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Holocaust and Auschwitz Study

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November 27, 2010

Paper based on an independent study of the Holocaust and trip to Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration Camp.

The Holocaust is generally accepted as the time period between January 1933 and May of 1945, beginning with Hitler becoming Chancellor of Germany and ending with the closing of World War II. During this period the Nazi party spread fear throughout Europe with their systematic plan to annihilate all the Jews in Europe. This plan was deemed The Final Solution (SWC). The Auschwitz concentration camps played a major role in the killing of Jews with over 1 million being murdered (USHMM). Today's Auschwitz is a stark comparison from its past. Auschwitz receives up to a million visitors each year, some with connections or memories, others to educate, but most it seem come for the awe that is associated with the horrific death of over 1 million innocent people. Flowers and makeshift shrines adorn the grounds of Auschwitz. Elderly people holding hands carry wreaths to assumed grave sites all the while in the background busloads of tourists donned with digital cameras are flashing away photographing each other under the infamous gate bearing the words, "Arbeit Macht Frei." This symbol has come to mean more than its original intention; it is a symbol of the modern evolution of Auschwitz that encompasses a wide range of controversy that continues to threaten Jewish communities across the world. Anti-Semitism did not end in 1945 with the close of World War II. The heart of Anti-Semitism began in 1945 when Holocaust deniers turned their backs on the piles of human ash and bone. Auschwitz is a museum, but also a cemetery. The notion that the two can coexist seems plausible, however the management and execution of Auschwitz exhibits

and memorials must begin first with commemoration and respect and lastly end with a goal. The goal is education, genocide prevention, and an even spread of benevolence amongst diverse cultures and religions.

Poland was once considered a Jewish haven, with many Jews moving to Poland pre World War II for their open, liberal, and accepting attitudes in respect to Jewish religion, life, and culture. While Jews would experience a heightened level of economic and cultural freedom pre World War II, Jewish life in Europe would change dramatically starting in January of 1933 with Hitler taking leadership in Germany. Several years would pass until Polish Jews would feel the threat of the Nazi regime; however German Jews would immediately feel Nazi intimidation with a series of laws being passed to severely limit the rights and freedoms of German Jews, known as the Nuremberg Race Laws (USHMM). Poland finally became victim in 1939 upon which restrictions against Jews took immediate effect. Krakow, a Polish city with over 70,000 Jewish residents was devastated by the takeover of the Nazi regime, “The German military authorities initiated immediate measures aimed at isolating, exploiting and persecuting the Jews of the city” (USHMM). One of the most harrowing effects of Nazi takeover was the formation of the ghetto.

The formation of ghettos was common practice and anywhere a Jewish population in Europe existed a ghetto was created. Ghettos served several functions; they were a means of isolationism and control, having Jews sectioned off into one area allowed for easy selections, (selections were the process of determining who was fit to work and who would be killed) and also ghettos served as a holding tank often accepting Jews from other rural parts of Poland. In most cases ghettos were surrounded by barbed wire and fencing (USHMM), but in the case of the Krakow ghetto barbed wire fencing was supplemented by large stone walls. The erection of

the stone wall was unique in that the wall served as a barrier meant to block passerby's from witnessing unpleasant scenes from inside the ghetto. A final piece of standing ghetto wall is still standing in Krakow today. The German military built the wall attempting to emanate Jewish grave stones.



(Photo by Michael Alto)

Inside the ghetto families lived in horrible conditions with multiple families often sharing one room. Food was scarce, sanitary conditions lacked, disease spread very quickly, and mortality rates inside the ghettos were very high (USHMM). The German auxiliary police (SS) would allow Jewish workers to leave the ghetto to work in nearby factories and in industries that

supported the expansion of the Nazi German government and war effort. This was the case in the Krakow ghetto. Many Jewish workers left the ghetto daily to work in surrounding factories.



(Photo by Michael Alto) Pictured in the background are many of the factories where Jewish workers from the nearby Krakow Ghetto and Plaszlow labor camp worked. The grey building farthest to the right is Schlinder's factory where hundreds of Jews were able to live and work away from the horrendous conditions of the ghetto or labor camp.

