

What was Resistance in Auschwitz?



Auschwitz: The Past is Present Video

In this activity, you will watch testimony of survivors who provide multiple perspectives on how they coped and survived the inhumane circumstances forced on them during the Holocaust.

To begin, watch the video, **Auschwitz: The Past is Present**. Think about what you already know. Based on your current knowledge, what do you think resistance meant in Auschwitz?

Add to your knowledge by reading the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum encyclopedia article titled **Jewish Resistance**. <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005213>

One Meaning of Resistance

Testimony



Itka Zygmontowicz, on Survival

As you have learned in the video, the conditions in the Auschwitz camps were horrific, leading to the death of 1.2 million men, women and children. Next, you will watch Itka Zygmontowicz talk about her memories of life in the camp. Read her biography in **Interviewee Biographies** handout, watch her testimony and answer the question below.

How does Itka's description of resistance help build your understanding of resistance at the Auschwitz camps?

Forms of Resistance in the Camps



Itka was not alone in her resistance.

You are now going to collect details from Itka's testimony and three other Holocaust survivors on the **Collect Student Worksheet**.

First, listen to how each survivor describes the way in which they resisted during their imprisonment in the camps. Record the form of resistance on your handout. Then, collect words that reflect the form of resistance you identified from each of the testimonies and include them on your handout as well.

Make sure to read each interviewee's biography as well.

- Start by listening to Itka's testimony again.
- Ruth Brand describes choosing to fast on Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar, while imprisoned in Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1944.
- Herschel describes the role that singing played for him while he was imprisoned in Birkenau. Although we consider singing an everyday thing, listen to how he talks about it in the context of his experience in the camp.
- In October 1944, men forced to work in the Auschwitz-Birkenau crematoria tried to blow it up. They recognized that the Nazis were beginning to lose the war, and that it was only a matter of time before those remaining in the camp were all murdered. The men relied on women, who were in forced labor elsewhere, to supply the gunpowder necessary for the uprising to occur. Anna Heilman was one of those women. Anna describes the process of hiding gunpowder passed to her by her sister.

Understanding Resistance at Auschwitz - Your Response



The Sonderkommando were Jewish men who were forced to work in the crematoria by the Nazis. As well as the uprising they also resisted by trying to document the crimes taking place. Here you can see a photograph taken by the Sonderkommando in May 1944.

Men and women took huge risks to preserve their own sense of identity, despite the dehumanization and starvation they faced. Resisting the Nazi regime in the horrific conditions of Auschwitz-Birkenau sometimes led to death, such as in the case of Anna's sister.

Your task is now to respond to the question:
What did it mean to resist in the Auschwitz camps?

Use the information you collected from the testimonies, information from the **Auschwitz: The Past is Present** video and the USHMM Encyclopedia article, **Jewish resistance**, to construct one of the following:

A poem that reflects how people resisted, the risks they took, and your personal thoughts

Or

A collage of words and images that reflects how people resisted, the risks they took and your personal thoughts

More Info: Photo courtesy of Yad Vashem The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority. Auschwitz, Poland, Cremation of bodies by the Sonderkommando, Summer 1944. <http://collections.yadvashem.org/photosarchive/en-us/23212.html>

Gallery Walk and Class Discussion



Post your poem or collage in your classroom – your teacher will direct you.

Next, move around the room on a “Gallery Walk” to see the work of your classmates.

Select two (2) pieces of work that you feel gave you additional insight or raise additional questions about the meaning of resistance during the Holocaust.

For each piece you have chosen, write a short comment. Consider what the piece clarified, what questions it raised and whether it changed your view and why. You may want to write your comments on Post-It notes and stick them close to your classmates’ work.

Interviewee Biographies



Itka Zygmuntowicz was born in Ciechanów, Poland on April 15, 1926 to an orthodox Jewish family. At the age of 15 on October 1941, she and her family were forced into the Warsaw Ghetto. In 1942, Itka was deported by cattle car to Birkenau. Later she was forced on a death march towards Ravensbrück concentration camp and was liberated by the Swedish Red Cross in April 1945. After the war in 1953 Itka migrated to the United States where she was interviewed in Philadelphia, PA on March 3, 1996.



Ruth Brand was born in 1928 into an orthodox Jewish family in Romania. During the Second World War she was interned into the Dragomiresti ghetto before being deported to Birkenau in Poland. From Birkenau, she was deported to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany, where in April 1945 she was liberated by the British Army. After the war Ruth moved to Israel, where she maintained her orthodox Jewish faith. She was interviewed in Israel in 1997.



Herschel Balter was born in 1920 in Ostrowiec, near Kielce, Poland to an orthodox Jewish family. After war broke out in Poland he and his family were forced into the Ostrowiec ghetto. From there he was taken to Birkenau and later to Mauthausen in Austria. Before the war ended he was forced on a death march and was liberated from St. Georgen concentration camp in Austria by the United States Army. After liberation he lived in a displaced persons camp and eventually emigrated to Australia, where he continued to practice orthodox Judaism. Herschel was interviewed in Australia in 1997.



Anna Heilman was born in Warsaw, Poland on December 1, 1928 into a Jewish family. Anna was forced into the Warsaw Ghetto with her family in 1941 at the age of 13. In 1943, she was deported by cattle car to Majdanek, and later to Birkenau. In 1945, aged 16, Anna was forced on a death march towards Ravensbrück. After the war she practiced conservative Judaism and lived in a number of countries before moving to the United States and later Canada. Anna was interviewed in Nepean, ON, Canada on February 22, 1996.

Collect Student Worksheet

Instructions: As you watch the testimony clips, collect your thoughts and ideas below:

How did they resist?

Words or phrases from their testimony you think are important:



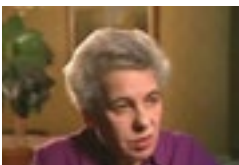
Itka Zygmuntowicz



Ruth Brand



Herschel Balter



Anna Heilman