

One Life in Auschwitz: Museum Exhibit (0-10 points)

You are an intern at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and you have been assigned to a forthcoming exhibition: "The Lives of Auschwitz." You and several other interns have each been assigned a memoir written by an Auschwitz inmate. You have been told to identify and summarize at least three experiences, events, or themes that epitomize that memoirist's time in Auschwitz and that will teach audiences about the inner workings of this concentration camp and killing center. Each of the three experiences, themes, or events that you believed should be highlighted, must be accompanied with one quotation that can be incorporated into the exhibit. (Be sure to cite page numbers.) What you write must be comprehensible to an audience that has no familiarity with the memoir, but it does not have to be polished prose. Remember we are at an informal stage here in the project. Don't worry about biographical sketches; the Director of Interns and the project director will take on this task. The Intern Director is depending upon your ability to focus on the essentials and not necessarily the first event that you encounter. NO LATE WORK ACCEPTED because our in-class discussion depends upon you bringing this content to your classmates for the final.

The project director has provided one example for the memoir by Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*. Note that she records page numbers in parenthesis. In this example, I have identified a single theme and supported with examples. I would still need to write about either two more themes, experiences or events to give the director enough material with which to work.

Theme 1

How did inmates make it from day to day? This is a theme that Primo Levi discusses in several parts of his memoir. For example, upon arriving at the camp and suffering humiliation, he does not believe this proved he had a "will to survive," just that he was not capable of realizing what complete unhappiness was because it is not in our nature, so he could not comprehend that he should just stop living right there and then. (17) Levi expresses himself more clearly when he writes about a "good day" thankful that wintery conditions have passed though they are still hungry. Levi calls this the "law of perspective." (73) He illustrates this more clearly in a later chapter when he describes being cold and wet in November 1944, but relieved because it was not windy so that his clothes would not turn to ice. He writes, "Strange, how in some way one always has the impression of being fortunate, how some chance happening, perhaps infinitesimal, stops us crossing the threshold of despair and allows us to live." (131) Is this hope?

Potential Quotation for Exhibit

"For human nature is such that grief and pain – even simultaneously suffered do not add up as a whole in our consciousness, but hide, the lesser behind the great, according to a definite law of perspective. It is providential and is our means of surviving in the camp. And this is the reason why so often in free life one hears it said that man is never content. In fact it is not a question of a human incapacity for a state of absolute happiness, but of an ever-insufficient knowledge of the complex nature of the state of unhappiness; ... if the most immediate cause of stress comes to an end, you are grievously amazed to see that another one lies behind; and in reality a whole series of others." (73)



Elie Wiesel



Gisella Perl

Compare similarities and differences of all four survivors and look for patterns and the absence of patterns:

Shlomo Venezia



Olga Lengyel



Auschwitz: Historical Context

Four Lives in Auschwitz

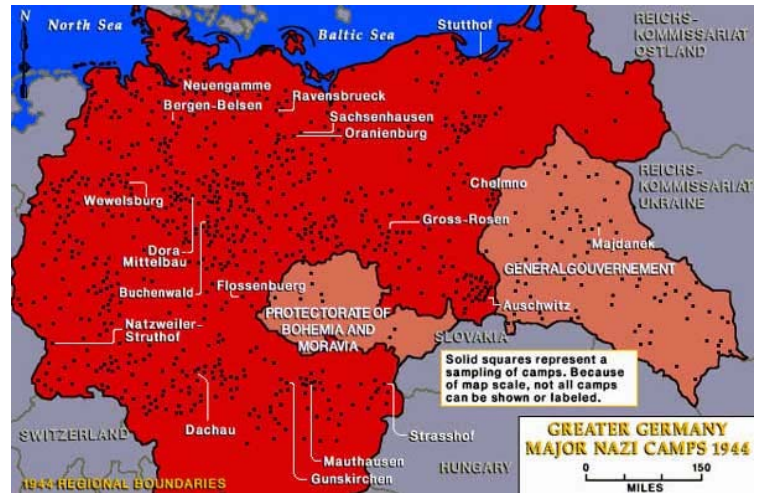
Concentration Camps, 1933-1945

- Made part of the penal system in Nazi Germany to imprison political prisoners, homosexuals, "asocials"
- "re-educate" through work and punishment



Forced Labor Camps, 1939-1945

housed forced laborers, many different nationalities to work in factories or farms in and outside Germany



