

Unit 6 / Lesson 6.2 / Overview

Unit 6: The German Killers and Their Methods

Lesson 6.2: Life in Camps

Background:

The methods used by the *Einsatzgruppen* could not kill Jews in sufficient numbers in a timely manner to satisfy Germany's goal of "cleansing" Europe of all its Jews. Therefore, prior to the Wannsee Conference in January 1942, German leaders devised a more efficient plan of large-scale mass murder that would coordinate all the resources that Germany had at its disposal. Killing centers were set up, using the gassing technology that had initially been used in the T-4 Program, in which tens of thousands of Germans with physical and mental disabilities were killed. These killing centers – Chełmno, Bełżec, Treblinka, Sobibór, and Auschwitz-Birkenau – were in remote areas of Poland, near train lines, and developed primarily for the sole purpose of facilitating the murder of Jews in the spring of 1942. Despite the attempts to hide these death camps, those who lived near them were aware of their existence and of what was happening inside.

In addition to the killing centers, hundreds of concentration and labor camps were established throughout Germany and Eastern Europe where Jews and other deportees were forced to work as slave laborers and were worked to death or died because of the horrific living conditions, starvation, and lack of medical care in the camps. An important factor that cannot be ignored when studying this aspect of the Holocaust is the role that German businesses played in supporting the camp system so that they could benefit from the use of slave labor. An example is Auschwitz-Birkenau, which primarily began as a labor camp but later turned into a killing center, and was encircled by factories of many of Germany's largest industrial companies. The relationship of German industry to the concentration camp system broadens the circle of those who helped make the "Final Solution" possible and leads us to ask important questions about those who were responsible for the Nazis' success.

Video Running Time: 17:29

Goal:

Students will describe how life in Nazi concentration camps was a day-to-day struggle for survival as they were subjected to unrelenting fear, attacks, and dehumanization.

Essential Questions:

- How did the camp system dehumanize prisoners?
- How did the camp system support Nazi ideology and racial policies?
- How did the camp system prevent Jews and others from escaping?

Learning Goals:

- Students will explain how the structure of camps prevented Jews and others from escaping.

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- Students will explain how the Nazi camp system led to the dehumanization of prisoners.
- Students will identify examples of how German industry played a role in the "Final Solution."

Success Criteria:

- Students will explain how prisoner uniforms and the physical structure of the camps with barbed wire and watch towers prevented people from escaping.
- Students will discuss the process of prisoner arrival and selection in a concentration camp.
- Students will discuss how deadly camps' daily routines were.
- Students will determine why resistance was difficult in a concentration camp and describe examples of ways in which prisoners resisted.
- Students will identify how German businesses exploited prisoner forced labor in camps.

Topics For Further Discussion:

- Analyze the connection between the T-4 program and the development of killing centers.
- Explore how the camp system dehumanized prisoners.
- Explore why the Germans would treat prisoners who were used and needed for the war effort so inhumanely, causing their deaths within weeks.
- Identify companies that used slave and forced labor in concentration camps.
- Explore how Germans and their collaborators were able to work in the camps, especially the killing centers.

Recommended Background Reading from *How Was It Possible? A Holocaust Reader*

Unit 6 – Lessons 6.1; 6.2; 6.3

Chapter 6

- Introduction to **Chapter 6: The German Killers and Their Methods**
- “Deciding to Kill” from *The Wannsee Conference and the Final Solution* by Mark Roseman
- “Bringing Death to Jews” from *Masters of Death* by Richard Rhodes
- “Bringing Jews to Death” from *The Destruction of the European Jews* by Raul Hilberg
- “Political Soldiers” from *Hitler’s Police Battalions* by Edward B. Westermann

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Unit 6: The German Killers and Their Methods

Lesson 6.2: Life in Camps

Question	
How did the Nazis identify prisoners which included nationality and reasons for imprisonment?	
What color badge were Jews and political prisoners assigned?	
Who were the non-Jewish prisoners of higher racial status and what type of work did they have?	
Which prisoners were considered to be of lower racial status and what type of work did lower racial status people have?	
What happened to Jewish prisoners upon arrival at a camp with selection?	
Why was roll call, <i>Appell</i> , so dangerous?	
What was the perpetrator structure in the camps?	

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What were the three areas of German medical experiments in the camps?	
Do scientists today accept the results of German experiments on camp prisoners and why?	
What is the difference between a death camp and a concentration camp?	
What happened to prisoners not chosen for slave labor?	
What types of spiritual and cultural resistance were found in the camps?	
What was the Treblinka Uprising inspired by?	
What was the goal of the Birkenau Uprising?	
How successful was armed resistance in the camps?	

