IN THIS ISSUE

Auschwitz Liberation: 70 Years Later (Duration: 17:15)
In the face of growing anti-Semitism worldwide, "let not the past be our children's future" was the unified call as Jews and non-Jews, survivors and their families gathered in Poland in January to pay respect to those who lost their lives in the notorious Auschwitz concentration camp.

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News in Review is produced by CBC News
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Note to Teachers
The classroom must promote a safe place for students to discuss sensitive issues such as violence and death. Prepare students for the topics that will be discussed. Allow for individual reflective time in addition to small group activities where students can safely process their thoughts and emotions.

MINDS ON

“Work Sets You Free” were the words inscribed above the entrance gates to the Nazi concentration camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau. The slogan gave the exhausted prisoners false hope; the only way to be “freed” from this experience, for an unthinkable number of people, was through the gas chambers.

The Nazis established the camp in occupied Poland in 1940. It is estimated that over a million people (Jewish, Polish, Russian and Roma) were killed there. When Russian troops liberated the camp on January 27, 1945, they were shocked to see that the few remaining survivors were walking skeletons. When the troops searched the rest of the grounds they realized that his was not a labour camp but an extermination centre. Stacks of clothes, eye glasses and shoes attested to the camp’s large number of victims. As the world became aware of the atrocities, many wondered how a cultured nation like Germany could resort to such actions.

Has humanity learned anything from this historical catastrophe? Could such an event ever occur again?

HOW COULD IT HAPPEN?

The roots of the Holocaust go back centuries to a time when Jews were often blamed for disaster and disease. At this point in history, many Christians blamed Jews for the death of Christ and even accused them of sacrificing Christian children.
In Germany, anti-Semitism often played a prominent role when its rulers needed a convenient scapegoat. Many Jews were murdered in pogroms organized and sanctioned by the authorities.

**Pogrom**

An organized action to persecute a specific ethnic group, historically targeting Jews in Russia or Eastern Europe.

After World War I, with Germany suffering badly from the economic impact of its defeat and the Great Depression, many citizens were looking for someone to blame. In 1933 Adolph Hitler became dictator of Germany and quickly legislated anti-Jewish laws, including banning Jews from teaching in universities, barring them from marrying non-Jews, restricting their movements, and forcing them to wear yellow Stars of David for easy recognition. By 1942 the Nazis adopted a policy of mass extermination of Jews as a “Final Solution” to what they considered to be the “Jewish problem.”

The main reasons that Hitler was able to implement his plans were that:

- he promised Depression-weary Germans that he would improve the economy and make Germany strong once again;
- he organized a secret police, supported by a network of informers, who intimidated and arrested anyone who opposed him; and
- to garner support, he exploited the negative myths that had existed for centuries about Jewish people.

Do such conditions exist today that might allow a repeat of these horrible events?

**Aging Survivors**

Without a doubt, Nazi extermination camps had an enormous psychological impact on those who survived their horrors. On the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, about 300 survivors returned to the camp to pay homage to its victims. This event is expected to be the last major anniversary that survivors will be able to attend in considerable numbers. Now at an advanced age, many continue to come to terms with their losses and experiences. They still bear the numbers the Nazis tattooed on their arms in an attempt to de-humanize and reduce them to a mere number. As the survivors have aged, some have developed Alzheimer’s, and with their short-term memory disappearing, they are left to continually relive the horrors of Auschwitz.

**The Legacy for Germany**

On the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz the German parliament met in a special session and heard the German President, Joachim Gauck, reflect on the horrors of the Holocaust. He summarized his comments by stating: “There is no German identity without Auschwitz. The remembrance of the Holocaust remains something for all citizens living in Germany. It belongs to this country’s history.”

Germany has been one of the most progressive nations in Europe regarding its prosecution of hate groups. Numerous convictions have been made against people and organizations that promote or preach hate. While many Germans agree with these policies, some younger Germans feel it is time to stop bringing up the Holocaust as a German crime. In their view, these events happened long before they were born and they feel the country has paid enough in guilt and compensation. Should the sins of one generation be placed on another?

**International Implications**

At the remembrance services at Auschwitz one important international leader was absent. Russian President Vladimir Putin declined to attend and claimed he did not receive a formal invitation. He also objected to the Polish
government claiming the troops who liberated the camp were members of a Ukrainian regiment. It has commonly been reported that the Red Army, which included members of many regions within the former Soviet Union, had liberated the camp. This incident reflected the political tension that currently exists between the Ukraine and Russia. It also suggests how easily the horrifying lessons of Auschwitz can be overlooked in the face of today’s conflicts.

