



When Auschwitz was liberated, in January of 1945, a film unit of the Soviet Army recorded what they saw. Among other things was this group of child survivors. The above still shot, from the Soviet film, has been released into the public domain by the Belarussian State Archive of Documentary Film and Photography and is online via the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

*He thought that all the boys and girls who lived there
would be in different groups, playing tennis or football,
skipping and drawing out squares for hopscotch
on the ground... As it turned out, all the things
he thought might be there - weren't.*

From *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, page 207
by John Boyne

Bruno is a nine-year-old German boy, living in Berlin, when his father gets a new assignment. The time frame is World War II, and the father's new job means a family move to a different country.

The new job comes about after the family gets a visit from someone Bruno calls "The Fury." That's a mispronunciation for "The Fuhrer." The Fuhrer is another name for Germany's WWII leader, Adolf Hitler.



Bruno, whom Asa Butterfield portrays in the film version of John Boyne's novel, is not happy in this new place (which he and his sister, Gretel, call "Out-With"). He has no friends and is not allowed to explore the surroundings at his new home. In fact, Bruno has a direct order about some of those places which are:

Out Of Bounds At All Times And No Exceptions.

In the distance, beyond his house, Bruno sees a concentration camp. He doesn't know what it is, doesn't know what it's called and has no idea what is happening to people who arrive, live, work and die there.

He does notice something unusual: All the people, working at this place, are wearing what Bruno believes are striped pajamas.

Although the novel does not tell us where the concentration camp is located, we can examine the facts in the story, then draw a reasonable conclusion.

Bruno calls the place "Out-With." Is that a childish interpretation of "Auschwitz?"

The concentration camp is in Poland. Given its other characteristics (which we discover along the way, particularly at the novel's end), it's fair to conclude that the camp is, indeed, Auschwitz.

Keep in mind the Nazis created different camps (with separate entrances) at Auschwitz. At the top of this comparative image is Auschwitz I, or Camp I, with its *Arbeit Macht Frei* sign—meaning "Work Makes One Free." At the bottom is Auschwitz-Birkenau, with its rail line leading directly into the camp (where Nazi officials decided the fate of new arrivals).



In this camp lives a nine-year-old boy from Krakow, Poland. His name is Shmuel, and he is Jewish. Shmuel is at

the camp with his father.

When he can no longer contain himself from exploring the area—including the forbidden places—Bruno follows a fence. Some distance away, sitting on the other side of the fence, Bruno sees another boy who seems very sad and is really thin.



That boy is Shmuel. He is also wearing pajamas and has a shaved head.

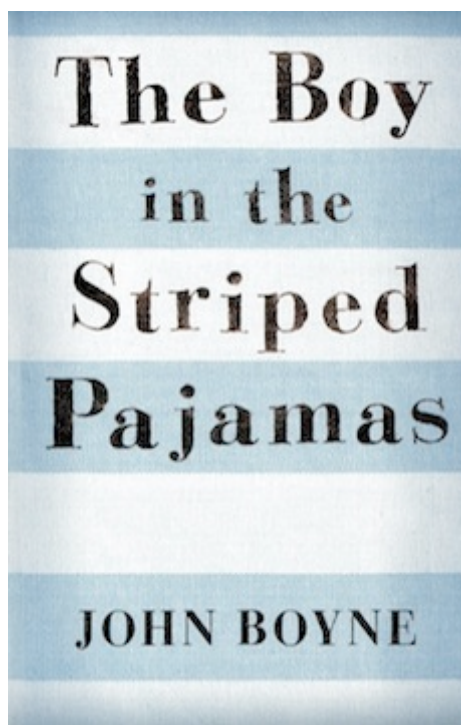
The lads talk and figure-out they share the same birthday: April 15, 1934. They'd like to play together, but the fence is separating them.

As time goes by, Bruno keeps-up his visits with Shmuel. Innocent of his friend's predicament, and that of all the people inside the camp, Bruno asks some questions.



He learns that Shmuel came to the camp after he and his family had to make two moves. The first move required them to leave their home, in Krakow, and live in a really small place with another family.

The second move happened when soldiers came to the small room and ordered everyone there to board a large truck and then a cramped train (with no windows). At the end of that truck-and-train journey, Shmuel arrived at the place Bruno calls "Out-With."



In this fictional story, by John Boyne, the nine-year-old *Boy in the Striped Pajamas* has a different arrival story than the non-fictional children his age. In reality, most youngsters arriving at Auschwitz, under the age of 12, died soon after stepping-off their transport trains. The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum [tells us why](#):

Upon arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau and other killing centers, the camp authorities sent the majority of children directly to the gas chambers...The chances for survival for Jewish and some non-Jewish adolescents (13-18 years old) were greater, as they could be deployed at forced labor.

As the boys continue their friendship, by talking on either side of the fence which separates them, Bruno gets lice. So does his sister.



Although they wash their hair with special shampoo, to rid their scalps of lice, their father thinks that's not enough to cure their problem. He orders that Bruno should have his head shaved.

After his hair is gone, Bruno notices that he now looks more like his friend Shmuel.

Bruno's mother has never liked living at "Out-With" and wants to return to Berlin with her son and daughter. Bruno's father, however, cannot leave his job as the commander of "Out-With."

Finally he agrees that his wife and the children can return to Berlin without him.



When Bruno shares this news with his friend, Shmuel is very sad. Not only is he sad about losing his friend, he is sad because he cannot locate his father inside the camp. The boys agree that before Bruno leaves for Berlin, he will help Shmuel look for his dad.

