dark, when you couldn’t avoid thinking about it?”

A. “In the end, the only way to deal with it was to drink. I took a large glass of brandy to bed with me each night and I drank.”

“I think you are evading my question.”

A. “No, I don’t mean to; of course, thoughts came. But I forced them away. I made myself concentrate on work, work and again work.”

“Would it be true to say that you finally felt they weren’t really human beings?”

A. “When I was on a trip once, years later in Brazil,” he said, his face deeply concentrated, and obviously reliving the experience, “my train stopped next to a slaughterhouse. The cattle in the pens, hearing the noise of the train, trotted up to the fence and stared at the train. They were very close to my window, one crowding the other, looking at me through that fence. I thought then, ‘Look at this; this reminds me of Poland; that’s just how the people looked, trustingly, just before they went into the tins...’”

“Cargo,” he said tonelessly. “They were cargo.”

“You said tins,” I interrupted. “What do you mean?” But he went on without hearing, or answering me.

A. “...I couldn’t eat tinned meat after that. Those big eyes... which looked at me... not knowing that in no time at all they’d all be dead.” He paused. His face was drawn. At this moment he looked old and worn and real.

“So you didn’t feel they were human beings?”

A. “Cargo,” he said tonelessly. “They were cargo.” He raised and dropped his hand in a gesture of despair. Both our voices had dropped. It was one of the few times in those weeks of talks that he made no effort to cloak his despair, and his hopeless grief allowed a moment of sympathy.

[The system] worked. And because it worked, it was irreversible.

“When do you think you began to think of them as cargo? The way you spoke earlier, of the day when you first came to Treblinka, the horror you felt seeing the dead bodies everywhere – they weren’t ‘cargo’ to you then, were they?”

A. “I think it started the day I first saw the Totenlager [death camp] in Treblinka. I remember [Christian] Wirth [the man who set up the death camps] standing there, next to the pits full of blue-black corpses. It had nothing to do with humanity – it couldn’t have; it was a mass – a mass of rotting flesh. Wirth said, ‘What shall we do with this garbage?’ I think unconsciously that started me thinking of them as cargo.” “There were so many children, did they ever make you think of your children, of how you would feel in the position of those parents?”

A. “No,” he said slowly, “I can’t say I ever thought that way.” He paused. “You see,” he then continued, still speaking with this extreme seriousness and obviously intent on finding a new truth within himself, “I rarely saw them as individuals. It was always a huge mass. I sometimes stood on the wall and saw them in the tube. But – how can I explain it – they were naked, packed together, running, being driven with whips like...” the sentence trailed off.

...“Could you not have changed that?” I asked. “In your position, could you not have stopped the nakedness, the whips, the horror of the cattle pens?”

A. “No, no, no. This was the system. Wirth had invented it. It worked. And because it worked, it was irreversible.”<sup>46</sup>

## CONNECTIONS

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How did Stangl view his role in the death camps? How much power did he think he had?

Elie Wiesel has described the process in which the Nazis reduced a person to a prisoner; the prisoner to a number; and the number to an ash, which



was itself dispersed. To what extent does Stangl's account explain that process?

In thinking about ways of preventing another Holocaust, what can be learned from the words of perpetrators like Stangl?

## READING 18

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### *Rationalizing Genocide*

The Nazis set out to make Europe *Judenfrei* ("free of Jews"). The work was not done by machines but by real people – each with his or her own weaknesses, prejudices, values, and beliefs. In a speech to SS officers in the fall of 1943, Heinrich Himmler acknowledged those factors.

I also want to make reference before you here, in complete frankness, to a really grave matter. Among ourselves, this once, it shall be uttered quite frankly; but in public we will never speak of it. Just as we did not hesitate on June 30, 1934, to do our duty as ordered, to stand up against the wall comrades who had transgressed, and shoot them, so we have never talked about this and never will. It was the fact which I am glad to say is a matter of course to us that made us never discuss it among ourselves, never talk about it. Each of us shuddered, and yet each one knew that he would do it again if it were ordered and if it were necessary.