Eventually the Nazi's would establish concentration camps. Concentration camps served two functions; camps functioned as killing centers and also labor camps. Camps throughout Nazi occupied Europe were labeled as one or the other with some camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau serving as both. In January of 1940 the Nazi's would begin creation of what would become one of the largest mass killing centers in all of Nazi occupied territory, Auschwitz. Using existing structures that once served as Polish government and military buildings the Nazi's began the first deployment of prisoners to Auschwitz in June of 1940 (Rees, intro) and would serve Nazi purposes until liberation on January 27, 1945. Several factors led up to the selection of the

Auschwitz concentration camp and later Birkenau as a labor and death camp. Most distinguishable is the physical location of the camp and the surrounding industry, but also the convenient location of the nearby European rail station that would transport prisoners in the thousands to Auschwitz on a daily basis to be sent to work in local industry or in most cases to death in gas chambers.

The commandant of Auschwitz was a man by the name of Rudolf Hoss whose original intentions for Auschwitz would greatly differ from what Auschwitz and later Birkenau, would eventually become. Hoss and Heinrich Himmler (Himmler served as one of Hitler's right hand men and was responsible for heading The Final Solution in Nazi Europe) had shared visions of Auschwitz that included agricultural production, "the idea that Auschwitz could be developed in a way to that could further agricultural knowledge therefore must have been hugely attractive to both of them" (Rees 25). Even though Auschwitz was inconveniently situated in an area "notorious for flooding, Auschwitz prisoners would labor in pursuit of Himmler's vision, digging ditches, draining ponds, shoring up riverbanks-all because it was much more exciting for the Reichsfuhrer SS to dream a dream than to discuss practicalities" (Rees). Many died executing the agricultural dreams set forth by Hoss and Himmler. Auschwitz would later evolve into not just a labor prison facilitating the wants of Hoss and Himmler, but would evolve into a money making empire upon which laborers were rented out to local industrial plants such as I.G. Farben (Rees). Auschwitz prisoners were rented out to the local chemical plant, I.G. Farben at the "all inclusive sum of three Reichsmark per unskilled worker and four Reichsmark per skilled worker and work performance was estimated at being 75% of that of a normal German worker" (Rees, 35). The need for more labor to produce more profits was evident. I.G. Farben would later, "help to speed up the extension of the camp," (Rees, 35) in order to accommodate more prison laborers, hence

the announcement to expand Auschwitz was made by Himmler in March of 1941 to expand Auschwitz one mile down the road to accommodate 100,000 prisoners (History Place). This expansion would be known as Birkenau or Auschwitz II. The combined factors of profit through the rental of prison labor and The Final Solution would turn Auschwitz-Birkenau into the largest mass extermination camp.

The use of labor at Auschwitz is paramount to the understanding of how Auschwitz evolved and also the nature in which genocide was able to produce profits for the Nazi's and the Third Reich. Laborers themselves would soon find that labor equated life. Those deemed fit to work were able to live another day, "for Jews, the ability to work often meant the potential to survive after the Nazis began to implement The Final Solution" (USHMM). The Final Solution would further support Nazi efforts through the process of gassing prisoners. Jews undoubtedly were the largest percentage of victims with approximately 960,000 killed at Auschwitz alone (USHMM). Mass death producing profit is horrific in nature, but the Nazi's were not concerned with ethics or values and thus robbed Jews of all their money and possessions to greater support themselves and the Third Reich. SS cashed in,

Possessions and valuables of Jews from Auschwitz and Majandek. German banknotes are sent to the Reich's Bank. Foreign currency, gold, jewels, and other valuables are sent to SS Headquarters of the Economic Administration. Watches, clocks and pens are distributed to troops at the front. Clothing is distributed to German families (History Place).

Arriving prisoners at Auschwitz were made to shave their heads; the human hair was later made into cloth and other textiles and then sold by the SS for profit. (Photo by Auschwitz Museum)



Life at Auschwitz was severe and beyond the death that occurred in gas chambers many died from starvation or diseases such as cholera and typhus. Hunger was ongoing, food was limited and often prisoners received just small rations of soup or bread (Shapiro). Beyond the European Jewish population at Auschwitz there were also many Polish and Soviet prisoners of war. Life for the Soviet prisoners was particularly harsh, with one surviving Soviet prisoner by the name of Stenkin stating, “The average living time for a Soviet prisoner at Birkenau was two weeks. If you got something eatable, you must swallow it. When it was time to get up in the morning, those who were alive moved, and around them would be two or three dead people” (Rees, 65). Starvation was common with Hoss himself stating, “I myself came across a Russian lying between a pile of bricks, whose body had been torn open and liver removed” (Rees).

