



# The Human Experience of **Auschwitz**

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# Introduce your students to the human experience of Auschwitz on International Holocaust Remembrance Day

In 2005, the United Nations General Assembly designated January 27 as International Holocaust Remembrance Day, marking the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. On this day, the [Holocaust Survivor Memoirs Program](#) encourages you to reflect on the history of the Holocaust with your students, and we offer this short activity as a way to introduce your students to the history of the Auschwitz concentration camp complex. Students will learn about this significant site using [Re:Collection](#), our digital resource. Re:Collection allows students to explore the history of the Holocaust using “recollections,” which are pieces of survivors’ stories told through video interview clips, memoir excerpts, photographs and artifacts. Of the nearly fifty survivors featured on Re:Collection, several were prisoners at Auschwitz.

This human-centred learning helps students approach the study of the Holocaust in the most effective way. Personal accounts, when carefully grounded in their specific contexts, enable students to recognize the diversity of experiences that make up this historical event. Students form connections with survivors when they learn about the ordinary lives they lived that were disrupted by war and genocide. And when students study the impact of the Holocaust on individuals, they develop historical empathy by understanding how people navigated their way through an unprecedented historical situation. Read more about our [Educational Philosophy](#).

The pedagogical goals of this activity are to gain knowledge of and to reflect on survivor accounts of Auschwitz-Birkenau. These accounts include discussion of immense suffering and death, so we ask teachers to take into consideration the maturity of their students and recommend this activity for students ages 16 and up.

# AUSCHWITZ

Auschwitz was a Nazi concentration camp complex built between 1940 and 1942 in German-occupied Poland. The largest camp complex established by the Nazis, Auschwitz contained three main camps: Auschwitz I, a concentration camp; Auschwitz II (Birkenau), a death camp that used gas chambers to commit mass murder; and Auschwitz III (Monowitz), which provided slave labour for an industrial complex. In 1942, the Nazis began to deport Jews from almost every country in Europe to Auschwitz, where they were selected for slave labour or for death in the gas chambers. In mid-January 1945, close to 60,000 inmates were sent on a death march to other Nazi camps away from the advancing Allied armies, leaving behind only a few thousand inmates too weak to travel, who were liberated by the Soviet army on January 27, 1945. It is estimated that 1.1 million people were murdered in Auschwitz, approximately 90 per cent of whom were Jewish; other victims included Polish prisoners, Roma and Soviet prisoners of war.



Felix Opatowski, 2013. Courtesy of the Azrieli Foundation

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*Most of what I will tell you here I experienced personally or saw with my own eyes. I will also tell you some things that other people told me, and rumours that I heard. Yet, having finished this memoir, I reflect on the fact that long after the survivors, including myself, are gone, historians will continue to write about the Holocaust, especially about Auschwitz. But they will never really know everything about the camp because nobody ever really knew everything about Auschwitz.*

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**Felix Opatowski**

# CLASSROOM INSTRUCTIONS



## LENGTH

One lesson (50–65 minutes)



## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This inquiry-based activity encourages students to participate in knowledge-gathering by providing guided research questions that span the range of common experiences at Auschwitz: deportation, arrival and selection, daily life, resistance, and death marches. In small groups, students will research different questions related to this topic and then present their findings to the class. As part of a collaborative learning process, each group will contribute an essential piece of knowledge, so that the class as a whole develops a fuller picture of this complicated site. Your students will learn about the diversity of lived experiences at Auschwitz from a group of men and women, some of whom were quite young at the time, who arrived at Auschwitz from different countries.



## MATERIAL NEEDED

Each group will need access to an internet-enabled computer or tablet, and the classroom will need a screen.

## INSTRUCTIONS

### STEP 1

Introduce your students to Auschwitz with this encyclopedia [article](#) from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

### STEP 2

Divide students into five groups and assign each group a research question and a related list of recollections to view.

### STEP 3

Play the Re:Collection instructional [video](#) for students.

### STEP 4

Allow students time to explore [Re:Collection](#) and to locate the menu to watch the short [intro video](#) on the Holocaust. Ask students to visit Special Collections to view the recollections within the Auschwitz Special Collection.

### STEP 5

When all groups are finished, ask each group to explain their answer to the research question they were given. Groups should introduce one of the survivors they encountered and present one of that survivor's recollections as evidence for their answer.

# RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND RECOLLECTIONS



## GROUP 1

**Research question:** How did some people respond to the brutality of deportation? How did it make you feel?

**View these recollections:** John Freund, "Train to Auschwitz"; Anna Molnár Hegedűs, "Deportation"; and one more recollection of your choosing that you find by exploring the Auschwitz Special Collection.

**Tip:** As you view these recollections, consider how people experienced the physical, mental and emotional effects of these journeys to an unknown destination.



## GROUP 2

**Research question:** What stands out the most to you from these descriptions of arrival at Auschwitz? How did it make you feel?

**View these recollections:** Nate Leipziger, "Selection"; Helena Jockel, "The Selection"; and one more recollection of your choosing that you find by exploring the Auschwitz Special Collection.

**Tip:** As you view these recollections, consider how age affected how people made sense of what was happening to them and their families at this strange new location. You might also consider how the process was designed to turn individuals into prisoners, dehumanizing them.



## GROUP 3

**Research question:** How did some individuals respond to the harsh conditions they encountered in Auschwitz?

**View these recollections:** Nate Leipziger, "The Rules of Auschwitz-Birkenau"; Judy Cohen, "Looking Out for Each Other"; and one more recollection of your choosing that you find by exploring the Auschwitz Special Collection.

**Tip:** As you view these recollections, consider how each of the survivors responded to the brutal conditions they faced.



## GROUP 4

**Research question:** In what ways did Jewish prisoners try to resist the cruel conditions they faced in Auschwitz?

**View these recollections:** Felix Opatowski, "Uprising"; Helena Jockel, "Resistance in the Women's Camp"; and one more recollection of your choosing that you find by exploring the Auschwitz Special Collection.

**Tip:** as you view these recollections, consider how risky it was for prisoners to engage in resistance activities in Auschwitz. Also consider the idea that resistance can be spiritual, holding onto one's humanity, as well as physical.



## GROUP 5

**Research question:** What is a death march? What are some of the reasons that the Nazis forced prisoners on death marches? What were the conditions prisoners faced during this phase of the Holocaust?

**View these recollections:** Anna Molnár Hegedűs, "Death March"; John Freund, "Death March"; and one more recollection of your choosing that you find by exploring the Auschwitz Special Collection.

**Tip:** Find the definition of "death march" in the glossary by clicking More Info. As you view these recollections, consider how this final phase of the Holocaust compared to imprisonment in Auschwitz.