Among ourselves, this once, it shall be uttered quite frankly; but in public we will never speak of it.

I am referring to the evacuation of the Jews, the annihilation of the Jewish people. This is one of those things that are easily said. "The Jewish people is going to be annihilated," says every party member. "Sure, it's in our program, elimination of the Jews, annihilation – we'll take care of it." And then they all come trudging, 80 million worthy Germans, and each one has his one decent Jew. Sure, the others are swine, but this one is an A-1 Jew. Of all those who talk this way, not one has seen it happen, not one has been through it. Most of you must know what it means to see a hundred corpses lie side by side, or five hundred, or a thousand. To have stuck this out and – excepting cases of human weakness – to have kept our integrity, that is what has made us hard. In our history, this is an unwritten and never-to-be-written page of glory, for we know how difficult we would have made it for ourselves if today – amid the bombing raids, the hardships and the deprivations of war – we still had the Jews in every city as secret saboteurs, agitators, and demagogues. If the Jews were still ensconced in the body of the German nation, we probably would have reached the 1916-1917 stage by now.

The wealth they had we have taken from them. I have issued a strict order, carried out by SS-Obergruppenfuehrer Pohl, that this wealth in its entirety is to be turned over to the Reich as a matter of course. We have taken none of it for ourselves. Individuals who transgress will be punished in accordance with an order I issued at the beginning, threatening that whoever takes so much as a mark of it for himself is a dead man. A number of SS men – not very many – have transgressed, and they will die, without mercy. We had the moral right, we had the duty toward our people, to kill this people which wanted to kill us. But we do not have the right to enrich ourselves with so much as a fur, a watch, a mark, or a cigarette or anything else. Having exterminated a germ, we do not want, in the end, to be infected by the germ, and die of it. I will not stand by and let even a small rotten spot develop or take hold. Wherever it may form, we together will cauterize. All in all, however, we can say that we have carried out this heaviest of our tasks in a spirit of love for our people. And our inward being, our soul, our character has not suffered injury from it.<sup>47</sup>

## CONNECTIONS

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To what events was Himmler referring, when he told SS officers, “Among ourselves, this once, it shall be uttered quite frankly; but in public we will never speak of it?” Why was it to be kept a secret?

To what event in 1934 does Himmler refer? How does he link it to the annihilation of the Jewish people?

What does it mean that “each one has his one decent Jew”?

What does Himmler mean when he says, “We had the moral right, we had the duty toward our people, to kill this people which wanted to kill us.” How is it a way of justifying his orders? Of rationalizing them? Why did he need to justify? To rationalize?

Consider the choices the victimizers had in the following situation:

Prominent guests from Berlin were present at the inauguration of the first crematorium in March 1943. The “program” consisted of the gassing and burning of 8,000 Cracow Jews. The guests, both officers and civilians, were extremely satisfied with the results and the special peephole fitted into the door of the gas chamber was in constant use. They were lavish with their praise of this newly erected installation.<sup>48</sup>

It should be remembered that German companies and technical engineers competed for contracts from the government to design the gas chambers and crematoriums.

## READING 19

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### *Resistance in the Death Camps*

In the death camps, resistance was far more difficult than in the ghettos. Yet even there individuals fought back and a handful even managed to escape. These were last-ditch efforts by men and women who had nothing left to lose. The rebellion in Treblinka began in August 1943 in the camp's repair shop where inmates duplicated the key to the camp armory. The plan was to take the weapons stored there, kill as many guards as possible, and then escape into the forest. All seven hundred Jews in the camp took part. Stanislaw Kon described what happened after a pistol shot signaled the start of the revolt.

