

0. WHEN DID THE ALLIES KNOW? - Story Preface

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This image, from the Russian State Archives, depicts Soviet soldiers freeing female prisoners at Auschwitz during the Red Army's late-January, 1945, liberation of the notorious death camp.

Nagging questions about Allied knowledge of Auschwitz have always troubled people. From camp survivors to the curious public, a key issue remains: Did the Allies know about extermination at Auschwitz before the camp was liberated? If so, why wasn't it bombed?

Had the sprawling complex been destroyed by Allied air raids, the Nazis would have lost their ability to continue murdering innocent people. Scholars have argued such action would have been preferable, even though prisoners would have died in the raid, because it would have ended the Nazi's biggest killing machine.

Did these aerial photographs sufficiently reveal what was happening at Auschwitz-Birkenau? Not according to the CIA report. It was only later, with the use of sophisticated photo-interpretation equipment and survivor testimony, that the various pieces of the Auschwitz terror could be fit together.

When Soviet troops liberated Auschwitz-Birkenau, on 27 January 1945, only a fraction of the camps' total prisoners had survived. Some of those survivors were *Sonderkommandos* - male prisoners who were forced to participate in the dreadful goings-on in the death camp.

Six of those *Sonderkommandos* later agreed to answer questions about what they did - and why they did it. Their responses and stories - including details of a Sonderkommando uprising (in October of 1944) which took the Nazis by complete surprise and resulted in burning the camp's crematoria - are included in a book entitled We Wept Without Tears. It is a difficult read.

Millions of people died at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Evidence of what remained, at liberation, chills the spine:

- Bales of hair, ready for shipment to Germany;
- Confiscated prayer shawls, dumped in an Auschwitz warehouse;
- Heaps of eyeglasses, no longer needed by murdered people;
- Piles of shoes, removed by those who thought they were just taking showers; and
- Stacks of clothing, carelessly tossed away by Nazis who thought they had the right to kill (or maim) people they considered inferior.

If females in the death camps of Auschwitz and Birkenau thought they were free from the grip of injustice and inhumanity, when the liberators arrived, they would soon experience a different reality.

In Auschwitz: A New History, by Laurence Rees, we learn that liberating soldiers of the Red Army did not just have freeing the captives on their minds when they arrived at the notorious death camps.

Some of the soldiers perpetrated a different kind of horror against the girls and women whom they freed from the Nazis. Stories told by survivors, included in Rees' book, are neither easy to read nor to comprehend.

And what of all the children who passed through Auschwitz?

Among those who survived were Miriam and Eva Mozes, two of the first youngsters to walk through the camp gates on January 27, 1945. We see them here, in this photo, which is part of an exhibition at the British Library called "Life in a Jar: Childhood Experience of the Holocaust."



How many children were still alive at the time of liberation?
Only 180 survived what happened at this place of horrors.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/WHEN-DID-THE-ALLIES-KNOW-Auschwitz-Place-of-Horrors>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/WHEN-DID-THE-ALLIES-KNOW-Auschwitz-Place-of-Horrors>

Media Stream



Auschwitz: Aerial View

Photo online, courtesy U.S. National Archives.

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Auschwitz Child Survivors

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/>



Auschwitz - Bales of Hair

Image online, courtesy Polish Archives at the [Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum](#).

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Auschwitz - Confiscated Prayer Shawls

Image online, courtesy Polish Archives at the [Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum](#).

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<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Auschwitz-Confiscated-Prayer-Shawls>



Auschwitz - Piles of Prisoner Eyeglasses

Image online, courtesy Polish Archives at the [Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum](#).

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Auschwitz - Heaps of Discarded Shoes

Image online, courtesy Polish Archives at the [Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum](#).

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Auschwitz - Inside a Gas Chamber Shower

Image online, courtesy Polish Archives at the [Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum](#).

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Auschwitz - Discarded Clothes of Murdered People

Image online, courtesy Polish Archives at the [Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum](#).

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WHEN DID THE ALLIES KNOW?

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Auschwitz Uprising - Sonderkommandos Revolt

THIS VIDEO CONTAINS RECREATIONS OF AN UPRISING AT AUSCHWITZ, IN OCTOBER OF 1944, FROM A FILM CALLED *THE GREY ZONE*. IT DEPICTS UNSETTLING EVENTS. PROCEED WITH CAUTION.

Sonderkommandos were young, strong and healthy Jewish men who were themselves prisoners at Auschwitz-Birkenau. They were assigned jobs in the camp's assembly lines of death.

A book about their work—*We Wept Without Tears*—sheds light on how the Auschwitz prisoners were treated. Of his work, one *Sonderkommando* says:

I ceased belonging to the human race.

Although the Sonderkommandos did not gas the victims, they were part of the process of death:

- *Some of them greeted new arrivals, assuring those who would be gassed that they would be reunited with their families after taking a shower.*

- *Others processed the bodies of gassed people (including cutting hair and removing gold teeth) before taking them to be burned in the crematoria.*

In October of 1944, a group of *Sonderkommandos* rebelled against the SS officers at the camp, taking them completely by surprise. Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial museum in Jerusalem, provides [information about the uprising](#) at its web site:

On October 7, prisoners assigned to the *Sonderkommando* staged a rebellion destroying one of the crematoria (Crematoria IV) and killing some of their German guards. The *Sonderkommando*, a squad of Jewish forced laborers who incinerated the bodies of gas-chamber victims in the crematoria, discovered that the Germans were about to murder them, too. They contacted the international resistance that had coalesced in Auschwitz and sought to launch a joint uprising.



When the international resistance refused to collaborate for various reasons, the *Sonderkommando* people decided to go ahead on their own. All the participants in the uprising fell in combat. In their investigation of the affair, the Germans discovered that the explosives used in the uprising had been smuggled by a group of young Jewish women elsewhere in Auschwitz. On January 6, 1945, four of these women were executed. The SS, who ran the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp, did not intend for any of the *Sonderkommandos* to survive—including those who did not participate in the uprising. Although most were killed, just like the victims whose bodies they had processed, some were alive at liberation (in January of 1945).

Because they were so despised by camp prisoners, and so ashamed of what they had done to survive the horrors of Auschwitz, it was not easy for surviving *Sonderkommandos* to reveal their roles. Notwithstanding, the Shoah Foundation (at the University of Southern California) contains video testimony of five *Sonderkommandos* and the book, *We Wept Without Tears*, contains the stories of six men.

This video clip is from *The Grey Zone*, a film about the Auschwitz *Sonderkommando* uprising. The movie is based on a [play of the same name](#) which, in turn, is based on the [account of Miklos Nyiszli](#) (a Jewish doctor who, as a prisoner at Auschwitz during the relevant time frame, worked with the infamous [Josef Mengele](#), a German doctor who [behaved like a monster](#)).

This video clip is the trailer for *The Grey Zone*, online courtesy Lions Gate Films via YouTube. Copyright, Lions Gate Films, all rights reserved. Clip provided here as fair use for educational purposes and to acquaint new viewers with the film.

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