Most of the people that arrived at Auschwitz were killed. In the early days of Auschwitz 1941-1942, makeshift gas chambers were built in block 11 for the purpose of killing people using zyklon B gas pellets. The first victims were Soviet POW's. (USHMM). Later as the technology progressed three more gas chambers were built at Birkenau and included crematoriums to provide efficient disposal of the bodies once they were gassed. This entire

process along with the building of the crematoriums was facilitated by prisoners, mostly Jews. Prisoners performed all aspects of the gas chamber and crematorium operations with the exception of the dispensing of zyklon b down the tubular shafts of the gas chamber; this was performed by the SS. There is one standing crematorium and gas chamber at Auschwitz I today, all the crematoriums at Birkenau were destroyed by the Nazi's in November of 1944 due to the inevitable approach of the Russian front and the Nazi's need to destroy all evidence of their crimes (Auschwitz Museum site visit).

The crematorium at Auschwitz I is a controversial exhibit, with some questioning why it's necessary to even have the gas chamber and crematorium on display at all. The greater question is how as a society are we benefiting from the display of an oven where thousands of bodies were burned? The exhibit itself lends into the notion that we as a society are exalted by things that play into are natural curiosity as a whole and less with the history itself. There is an underlying Disney affect occurring, especially in regards to certain aspects of modern Auschwitz and especially in regards to exhibits revolving around death, destruction, and human degradation. The response in how we approach this subject is individual in nature and reflective of our own interests and values.

After many years of suffering those remaining in Auschwitz would finally be liberated by the Soviet army on January 27, 1945. Approximately 8,000 living prisoners were found. The other prisoners, approximately 65,000, local Baltimore survivor Bluma Shapiro included, were sent on death marches further into Germany. The marches lasted sometimes weeks and, "would be remembered by many of the prisoners who were forced to take part in the evacuation as the worst experience they suffered while in captivity-worse than the constant selections, worse than the starvation diet in the camps, worse than the disease ridden, freezing huts they lived in" (Rees,



262). The experience was literally a death march. Even after liberation many prisoners would find themselves in difficult situations, especially for recently liberated Jews returning home to find their houses occupied by German families. This increased tensions between Jews and non-Jews. Not all concentration camp liberations were celebrations, “the days immediately after the end of the war ought to have been a time of comfort and recuperation for all those who had suffered in the camps-but they were not” (Rees, 272). Many Soviet soldiers “looked for cute girls and raped them” (Rees) and after many years of Nazi occupation Anti-Semitic sentiment continued to permeate throughout Europe, with many of the remaining Jews having no place to turn.

Understanding the Holocaust and all its history is a challenge. The timeline of occurrences all of which bear historic worth is endless, but vital to the study. Survivors are dwindling; many of their stories have been archived while others refuse to come forward, making the actual number of Holocaust survivors hard to account for. Auschwitz is unique because there were so many survivors, unlike the other camps where the SS killed most of the prisoners before destroying the camps themselves. There are hundreds of books written about Auschwitz and it is the most well known of all the concentration camps receiving over a million visitors every year. The images from Auschwitz and from the Holocaust are powerful, so powerful that whole institutions like the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) have been created to showcase these images in elaborate and carefully planned settings that are said to contribute to a greater understanding of the Holocaust and genocide. USHMM sells key chains, pins, and a teddy bear refugee. How do these items contribute to our greater understanding of the Holocaust and is there a devaluation occurring in regards to the marketing of the Holocaust? These questions are debatable and as global society moves forward a careful

approach needs to be taken in regards to remembrance and education. There are clear marketable images such as that of gas chambers, crematoriums, photos, and other real artifacts like eyeglasses, human hair, and clothing that contribute to human curiosity and it's the same institutions that we rely on to educate that feed us some of these unnecessary images. We as a society need to be aware that there is a clear separation on the education of the Holocaust and the marketing practices of certain institutions that use controlled images to generate profit.

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