Exactly at four in the afternoon, emissaries are sent to the groups with the order to come immediately to the garage to receive weapons. Rodak from Plock is in charge of distributing them. Everyone who comes to receive a weapon is obliged to state the password: "Death!" To which comes the answer: "Life!" "Death-life," "Death-life" – the ardent messages are repeated in quick succession and hands are stretched out to grasp the longed-for rifles, pistols, and hand grenades. At the same time, the chief murderers in the camp are being attacked. Telephone contact is immediately cut off. The guard towers are set alight with petrol. Captain Zelomir attacks two SS guards with an axe and breaks through to us. He takes over command. By the garage stands a German armored car whose engine Rodak has immobilized in good time. Now the car serves him as shelter, from which he fires at the Germans. His shots fell Sturmfuhrer Kurt Meidlar and several of Hitler's hounds. The armory is captured by force by Sodovitz's group. The weapons are divided up among the comrades. We have two hundred armed men. The remainder attack the Germans with axes, spades, and pickaxes. The crematoria are set alight. The false railway station with its signs "Bialystok-Volkowisk," "Ticket Office," "Cashier," "Waiting Room," etc. burns. The Max Bull barracks also burn. The flames and the echoes of the shots summon Germans from all around. SS men and gendarmes from Kosov, soldiers from the nearby airfield, and even a special SS unit from Warsaw arrive. The order is given to destroy and to breach the siege to the nearest forest. Most of our warriors fall, but Germans fall as well. Few of us are left.<sup>49</sup>

About 150 prisoners escaped. The rest were murdered but not before they killed sixteen guards. By the end of September, Treblinka was closed. An armed revolt at Sobibor took place two weeks later. The Security Police sent the following report to Berlin:

On October 14, 1943, at about 5:00 P.M., a revolt of Jews in the SS camp Sobibor, twenty-five miles north of Cholm. They overpowered the guards, seized the armory, and, after an exchange of shots with the camp garrison, fled in unknown directions. Nine SS men murdered, one SS man missing, two foreign guards shot to death.

Approximately 300 Jews escaped. The remainder were shot to death or are now in camp. Military police and armed forces were notified immediately and took over security of the camp at about 1:00 A.M. The area south and southwest of Sobibor is now being searched by police and armed forces.<sup>50</sup>

The SS tracked down most of the prisoners. Local residents turned over others to the Nazis. Only a few individuals reached resistance groups. Some were turned away because they were Jews. No more than a few dozen were able to find groups willing to accept them. As in Treblinka, the Nazis closed the camp after the revolt.

A revolt also occurred in Auschwitz-Birkenau in October of 1944. There the Special Squad organized the break-out by working with Jewish women employed in an ammunitions factory at Auschwitz. The women smuggled explosives into the death camp so that the inmates could blow up a crematorium and kill the guards. The odds were against the revolt from the start. The few who managed to escape were immediately captured and then executed.

## CONNECTIONS

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Evaluate the importance of the revolts in the death camps.

Sonia Schreiber Weitz spent her adolescence in concentration camps. She and a sister were the only survivors in a large family. She recalls:

One... day, I sneaked into my father's barracks on the other side of the barbed wire fence. While I was there, I met a boy who was about my age – 14 or 15. The boy was playing a harmonica, an offense punishable by death. My father and I listened to the music and my father said to me, "You and I never had a chance to dance together"... and so we danced. It is such a precious image, a bizarre and beautiful gift.<sup>51</sup>

Why would Sonia Weitz, her father, and the young harmonica player risk death for a few moments of pleasure? Why does Weitz call those moments "a bizarre and beautiful gift"? Were they also an act of resistance? Sonia Weitz's book, *I Promised I Would Tell*, is a blend of reminiscences and poetry. It is available from the Facing History Resource Center.

→Max Bork, a slave laborer at Dora-Nordhausen, recalls ordering fellow prisoners to urinate on electrical wires so that the machinery would not function. Reprisals were severe. Everyone involved except Bork was killed. What did the prisoners gain from such resistance? For Bork's story see *Elements of Time*, page 124. See also Helen K.'s description of the effort of

prisoners to blow up the crematoria at Auschwitz in October 1944. See the summary of her testimony in *Elements of Time*, pages 35-39. A video portrait is available from the Facing History Resource Center. For additional information on resistance in the camps and Nazi reprisals, see *Elements of Time*, pages 124-125. Renee Scott, a young French resister, was captured and sent to Ravensbrueck and other camps. Her video portrait is also available from the Resource Center. Information on women in the resistance and the camps can be found in *Elements of Time*, pages 40-45.

