

THE HOLOCAUST FROM A VICTIM'S PERSPECTIVE

Osher
October 6, 13, 20

Don Schilling
schilling@denison.edu

"Auschwitz defies imagination and perception; it submits only to memory.... Between the dead and the rest of us there exists an abyss that no talent can comprehend." Elie Wiesel

"At bottom the Judeocide remains as incomprehensible to me today as...when I set out to study and rethink it." Arno Mayer

"The Holocaust is a fundamental event in history--not only because one-third of the Jewish people in the world died in the space of four years, but because, in the last analysis, it is inexplicable." Raul Hilberg

"Question from the audience: And do you believe it's possible to come to grips with the events that you write about?
Answer: No (The deaths of six million Jews, twenty million Russians, six million Poles.) In that case--follow up question--what's the use of bringing it up again and again?" Christa Wolf

"Auschwitz remains incomprehensible." Charles Maier

"The Holocaust...is an historical event; it was perpetrated by humans for human reasons, and is therefore as explicable as any other series of violent acts in recorded history." Yehuda Bauer

The Course

I have previously taught this course, but this will be the first time I have offered it as virtual class on Zoom. It will be a learning experience for all of us. As much as possible, I would like to include opportunities for us to discuss the issues raised by my comments and course readings. We'll just have to see how well this works in our virtual setting and may require some modification of the syllabus as we proceed.

Is it ultimately beyond our grasp to understand the Holocaust, its causes, nature, and consequences? Is the Holocaust so removed from our experience as human beings in the 21st century that we will always be thwarted as we confront this tragedy and attempt to seek its meaning? Or is the Holocaust, as Bauer argues, "explicable"? If so, in what sense? There are no simple answers to these questions and we will only begin to wrestle with the challenging issues of the Holocaust in this brief three-week class that has its focus on the victims. We will rely heavily on Primo Levi's classic memoir, *Survival in Auschwitz*, to assist us in our quest for understanding. I welcome the opportunity to engage with you in the discussion of this vital work and a selection of relevant documents.

Reading: I have listed the Touchstone (previously the Collier Books) edition of this book in the course catalog as the preferred edition (ISBN: 0-684-82680-1, or ISBN-13: 9780684826806). However, if you have a different edition, that is not a problem. I have listed our assignments by chapters and those should remain the same for all editions.

Objectives: 1) Class members will acquire a fuller understanding of the range of Nazi policies and the experiences endured by victims, how these policies and experiences varied over time and space, and how victims sought to cope with their increasingly desperate situations.
2) Through the careful study of Levi's memoir, class members will gain deeper insight into the nature of the concentration camp and how prisoners from positions of near powerlessness struggled to survive.
3) Class members will assess Levi's position as a witness to the Holocaust in the context of his life.

Class Schedule:

Oct. 6 Introductions and Contexts

The European Context: Anti-Judaism, Antisemitism and Racism
The German Context: Adolf Hitler and National Socialism
The Course of German Anti-Jewish Policy & Jewish Responses, 1933-1938
The War and its Implications for the Jewish Population of Europe

Required Reading: Documents from the Shoah Resource Center, pp. 1-6.

Discussion Questions: For each document consider the following questions. Who produced the document? When? What perspective does it represent? How does the document characterize the challenges facing the Jewish community? What recommendations does the document make about how Jews should respond to the new situation created by National Socialist government? What major conclusions can we draw from reading these documents?

Oct. 13 The SS, the Camp System, and Primo Levi

The SS
Ghettos
Mobile Killing Units: The *Einsatzgruppen*
General Features of the Camp System
The Auschwitz Complex
Primo Levi: Biography, *If this is a Man*
Observations about Levi as a Writer
Experiencing the Lager

Required Reading: Levi, Preface, Chapters 1-8.

Discussion Questions: As the Jewish prisoners embarked on their journey, how well prepared were they for what lay ahead of them? What did it mean to be “On the Bottom”? What factors were crucial for a prisoner’s survival in his initial weeks in the Lager? How do we understand the role of an infirmary (Ka-Be) in a concentration camp? Levi gives chapters 5 and 6 innocuous titles (“Our Nights,” “The Work”), but what do they reveal about the challenges of surviving the Lager? Is Levi just being sarcastic when he titles chapter 7 “A Good Day”? What are the key features of the Lager’s economic system? What is your response to the concluding paragraph of chapter 8?

Oct. 21 Further Discussion of *Survival in Auschwitz* and Levi’s Postwar Journey

Considering “The Drowned and the Saved”
Surviving to 1945
The Last Ten Days
Levi’s Postwar Journey and Death
Concluding Reflections

Required Reading: Levi, Chapters 9-17, and, if your edition contains it, “A Conversation with Primo Levi by Philip Roth.”

Discussion Questions: What are your reactions to Levi’s claims and analysis on pp. 87-88 (first two pages of chapter 9)? What does it take to become one of the “drowned” or one of the “saved”? How does Levi’s training as a chemist shape his experience in Auschwitz? In a memoir of this kind, it seems very strange to encounter the chapter, “The Canto of Ulysses.” What do you make of it? By August 1945, Levi has spent five months in the Lager and is among the “old ones.” What has he learned; what new challenges does he face; and what becomes critical to his continued survival? In chapter 16, p. 149, Levi comments on the revolt of prisoners in Birkenau. What is the significance of such resistance? Why didn’t more such actions occur? In the last chapter Levi identifies an act of sharing as signifying the death of the Lager (p. 160). Do you agree? Why has Levi had so little to say in his memoir about the SS who ran Auschwitz? What additional insights about Levi and his Auschwitz experience did you glean from Philip Roth’s conversation with Levi? Did Levi survive Auschwitz?