The next day, without telling anyone at home about his plan, Bruno slips under the fence and swaps his own clothes for a pair of dirty striped pajamas. Now he looks more like a camp inmate.



Unable to find Shmuel's father, Bruno thinks it's time for him to change back into his own clothes and return home. Suddenly, however, the two boys are caught-up in one of the "marches" Shmuel has described to Bruno.

With so many men moving closely together in the march, Bruno and Shmuel cannot get away from the crowd of people. The people wearing striped pajamas are all forced inside a warm room with no windows.

When Bruno and Shmuel are in the very dark room, they hold hands to reassure each other. Still innocent of the evil around them, the boys are unaware that the slammed-and-locked door is the only way out of a gas chamber.

With Bruno's parents unaware that he is in "Out-With's" darkest place, they lose their son. Not only do they lose him to death, they do not even know where he is. The camp's ovens will insure that they will never see him again ... including his remains.



Not until some time later, after his wife and daughter have returned to Berlin, does Bruno's father go back to the place where his son's clothes had been found.

Seeing the opening under the fence, he realizes what must have happened to his boy. It is an agonizing reality which transforms the everyday horrors of "Out-With" into a personal tragedy for the camp's commander.

Not long after this discovery, soldiers come for him, too:

A few months after that some other soldiers came to Out-With and Father was ordered to go with them, and he went without complaint and he was happy to do so because he didn't really mind what they did to him anymore. (The Boy in the Striped Pajamas, by John Boyne.)

What does John Boyne say about the basis of his novel? Is it a true story? Are the people real?

It's not based on a true story, but it is a fact that the commandant at Auschwitz did bring his family, including his five children, to live near the camp. It seemed just the right way to tell the story from this German perspective.

Bruno walks to the fence and asks questions that children ask when studying the Holocaust. Granted, you experience the horrors of the camp, but this is where the story is always leading. (Quoted by Steve Ramos in his November 20, 2008 article in the Journal Sentinel entitled "Boy in the Striped Pajamas Is a Tough Sell.")

For personal, true stories about life during the Holocaust, also see:

Anne Frank Starts Her Diary

Anne Frank Gets Bad News

Anne Frank Goes to the Secret Annex

Corrie Ten Boom - A Closet Becomes a Safe Place

Corrie Ten Boom - Wearing the Yellow Star

The Story of Corrie Ten Boom

Corrie Ten Boom - The Hiding Place

For fictional stories based on Holocaust events, also see:

"Someone Named Eva"

"Shadow on the Mountain"

Credits:

In-text images:

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Comparison of Auschwitz (Camp I) and Auschwitz-Birkenau photos by Dawid Skalec. License: [CC BY-SA 3.0](#)

Marcin Bialek’s photo, of the Crematorium at Auschwitz I, is online via Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC BY-SA 3.0](#).

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](#)

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/The-Boy-in-the-Striped-Pajamas>

See [Learning Tasks for this story online at:](#)

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/The-Boy-in-the-Striped-Pajamas>

Media Stream



Hitler Arrives - Striped Pajamas

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



Auschwitz I Compared to Auschwitz-Birkenau

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



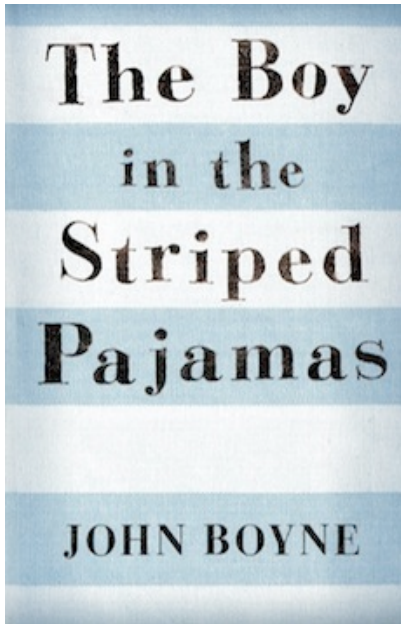
Boy with the Striped Pajamas - Schmuel

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Bruno and Schmel

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The Boy in the Striped Pajamas Book Cover

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Bruno and Schmel at the Fence

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Striped Pajamas - Mum with Kids

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Striped Pajamas - Bruno Changes Clothes

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Auschwitz I Crematorium

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The Boy in the Striped Pajamas

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Trailer - The Boy in the Striped Pajamas

John Boyne's novel, *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, has been made into a film.

While the movie doesn't exactly follow the book in all respects, such as the age of Bruno and Schmuël, much of it tracks the text.

The film, which is rated PG-13, has several tag lines:

- A story of innocence in a world of ignorance
- A timeless story of innocence lost and humanity found.
- Fences divide, but hope unites.
- Lines may divide us, but hope will unite us...

Among its other attributes, the film conveys how a commander's decisions to harm camp prisoners feels when those decisions are unexpectedly—and personally—felt by the commander himself.

Directed by: Mark Herman

Produced by: David Heyman

Screenplay by: Mark Herman

Based on: *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* by John Boyne

Starring:

Asa Butterfield
Jack Scanlon
David Thewlis
Vera Farmiga
Amber Beattie

Music by: James Horner

Cinematography: Benoît Delhomme

Edited by: Michael Ellis

Production companies:

Miramax Films
BBC Films
Heyday Films

Distributed by: Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures

Release date: September 12, 2008

Running time: 94 minutes

Country: United Kingdom

Language: English

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