## READING 20

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### *Is This a Person?*

Less than a year after the war ended, Primo Levi wrote a poem called “The Shema.” In Hebrew, the word means to hear or listen.

You who live secure  
In your warm houses,  
Who return at evening to find  
Hot food and friendly faces:  
    Consider whether this is a man,  
    Who labors in the mud  
    Who knows no peace  
    Who fights for a crust of bread  
    Who dies at a yes or a no.  
Consider whether this is a woman,  
    Without hair or name  
    With no more strength to remember  
    Eyes empty and womb cold  
    As a frog in winter.  
Consider that this has been:  
I commend these words to you.  
Engrave them on your hearts  
When you are in your house, when you  
walk on your way,  
When you go to bed, when you rise.  
Repeat them to your children.  
Or may your house crumble,  
Disease render you powerless,  
Your offspring avert their faces from you.<sup>52</sup>

## CONNECTIONS

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The word *shema* means “to hear.” It also refers to the opening words of a prayer that religious Jews recite three times a day: “Hear O’ Israel. The Lord is our God. The Lord is one.” Jews are commanded to keep those words in their hearts and teach them to their children. Levi paraphrases parts of the prayer.

What does Levi want kept in the hearts of his readers? Why do you think he calls his poem “The Shema?”

In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Primo Levi points out how difficult escape and rebellion were. He also speaks of his frustration in explaining those difficulties to young people who ask, “Why did you not escape? Why did you not rebel?” In response he writes:

For everyone else, the pariahs of the Nazi universe (among whom must be included Gypsies and Soviet prisoners, both military and civilian, who racially were considered not much superior to the Jews), the situation was quite different. For them escape was quite different and extremely dangerous; besides being demoralized, they had been weakened by hunger and maltreatment; they were and knew they were considered less than beasts of burden...

The particular (but numerically imposing) case of the Jews was the most tragic. Even admitting that they managed to get across the barbed wire barrier and electrical grill, elude the patrols, the surveillance of the sentinels armed with machine guns in the guard towers, the dogs trained for man hunts: In what direction could they flee? To whom could they turn for shelter? They were outside the world, men and women made of air. They no longer had a country.<sup>53</sup>

How would you answer the questions, “Why did they not escape? Why did they not rebel?” How does Levi’s account help you understand the realities of the camp and its relationship to the outside world? Would prisoners have had more opportunities to escape if the outside world was more hospitable? For a more complete excerpt from Levi’s remarks on resistance see “Beyond Judgment” in *Elements of Time*, pages 316-327. Also compare Levi’s discussion of hostility in the outside world with Jan Karski’s video testimony, available from the Facing History Resource Center.

## NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Paul Bookbinder, "An Historical Inquiry into the Background Causes of the Holocaust." Paper presented at session on the Historical Roots of Antisemitism, 25 July, 1991, Facing History and Ourselves Summer Institute, Chicago.
- <sup>2</sup> Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, trans. S. Woolf, (Collier Books, 1993), 26-27.
- <sup>3</sup> Lawrence Langer, *Versions of Survival; The Holocaust and the Human Spirit* (State University of New York Press, 1982), 74.
- <sup>4</sup> Eva Fleischner, ed. *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era?* (KTAV Publishing House, 1977), 288-289.
- <sup>5</sup> Quoted in Lucy Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews*, 170.
- <sup>6</sup> Quoted in Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust*, 187-188.
- <sup>7</sup> Quoted in *A Holocaust Reader*, ed. Lucy Dawidowicz, 334-335.
- <sup>8</sup> Elie Wiesel, "Art and Culture After the Holocaust," in *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era?*, ed. Eva Fleischner, 405.
- <sup>9</sup> Christopher R. Browning, "One Day in Jozefow: Initiation to Mass Murder" in *The Path to Genocide: Essays on Launching the Final Solution* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 174-175.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 181-182.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.
- <sup>13</sup> Quoted in Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust*, 227-229.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>15</sup> Minutes of Wannsee Conference, 20 January, 1942. NG-2586-G. *Trials of War Criminals before the Nuremberg Military Tribunals*, XIII, Washington, D.C., 1952, 210-211, 218-219.
- <sup>16</sup> Bernd Engelmann, *In Hitler's Germany*, 127-128.
- <sup>17</sup> Testimony, session 30, 8 May, 1961, uncorrected English transcription, in *Documents of Destruction*, Raul Hilberg, ed. (Quadrangle Books, 1971), 59-62.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>19</sup> Lawrence Langer, *Versions of Survival*, 8.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.
- <sup>21</sup> Quoted in *A Holocaust Reader*, ed. Lucy Dawidowicz, 280.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.
- <sup>23</sup> Quoted in Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust*, (Pantheon, 1985), 172-175.
- <sup>24</sup> Quoted in *The Holocaust Years*, ed. Nora Levin, 272-273.
- <sup>25</sup> Excerpt from pages 3-4 of *Fragments of Isabella: A Memoir of Auschwitz* by Isabella Leitner, edited and with an Epilogue by Irving A. Leitner. (Thomas Y. Crowell, Publishers) copyright 1978 by Isabella Leitner and Irving A. Leitner. Reprinted by permission.
- <sup>26</sup> Quoted in *A Holocaust Reader*, ed. Lucy Dawidowicz, 334-335.
- <sup>27</sup> Quoted in *The Holocaust Years*, ed. Nora Levin, 259-260.
- <sup>28</sup> Quoted in Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah*, 197-198.
- <sup>29</sup> Deborah Dwork, *Children with a Star* (Yale University Press, 1991), 255.
- <sup>30</sup> *The Diary of Anne Frank*, (Pocket Books, 1952), 201.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 131-132.
- <sup>32</sup> Miep Gies, *Anne Frank Remembered*, 166-167.
- <sup>33</sup> *The Diary of Anne Frank*, 237.
- <sup>34</sup> Quoted in Deborah Dwork, *Children with a Star*, 79-80.
- <sup>35</sup> Quoted in *I Never saw Another Butterfly: Children's Drawings and Poems from Terezin Concentration Camp* (Shocken, 1978), 14.
- <sup>36</sup> Rudolf Hoess, *Commandant of Auschwitz* (World Publishers, 1959), 222-223.
- <sup>37</sup> "Rita Kesselman at South Boston High School," transcript of a videotape, (Facing History and Ourselves, 1987).
- <sup>38</sup> Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 26-27.
- <sup>39</sup> Rudolf Hoess, *Commandant of Auschwitz*, 217.
- <sup>40</sup> Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 123.
- <sup>41</sup> William Styron, Introduction to *The Cunning of History*, x-xi.

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- <sup>42</sup> Charlotte Delbo, *Days and Memory*, trans. Rosette Lamont, (The Marlboro Press, 1990), 9.
- <sup>43</sup> Alexander Donat, *The Holocaust Kingdom* (Holt, 1963), 177-178.
- <sup>44</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal, (Summit, 1988), 50-51.
- <sup>45</sup> Lawrence Langer, *Versions of Survival*.
- <sup>46</sup> Gitta Sereny, *Into That Darkness* (Pan Books, 1977), 200-202.
- <sup>47</sup> Quoted in *A Holocaust Reader*, ed. Lucy Dawidowicz, 132-133.
- <sup>48</sup> Quoted in *A Holocaust Reader*, ed. Lucy Dawidowicz, 119.
- <sup>49</sup> Quoted in Leni Yahil, *The Holocaust*, (Oxford University Press, 1990), 484.
- <sup>50</sup> Quoted in Raul Hilberg, *Documents of Destruction*, 223.
- <sup>51</sup> Sonia Weitz, *I Promised I Would Tell* (Facing History and Ourselves, 1993), 34.
- <sup>52</sup> Primo Levi, "The Shema" in *Collected Poems*, trans. Ruth Feldman and Brian Swann, (Faber & Faber, 1988), 9-10.
- <sup>53</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*.