

Episode Guide: Liberation & Revenge

January 1945–January 1963

Prisoners of Auschwitz greet their liberators.

Overview

"Liberation & Revenge" (**Disc 2, Title 3, 47:29**) completes the history of Auschwitz. As the end of the war approached, Auschwitz camp officers tried to hide the evidence of their crimes but were not completely successful. After liberation, survivors searched for their families and tried to return to their pre-war homes, but former communities and neighbors did not always welcome them back. As evidence of war crimes emerged, some senior SS officers were tried and convicted; others were allowed to resume their lives. Over four years, 1.3 million people were sent to Auschwitz, and 1.1 million people died there. Of the 7,000 members of the SS who worked at Auschwitz and survived the war, fewer than 800 were ever put on trial.

In the Follow-up Discussion (**Disc 2, Bonus Features, Title 12, Chapter 1, 11:12**), Linda Ellerbee talks with eight students: Humera Ahmed, a sophomore at Boston College (school identifications are as of fall 2004); Henry Connelly, a senior at The Crossroads School, Santa Monica; Carmen Farias, a sophomore at Wellesley College; Adam Finelli, a junior at New York University; Lewis Frank, a senior at Boston Latin School; Meredith (Molly) Higgins, a senior at Boston Latin School; Janelle Jackson, a freshman at Clark Atlanta University; and Lydia Ross, a freshman at Columbia College. Humera, Carmen, Adam, Lewis, Molly, and Janelle had previously taken a course on the Holocaust with Judi Freeman, Seevak Chair in History at Boston Latin School, which included a trip to Poland for most of them.

Target Audience: Grades 9-12 social studies, history, and English courses

Student Learning Goals

- Compare the post-war experiences of various groups at Auschwitz (e.g., SS leaders, SS officers, Jewish survivors, Russian prisoners of war).
- Evaluate the kind of evidence needed to prosecute war crimes and consider how it might be obtained.
- Recognize the shifting global power relations post-war, identifying U.S. interests.
- Deliberate whether obedience is an adequate defense for the commission of war crimes.
- Assess whether you believe justice has been done in reference to the Holocaust.
- Discuss options for personal behavior at times when genocide is occurring.

Content Synopsis

The chapter numbers, titles, and times below correspond to the two-videodisc set of Auschwitz: Inside the Nazi State published by BBC Video (E2113).

1. **Liberation (Start: 00:00; Length 3:53):** As the end of the war and the Soviet Army approached, Auschwitz camp officers attempted to hide the horrors they had perpetrated during the war. The Soviets liberated Auschwitz on January 27, 1945, finding only a few thousand survivors, many of them children, including twins who had been subjects of Mengele's experiments.
2. **Suicide and Flight (Start: 3:53; Length: 9:56):** Shortly before the end of the war, Adolf Hitler committed suicide and Heinrich Himmler told Rudolf Höss to disappear into the army to avoid capture. Höss did so successfully, but Himmler was captured and later committed suicide. Allied troops entering Auschwitz witnessed the severity of the Nazis' crimes, although many perpetrators escaped unnoticed. Höss managed to escape seizure in the first months after the war, first in the navy and later as a farm worker. Having learned more about his role at Auschwitz, the British army pursued him and arrested his wife. At first she said Höss was dead, but they tricked her into revealing his whereabouts, and British soldiers captured him. Whitney Harris, a prosecutor at the Nuremberg Trials, describes Höss's testimony.
3. **A New Terror (Start: 13:49; Length: 7:18):** The Soviets treated not only their German prisoners more harshly than did the British, they also mistreated many Soviet prisoners who returned from Nazi camps. Returning prisoners were suspected of having been turned into German spies and often were punished. A Soviet soldier, captured by the Germans in 1941 and convicted by the Soviets of being a spy after the war, describes being sentenced to hard labor until 1953. Refugees and camp prisoners who tried to return home to Soviet-controlled Eastern Europe faced brutal treatment from Soviet soldiers, including rape and murder. After the war, some captured SS soldiers were sent to British prison camps, where their treatment was very humane. Many became laborers in local villages and farms. Some even formed a choir and were able to leave the prison camp with relative ease.
4. **No Regrets (Start: 21:07; Length: 7:11):** In 1947 Rudolf Höss returned to Poland as a convicted war criminal awaiting execution. He wrote his memoirs, which revealed much about the camp and its commandant. He wrote that he believed in the killing program he oversaw. His only regret was the time spent away from his family. Höss was executed at Auschwitz on April 16, 1947. Across Eastern Europe, little remained of once-thriving Jewish communities. For some Auschwitz survivors, returning home was a bitter experience. Few, if any, family members had survived. Often their prewar property had been confiscated or stolen by the occupiers or their former neighbors who now rejected them. In some extreme cases, communities reacted violently and murdered returning survivors.