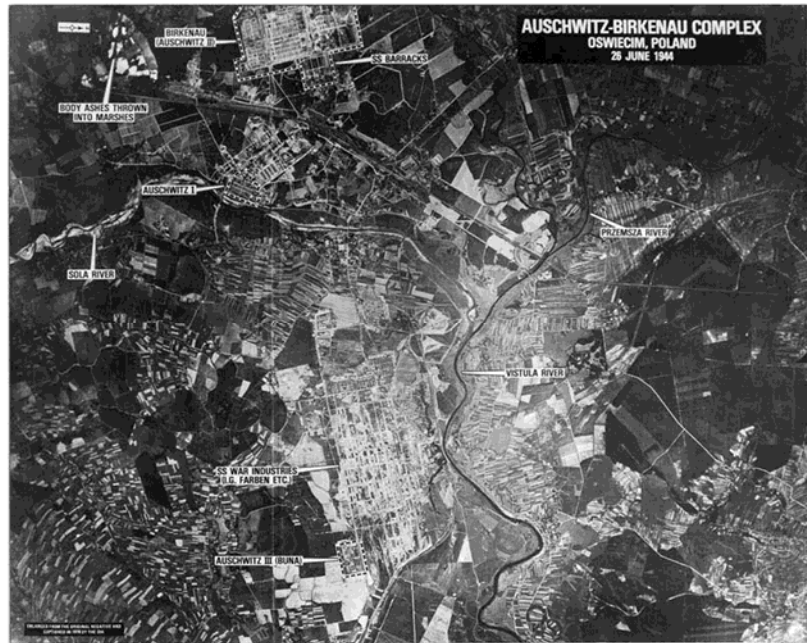
Concentration or Extermination Camps, 1941-1945

- Sobibor
 - Majdanek
 - Treblinka
 - Chelmno
 - Belzec
 - Auschwitz
- Extermination through Carbon Monoxide or Zyklon B
- Concentration Camp (est. late 1939) + Extermination Camp (during 1941)

By November
1943

- Auschwitz I: Main Camp
- Auschwitz II: Birkenau
- Auschwitz III: Monowitz
- 40 + subcamps

~~37 Square Kilometers~~
Approx. 16 square miles



Power Structure

- SS officers and rank & file
- Lithuanian and Ukrainian auxillary guards
- Kapos and Block elders

Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*:

“the privileged oppress the unprivileged: the social structure of the camp is based on this human law.”
(44)



Prisoner Groups

- German criminals
- Poles
- Jews (Polish initially + all nationalities)
- Sinti and Roma (a.k.a. Gypsies)
- Soviet POWs
- Jehovah's Witnesses
- Homosexuals

INSIGNIA WORN BY PRISONERS IN NAZI CONCENTRATION CAMPS

Categories of Prisoners						
Type of insignia	Political	Jehovah's Witnesses and clergy	Emigrants	Asocial	Common criminals	Homosexual
Basic colors	Red triangle	Purple triangle	Blue triangle	Black triangle	Green triangle	Pink triangle
Insignia worn by Jews until mid-1944	Yellow star	Purple star	Blue star	Black star	Green star	Pink star
Insignia worn by Jews after mid-1944	Yellow triangle	Purple triangle	Blue triangle	Black triangle	Green triangle	Pink triangle

Special Insignia						
Camp serial number	Insignia for Polish nationality	Insignia for French nationality	Assignment to the penal company	Prisoner returned to camp	Suspected of escaping	Subsistence workers (penal company category)
0241	P	F	Black triangle with white dot	Black triangle with white horizontal bar	IL	Green triangle

Remarks: Prisoners suspected of intention to escape wore the marking "IL" (im Lager), which meant that such a prisoner could be employed only within the main camp perimeter fence.
The colors in the special insignia shown here are only examples. They varied according to a prisoner's category. Only in the case of the prisoner number was the color always green.

