This year is the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the largest of the Nazi extermination camps. This lesson plan, suitable for secondary school students, will introduce your students to Auschwitz, and share with them the stories of some of those who were imprisoned there. The lesson will conclude by suggesting ways your students can keep alive the memories both of those who were murdered in Auschwitz and those who survived. This lesson plan is recommended for students aged 14+, and it is advised that you read through the whole lesson plan in advance to ensure it is suitable for your students, as they find some of the material distressing.

For some people, the word ‘Auschwitz’ is synonymous with ‘the Holocaust’, yet there were many varied experiences of the Holocaust: some people went into hiding; people were rounded up into ghettos, imprisoned in concentration camps; people were driven to their deaths by starvation, by bullets, in slave labour camps, in gas chambers, in death marches. Even within Auschwitz, experiences were varied. This lesson plan will highlight to your students the variety of experiences within Auschwitz and by the end of the lesson, your students will have a greater understanding of what Auschwitz was, and why it is sometimes deemed representative of the Holocaust as a whole.

Auschwitz was the largest and most infamous of all the Nazi camps, where approximately 1.1 million people were murdered. More detailed information about Auschwitz is available at the end of this lesson plan.

Activity: Knowledge
Start by asking your students what they know about ‘Auschwitz’ and write down students’ comments on a flip chart. Your students may need prompting – you could use these questions:

- Where is Auschwitz?
- What was Auschwitz?
- Have they heard of Auschwitz in any books or films?

The answers to the first two questions are included in the PowerPoint presentation.

Activity: Defining Auschwitz
Share with your students the following experiences of Holocaust survivors. In small groups ask them to read the statements and ask them if they can identify which ones are talking about Auschwitz. These are on the PowerPoint presentation (spread over two slides) and also included in the lesson plan so that you can print these out and hand them around to your students.

After your students have had a chance to read all the statements and discuss them, ask them to share with the rest of the class which ones they thought were about Auschwitz. Reveal that they are all, in fact, about Auschwitz. Are the students surprised? How does this compare with what they thought they knew about Auschwitz (see their answers to activity 1)? What does it add to their knowledge? What have they learned about Auschwitz from these statements?
To this day, I cannot fully recall the details. All I know is that the experience has left me with a feeling of total madness, as if the whole world had fallen into an abyss of apocalyptic proportions. (Esther Brunstein)

Lily and her sisters saw a fire in the chimneys, and smelt a terrible smell. They thought it was a factory and asked people about it. They were told it was not a factory and that it was Lily’s family who were being burned there with all the others who had been sent down the path to the left. (Lily Ebert)

In spring 1944 I was transferred to work near the gas chambers – the centre of extermination. For eight months I worked in the doomed ‘Kanada Kommando’, sorting the clothes and belongings stripped from the Jews murdered in the nearby the gas chambers. (Kitty Hart-Moxon)

In a large room Iby was made to sit naked on a stool and her head and body hair was shaved off under the watchful eye of male and female SS guards who laughed. For an 18 year old girl the humiliation was terrible. (Iby Knill)

Iby shared the fears of camp inmates when told it was time for a shower because, she explains ‘One never knew whether one was going to be gassed or showered.’ (Iby Knill)

When we arrived...the SS selected the younger people who were to walk to the camp, but the older men and women with their children were taken away by trucks... We heard some alarming rumours about the older men, women and children transported by trucks, but very few believed them. Others, however, who gave credence to the rumours, killed themselves by walking straight into the electrical fences. (Freddie Knoller)

They housed hundreds of us in a barrack. Every night someone went insane. They would count us at dawn. They poured coffee into a csajka (a tin or aluminium plate with high sides) for breakfast towards evening we got a little piece of bread with a bit of meat. We were continuously hungry. The only water came from the cistern, which you had to stand in line for. The SS soldiers hit the women with the metal on their belts, as they scuffled for the water. If someone was hit in the head, it could kill them. There were always a couple that died. (Ruzena Deutschova)

The following day we were allocated to an empty hut, and we had to sit against the wall, five in a column, squashed between each other’s legs. In this position we had to sit day and night. Roll-calls were taking place twice a day, early morning and late afternoon. Meals were served once a day – just a saucepan of soup which had to be shared between the five people in each column, without a spoon. (Renee Salt)

As long as the Germans wanted an orchestra, it would have been counter-productive to kill us. Our task consisted of playing every morning and every evening at the gate of the camp so that the outgoing and incoming work commandos would march neatly in step to the marches we played. We also had to be available at all times to play to individual SS staff who would come into our Block and wanted to hear some music after sending thousands of people to their death. (Anita Lasker-Wallfisch)

On the sixth day we arrived ... The ramp was near the chimneys. My mother had collapsed and had to be dragged out of the truck. Hopefully she no longer understood what was happening to her. She was taken in the direction of the chimneys – from which smoke and stench poured out from the burning bodies – and this was with us day and night while we were in this extermination camp. (Trude Levi)
Activity: Find out more – individual stories
Ask your students to choose one or two of the statements that they would like to find out more about. All of the statements are from the survivors’ life stories and links to all these, and more life stories of those who were imprisoned at Auschwitz, are included at the end of this lesson plan. Some are available as films (Lily Ebert and Iby Knill) and as podcasts (Kitty Hart-Moxon and Philipp Manes) so you could watch or listen to these as a whole class. You could give each student a story individually, or put the students in groups and give each group a different life story. Allow the students time to read and respond to the life stories.