5. **Escape and Pursuit (Start: 28:18; Length: 11:08):** After the war, several major Nazi figures managed to escape capture, including Joseph Mengele and Adolf Eichmann. In retaliation for Nazi atrocities, the Jewish Brigade, a former British Army unit, took it upon themselves after the war to capture, try, and execute war criminals. But many Nazis successfully returned to a normal life after the war, although they often tried to hide their past from their neighbors as well as their families. Years after his escape Eichmann was discovered in Argentina, captured, sent to Israel for trial, convicted, and executed. Of the roughly 7,000 SS troops who served at Auschwitz and were alive at the end of the war, the majority were not arrested or tried for their crimes. Many lived productive lives. Survivors of the camps were less able to resume their prewar lives. In addition to their grief over murdered family and friends and psychological aftereffects of their Holocaust experiences, many lost their homes and property and received little or no compensation for them.

6. **A Dark Legacy (Start: 39:26; Length: 8:03):** Of the 7,000 members of the SS who worked at Auschwitz and who survived the war, fewer than 800 were ever put on trial. Oskar Gröning, was one of those never tried and discusses his life after the war and his reasons for talking about his experiences in this film. Thomas Blatt, a former Jewish prisoner, describes going back to his home in Izbica. As for Auschwitz, in four years, 1.3 million people were sent to Auschwitz, and 1.1 million people died there, all so-called enemies of the Nazi state. The grounds of the death camp continue to serve as a reminder of the past and a warning to the future.

7. **Follow-up Discussion (Disc 2, Bonus Features, Title 12, Chapter 1, 11:12):** High school and college students discuss their response to the series and efforts they believe individual students can take when they learn that a genocide is occurring.

Learning Resources

Timeline: 1945–1963

Biographies: **Thomas Blatt**, **Libusa Breder**, **Helena Citronova**, William Cross, Adolf Eichmann, **Oskar Gröning**, **Vasily Gromadsky**, **Stanislaw Hantz**, **Whitney Harris**, Heinrich Himmler, Adolf Hitler, Hedwig Höss, Rudolph Höss, **Eva Mozes Kor**, Josef Mengele, **Pavel Stenkin**, **Moshe Tavor**

(boldface indicates people interviewed in the program; others are mentioned or seen in archival films or dramatizations)

Glossary: Allies, Auschwitz, Birkenau, concentration camps, death camps, Eastern Europe, extermination camps, Jewish Brigade, Nazis, Nuremberg Trials, Red Army, Red Square, Reich, Ruthenians, Sonderkommando, SS, Zyklon B

Readings:

- 6.1. Excerpt from *Night* (Elie Wiesel).
- 6.2. Speech by Rabbi Herschel Schacter.
- 6.3. "Nothing Makes You Free" by Melvin Jules Bukiet.
- 6.4. "Who Can You Count On? Looks, Race, Even Weather May Play Role in Whether You'll Get a Helping Hand" (20/20 ABC News).

Before Viewing the Episode

A discussion prompt in Program 2 suggested that students discuss the extent to which various people were responsible for the Holocaust. If you used the exercise, this would be a good time to refer back to it and to the ways in which students defined guilt. In legal terms, guilt is a breach of duty to abide by the laws. Underlying the legal concept is the broader idea of guilt as a breach of socially accepted norms of behavior. In introducing this episode, explain that as the war came to an end, the question of individual and collective guilt became critical. As they view the episode students should look for ways in which the world approached the concept of guilt after the Holocaust. What criteria did they use for identifying socially accepted norms of behavior?

Post-Viewing Discussion

- To give students a sense of what it was like for prisoners at Auschwitz as the Russian Army got nearer and nearer, distribute **Reading 6.1. Excerpt from Night** by Elie Wiesel, in which he eloquently describes his final 24 hours at Buna (Auschwitz III). *Discuss:*
 - How would you describe the behavior of the SS as the Red Army approached Auschwitz? Why do you think they behaved as they did?
 - What do you learn about Wiesel's and other prisoners' concerns and fears about this evacuation?
 - Throughout his memoir, Wiesel uses the word *night* as both a literal reality and a metaphor. What do you think the word *night* refers to in this section?
 - What is ironic about the evacuation from Buna?