Design: Franziska Pflanz
Graphic design: © Anne Strohbach-Jankovic

Uniforms



- "Striped Pajamas"
- Civilian clothing

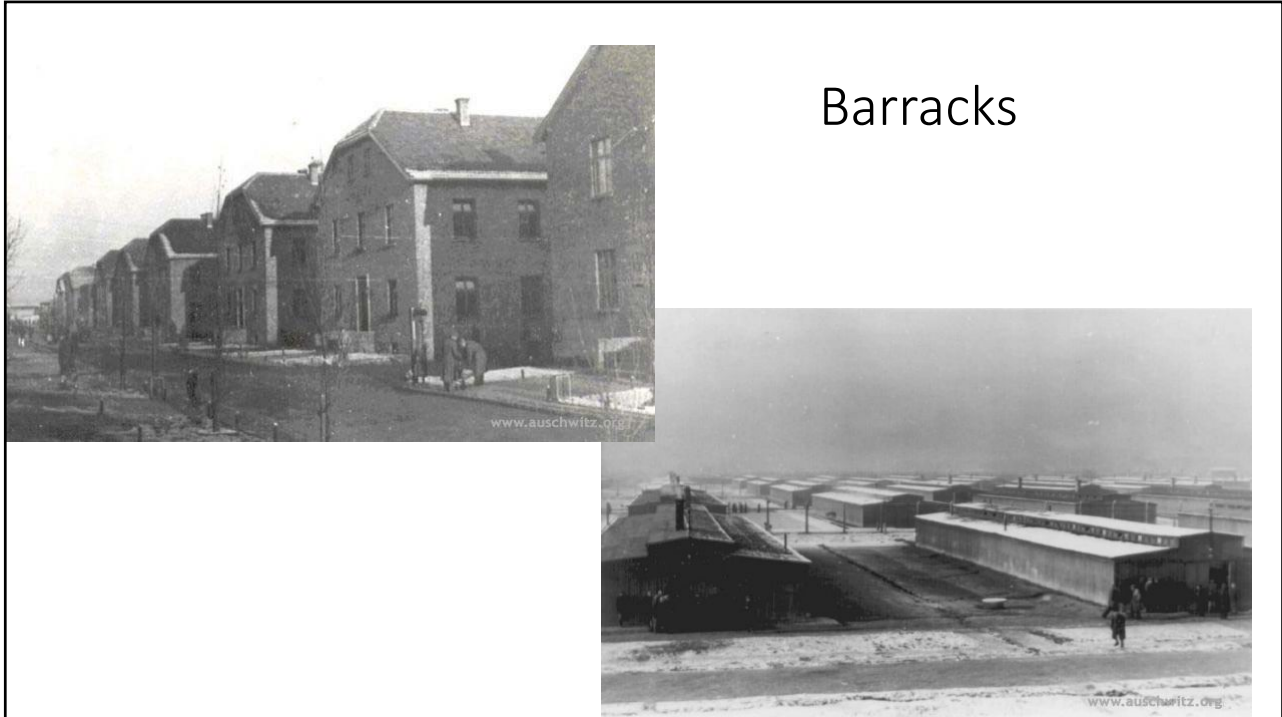
Children

- 232,000 out of 1.3 million
- Jewish (of all nationalities)
- “Gypsy”
- Polish
- Soviet



Births at Auschwitz





Meals

- Morning: “coffee” or “tea”
- Noon: soup (mostly with vegetables)
- Supper: black bread with 25 grams of sausage, margarine, or marmalade or cheese

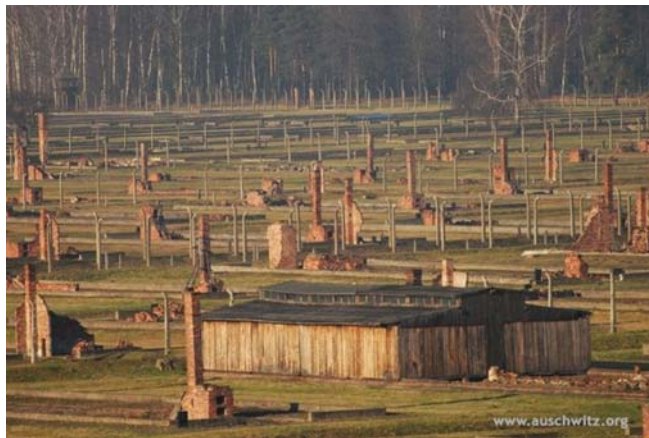


Work

- 4:30/5:30 am
- Roll call
- March to work
- 11 hours



Hospitals



Gas Chambers at Auschwitz

- Block 11 experiments
- “Little Red House” & “Little White House”



Gas Chambers at Auschwitz

- Block 11 experiments
- “Little Red House”
- Gas Chambers + Crematorium I-IV



Selections

- Unfit to work upon arrival or after imprisonment
- As punishment

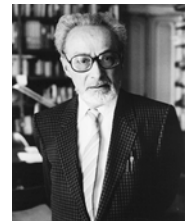


“Kingdom” of Auschwitz

Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*:

Upon having reached out of the barrack’s window for an icicle to quench his thirst, the German ripped it from Levi’s hand. He asked “Why?” and the guard responded: “There is no why here” and pushed his hand back inside. (29)

“... in the face of driving necessity and physical disabilities many social habits and instincts are reduced to silence.” (87)



Average life span

Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*

“At Auschwitz, in 1944, of the old Jewish prisoners ... not one was an ordinary Häftling, and subsisting on the normal ration. ... Whosoever does not know how to become an ‘Organisator’, ‘Kombinator’, ‘Prominent’ ... soon becomes a ‘musselman.’” (89)



Number of Victims

Ethnicity/category	number
Jews	1.1 million
Poles	140-150 thousand
Gypsies	23 thousand
Soviet POWs	15 thousand
Others	25 thousand
Total	Approx. 1.3 million

Sonderkommandos



Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*:

“Survival without renunciation of any part of one’s own moral world ... was conceded only to very few superior individuals, made of the stuff of martyrs and saints.” (92)

Resistance

- Escapes
- Sonderkommando Uprising or Mutiny (7 October 1944)



Evacuation & Liberation