There is now an opportunity to explore these stories in a way appropriate to the group and to a specific subject matter. Here are some ideas for additional activities:

Creative activity: allow your students to create a response to the story they have read – they could draw a picture, write a poem, make a sculpture, write a piece of music, either individually, in small groups, or as a class. You could then share this with the rest of the class, year group, school and school community and upload the responses to our #memorymakers campaign – please look at Keepthememoryalive.hmd.org.uk for more information.

Reflective activity: allow your students to create a response directed to the survivor whose story they have read – this can be creative as above, or they could write a letter directly to the survivor – what would they like to say to them? Your students could also write a letter or postcard sharing the survivors’ stories with someone else, thereby keeping their memory alive. We can pass any letters onto survivors.

Activity: Find out more – the bigger picture
The life stories presented here just touch on the full scale of Auschwitz. Use the accompanying PowerPoint presentation to share with your students images of Auschwitz and thereby provide them with more information about the camp. As you share these images with your students ask them what the pictures show us, and what do they add to our understanding of Auschwitz?

The first concentration camp was established at Dachau in Germany on 23 March 1933. As the Nazis captured more territory through wartime invasions, the camp system was greatly expanded and used as a tool in the creation of a single-race state. The Nazis created thousands of camps – including forced labour, transit, and extermination camps throughout German-occupied territories. Camp inmates were often subject to forced labour, overcrowding, poor sanitary conditions, starvation and cruel treatment, with a high death rate resulting from the poor conditions. After initial attempts to commit mass murder through shootings and mobile killing units proved ‘inefficient’, the Nazis extended the camp system to include six extermination camps: Auschwitz-Birkenau, Belzec, Chełmno, Majdanek, Sobibor, and Treblinka. Their purpose was to carry out genocide – using gas chambers.

The first few images show the entrance to Auschwitz, the arrival and selection process. Over 1.1 million people were murdered at this site, over 90% of the victims being Jewish. Arrival in the camp started with a selection process – men, women and children were removed from the trains and had their valuables taken away. Men were separated from women and children. A Nazi physician would quickly assess whether each person was healthy enough to survive forced labour, and based on this, individuals were sent to the camps or to the gas chambers. The disabled, elderly, pregnant women, babies, young children or the sick, stood little chance of surviving this selection. Those who were selected for death were led to the gas chambers, and, in order to prevent panic, some victims were told they were going to the showers to remove the lice from their bodies. They were made to hand over any remaining valuables and remove all of their clothes – the next few slides show their belongings. After being ushered into the gas chambers, the doors would be shut and bolted. The poison took up to 20 minutes to kill those in the chambers. Camp prisoners were then forced by the SS guards to remove the corpses from the chambers and to remove hair, gold teeth and fillings. The corpses were then burned in crematoria.

Auschwitz was a network of several camps, combining forced labour and extermination camps. In late summer 1941 the Nazis began experimenting with a new killing method – a poison gas called Zyklon B. As the war progressed, larger poison gas chambers were constructed at the camp, afterwards Auschwitz-Birkenau was selected as the main killing site for European Jews because of its location and access to the rail network. In 1942 Jews from across
Europe began to be transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The peak of the slaughter occurred in 1944, when more than 400,000 Hungarian Jews were killed in just two months.

Auschwitz was liberated by Soviet troops on 27th January 1945 – 70 years ago. Today Auschwitz is a museum and a memorial to those who were murdered there.

What do these images and this background information add to our knowledge and understanding of Auschwitz?

Return to the flip chart you created in Activity 1 and add information to it, showing what your students have learnt.

Activity 5: Plenary

Share with your students the following information about Holocaust Memorial Day 2015, and that we are asking them to Keep the memory alive.

27 January is a day for everyone to remember the millions murdered in the Holocaust, under Nazi Persecution and in subsequent genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, and Darfur. On HMD we honour the survivors of these atrocities and learn the lessons of their experiences to challenge hatred and discrimination in the UK today. HMD 2015 marks the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau and the 20th anniversary of the Genocide in Srebrenica, Bosnia.

On HMD 2015 we encourage you to learn from the powerful stories of survivors whilst they are still with us, and consider your own responsibility to Keep the memory alive for future generations. Take part by sharing the memories of genocide, exploring how the past is memorialised, and creating a legacy for the future.

Inform your students that by taking part in today’s lesson, they have contributed to keeping the memory alive, but perhaps there is more that they can do? Ask them to come up with ideas for ways to keep alive the memory of the survivors whose stories they have learnt about today, and, if practical, encourage them to do these.

Please encourage your students to keep the memory alive. This could be something done collectively, in the classroom, or could be done individually. There are resources on the HMD website that can help with this including lesson plans, assemblies and activities:

hmd.org.uk/education

Life Stories of survivors of Auschwitz

Esther Brunstein  hmd.org.uk/esther-brunstein
Lily Ebert  hmd.org.uk/lilyeberthiddenhistories and hmd.org.uk/lilyebert
Ruzena Deutschova  hmd.org.uk/ruzenadeutschova
Regina Franks  hmd.org.uk/reginafranks
Roman Halter  hmd.org.uk/romanhalter
Kitty Hart-Moxon  hmd.org.uk/kittyhartmoxon
Hedy Klein  hmd.org.uk/hedymemorybook
Iby Knill  hmd.org.uk/ibyhiddenhistories and hmd.org.uk/ibyauschwitzpromise
Freddie Knoller  hmd.org.uk/freddieknoller
Anita Lasker-Wallfisch  hmd.org.uk/anitalaskerwallfisch
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