**Anti-Semitism today**

At the 70th anniversary ceremony, Holocaust survivor Roman Kent implored participants: “We do not want our past to be our children's future.” Unfortunately over the last few years there have been many incidents in France, including a recent attack on a kosher supermarket in Paris (within days of shootings at the Charlie Hebdo newspaper). In 2013 there were 527 anti-Semitic acts reported in France.

The increase in such actions prompted Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to call on European Jews to immigrate to Israel where they would be safe from anti-Semitism. European leaders quickly responded and criticized his remarks. They emphasized the contributions of Jewish citizens in their countries and called for universal tolerance.

In coming years fewer Auschwitz survivors will be alive but their message will continue to resonate around the world, that we must remember their suffering and use it to ensure such atrocities never happen again.
VIDEO REVIEW

Pre-viewing

1. Do you think commemorating the liberation of a death camp is necessary considering all the horrifying memories related to the site? Why or why not?

While viewing

1. Why would survivors return to the site of such painful memories?

2. How were the commemorations meant to go beyond just remembering the victims of the camp?

3. How did Helena Jockel’s conversation with the young SS girl illustrate how well the Nazis had indoctrinated their people regarding Jews?

Post-viewing

1. a) What do you think the attitude of Auschwitz survivors may have been toward Germans?

b) After you have reflected and answered the question above, read the response of Primo Levi, an Italian chemist and writer who survived the Auschwitz camp, when asked if he hated Germans:

"I regard hatred as bestial and crude, and prefer that my actions and thoughts be the product, as far as possible, of reason. Much less do I accept hatred directed collectively at an ethnic group, for example at all the Germans. If I accepted it, I would feel that I was following the precepts of Nazism,"
which was founded precisely on national and racial hatred. I must admit that if I had in front of me one of our persecutors of those days, certain known faces, certain old lies, I would be tempted to hate, and with violence too; but exactly because I am not a fascist or a Nazi, I refuse to give way to this temptation.

Compare his answer to your own and explain how they are similar and different? Did his answer surprise you? Why or why not?

2. Using the following link, examine the virtual tour created for the camp at Auschwitz. If you were to be given the task of creating your own version of the virtual tour, which areas of the camp would you call attention to? Provide a rationale for your choices. How would your tour be different?

[remember.org/auschwitz/map-aus.php](remember.org/auschwitz/map-aus.php)

3. Coinciding with the anniversary of the liberation of the camp, the administrators of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum are shifting the way they conceive their mission. According to the New York Times, “The site will be organized to explain to generations who were not alive during the war what happened rather than to act as a memorial to those who suffered through it.” Today there are still groups and individuals who deny the Holocaust and claim that it was impossible for the events to have occurred. What evidence would you present to counter these claims? Why might it be more difficult in the future to refute deniers’ claims?

Sources:


PRIMARY-SOURCE EVIDENCE: THE PHOTOS OF HENRYK ROSS

During World War II, the Nazis created a series of ghettos in cities across German-occupied Poland and the Soviet Union where they forced the surrounding Jewish population to live. The city of Lodz, 130 kilometres southwest of Warsaw, was a major industrial centre in Poland and was home to one of Europe’s largest Jewish populations. The Lodz Ghetto was second in size only to the Warsaw Ghetto.

To commemorate the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, the Art Gallery of Ontario is hosting an exhibit of photos by Henryk Ross. A resident of the Lodz Ghetto himself and a photojournalist by trade, Ross was ordered by the Germans to document the efficiency of life in the ghetto under the Nazis. His photos were meant to show the ghetto in a positive light but Ross managed to depict the everyday struggle of its Jewish residents to survive their deplorable conditions. His images often gave the victims some dignity.

Examine a selection of the photos featured in the Toronto Star:


Use the worksheet on the following page, created by the Historical Thinking Project, to help analyze the pictures. For more information on using primary-source evidence, visit: historicalthinking.ca/primary-source-evidence
### WORKSHEET: Primary-Source Evidence

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<td>1. What type of source is it?</td>
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<td>5. Why was it created? Who was the intended audience?</td>
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<td>8. What evidence does it contribute to the topic you are studying, the narrative you are writing, or the argument you are making?</td>
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