- **Reading 6.2. Speech by Rabbi Herschel Schacter**, is an eyewitness account of the liberation of Buchenwald, which was a Nazi concentration camp but not a death camp. *Discuss:*
 - Compare the reactions of the soldier in the film who describes what he found upon liberating Auschwitz with those of Rabbi Schacter.
 - How does Rabbi Schacter connect with the prisoners to let them know that he is truly a liberator?
 - If Buchenwald was not a death camp, why did it have crematoria and why were they used so often?
 - From this reading and **Reading 6.1. Excerpt from Night** by Elie Wiesel, what would you say to someone who said the Holocaust did not occur?

- For a brief reading on war crimes trials, direct students to the Holocaust Encyclopedia on the Web site of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (www.ushmm.org/wlc/en). Two brief but important articles will provide students with additional information on international justice after the war: "War Crimes Trials" and "The Search for Perpetrators." *Discuss:*
 - Throughout the series, both Nazi leaders and individual perpetrators provide justification for their crimes—from stealing prisoners' jewelry to mass murder. Identify some of these justifications. Which justifications stem from a personal morality and which relate to ideology? Is there a difference between the personal ("I deserve it.") and the ideological ("Nazism requires it.")?
 - Many Nazis defended their actions by saying they were just following orders. What is your opinion of this defense for murdering people?
 - Should people always do as they are ordered? Should people refuse to obey orders when they feel they are morally wrong? What alternative actions can one take under such circumstances? What does it mean to "respect authority but question information," as Professor Edward Kissi says in the Follow-up Discussion of Episode 2? Develop some scenarios that would illustrate the difference.
 - A small number of Nazis were actually brought to trial and convicted (compared to the number who participated in the Holocaust). Do you think justice was served?
 - What efforts are still going on to find Nazi perpetrators and what avenues are available to bring them to justice? Conduct a search of a national newspaper for the last year on the subject of Holocaust survivors, both

victims and perpetrators. What do the results of your research suggest about the current hunt for guilty parties?

- Hitler and Himmler committed suicide. The Jewish Brigade murdered Nazis without trying them. The people who found Rudolph Höss clearly beat him up before bringing him in. Are these actions ethical?
- In the last dozen years, particularly as the life span for many survivors is running out, numerous agencies have taken up the question of reparations. The German government and industry, for example, have a fund that would pay approximately \$3,000 to each person who was made a slave laborer by the Third Reich. Swiss banks also have created a fund to compensate survivors whose property was confiscated by the Nazis and stored in the banks of the otherwise neutral Swiss. Can reparations right an old wrong? Should people who receive restitution "forgive and forget"? How would you determine who is eligible for reparations? What factors would you take into consideration? Who should represent the survivors?
- **Reading 6.3. Nothing Makes You Free** was written by Melvin Jules Bukiet, a writer and professor of creative writing at Sarah Lawrence College who participated in the Follow-up Discussion of Episode 2. He is a member of the Second Generation—also called 2G—the children of survivors. Bukiet writes here about his experience as a 2G in the first 20 years or so after the war. *Discuss:*
 - Compare Bukiet's description of what survivors found when they tried to return to their homes with survivors' accounts in the film.
 - In his first sentence of "Nothing Makes You Free," Bukiet writes: "Concentration camps were 'liberated'." Why does he use quotation marks with the word "liberated"? How does his view of liberation compare to Rabbi Schacter's?
 - Why do you think Bukiet says that Hitler won and the Jews lost? Do you agree with him? Why?
 - Why do you think people wanted the survivors to remain unobtrusive?
 - In Episode 2, Professor Bukiet said emphatically that there are no lessons to be learned from the Holocaust. What do you think he meant by this? Do you agree with his assessment?
 - Since the 1980s many survivors have spoken publicly of their experiences. Tens of thousands have been interviewed on videotape or audiotape so their stories will be available for posterity. Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation has recorded more than 52,000 interviews and is in the process of creating a database so that survivors' stories will be available

worldwide. Direct students to www.vhf.org to learn more about the Shoah Foundation and see whether it has interviews with any survivors in your community. Students might take on a class project of raising the relatively small amount of money needed to get copies of these videotapes for the local library.

- In the Follow-up Discussion to the program (**Disc 2, Bonus Features, Title 12, Chapter 1, 11:12**), a group of students ranging from seniors in high school to sophomores in college discusses their responses to the series and the actions they believe to be available to them in helping peoples beset by other genocides. Have students react to and discuss the various points of view expressed by the students as well as try to generate additional responses they think could be made. Share **Reading 6.4. Who Can You Count On? Looks, Race, Even Weather May Play Role in Whether You'll Get a Helping Hand**, an interesting study on the ways in which individuals behave and under what circumstances when a crime is taking place or an individual clearly needs some assistance. Help students explore their own likely behavior in similar circumstances and in particular the writer's definition of some of these responses as "bystander apathy." Use this article to motivate students to discuss how they can become involved in preventing or stopping current or future genocides.