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Answer Key

Question	Possible Answers
How did the Nazis identify prisoners which included nationality and reasons for imprisonment?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prisoners were identified by different colored triangular badges Letters indicated nationality Badges were sewn onto prisoner uniforms and enabled SS guards to identify different types of prisoners (Slide 4)
What color badge were Jews and political prisoners assigned?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jews wore a yellow triangle Political prisoners wore a red triangle (Slide 4)
Who were the non-Jewish prisoners of higher racial status and what type of work did they have?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Non-Jewish French, Dutch, and German prisoners were of high racial status Better work assignments Work indoors in administrative offices Kitchens Infirmaries (Slide 5)
Which prisoners were considered to be of lower racial status and what type of work did lower racial status people have?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jews were the lowest in the camp Poles were also ranked lower racially Physically demanding work Factory work Mining Construction Much higher mortality rate from physical exhaustion, low food rations, and brutal treatment from guards (Slide 5)
What happened to Jewish prisoners upon arrival at a camp with selection?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jews were separated into two groups: men, and women and children SS physicians would determine if one was fit for work Those fit for work were admitted into the camp to become slave labor Those who were sick, babies, young children, pregnant women, elderly, and handicapped were sent directly to the gas chambers (Slide 6)

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Why was roll call, <i>Appell</i> , so dangerous?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prisoners were forced to stand completely still, often for hours at a time, in the bitter cold, snow, rain, or extreme heat Prisoners would often be beaten, even murdered, by SS guards or kapos during <i>Appell</i> A prisoner who did not follow an order, or for no reason at all, would be severely punished by whipping, solitary confinement, lost food rations or other forms of violent brutality, up to and including being killed on the spot (Slide 7)
What was the perpetrator structure in the camps?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Camp commandant was in charge SS Death head units administered the camps (Slide 9)
What were the three areas of German medical experiments in the camps?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Survival of German military personnel Testing of drugs and treatments for the military Advancing Nazi racial and ideological goals (Slide 10)
Do scientists today accept the results of German experiments on camp prisoners and why?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scientists today reject use of results from camp experiments on ethical grounds (Slide 10)
What is the difference between a death camp and a concentration camp?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> At death camps or killing centers, there was no selection process; arriving prisoners went directly to the gas chambers Concentration camps included both forced labor and killing units In concentration camps, there was often a selection (Slide 12)
What happened to prisoners not chosen for slave labor?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prisoners were sent directly to the gas chambers Prisoners were undressed and forced into the gas chamber Bodies were burned in the crematoria (Slide 13)

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What types of spiritual and cultural resistance were found in the camps?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Stealing food and other necessities• Establishing secret communications• Keeping diaries• Sketching scenes of daily life• Holding secret religious services (Slides 15)
What was the Treblinka Uprising inspired by?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (Slide 16)
What was the goal of the Birkenau Uprising?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To destroy the gas chambers and crematoria (Slide 18)
How successful was armed resistance in the camps?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Most attempts at rebellion and escape were unsuccessful (Slide 19)

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Unit 6: The German Killers and Their Methods

Lesson 6.2: Life in Camps

Slide 1 – Life in Camps

Welcome to Lesson 6.2 of *How Was it Possible? A Holocaust Curriculum For and By Teachers™*, from The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous. This presentation will give you an overview of “Life in Camps.” This lesson was prepared by Amy McDonald, who teaches US History and Holocaust Studies at Shades Valley High School in Birmingham, Alabama.

Slide 2 – Life in Camps

From the moment they arrived in the camps, concentration camp prisoners were subjected to unrelenting fear, attacks, and dehumanization. Every day was a struggle for survival.

In this photograph we see prisoners at forced labor in the Neuengamme concentration camp.

Slide 3 – Structure in Camps: The Prisoners

The largest number of concentration camp prisoners were Jews; however, other individuals from a broad range of backgrounds, nationalities, and ethnicities could also be found.

In this photograph we see Jewish women at forced labor on “Industry Street” in the German concentration camp in Płaszów, occupied Poland.

Slide 4 – Prisoner Badges

In the camps, the Nazis established a hierarchy where prisoners were organized based on nationality and reasons for imprisonment.

Prisoners were identified by different colored triangular badges. The badges were sewn onto prisoner uniforms and enabled SS guards to identify different types of prisoners. Jews in the camps were identified by a yellow triangle sewn onto their prison uniforms.

At first, Jews were issued a yellow triangle pointing up; when a triangle in one of the other colors (almost always red in practice) was sewn over it, the resulting effect was a six-pointed Star of David. Later, instead of a second triangle, a narrow band of yellow fabric was sewn above the other-colored triangle.

This image shows a chart of Nazi badges that were assigned to prisoners.

Political prisoners, including not only Communists and Socialists, but also most Poles and Jews, wore red triangles.

Common criminals wore green.

Jehovah's Witnesses wore purple.

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Letters indicated nationality: for example, P stood for Polish, SU for Soviet Union, T for Czech.

Slide 5 – Prisoner Hierarchy

Non-Jewish prisoners with a higher racial status within the camp, such as the French, Germans, and Dutch, for example, often had better work assignments, especially indoors, in kitchens, infirmaries, and administrative offices. Lower-ranked prisoners, such as Jews and Poles, for example, had more physically demanding tasks such as factory work, mining, and construction. These prisoners suffered a much higher mortality rate from physical exhaustion, low food rations, and brutal treatment from guards.

In the prisoner hierarchy, Jews were the lowest in the camp.

Kapos were prisoners who were work unit supervisors.

Slide 6 – Arrival/Admission into Camp

Once the prisoners arrived at the camp, they were unloaded from the transportation vehicles, usually trains or trucks.

Non-Jewish prisoners arriving at Auschwitz were automatically registered as prisoners. In late spring 1942, the SS began selections for arriving Jews, who were separated into two groups: men, and then women and children.

The guards ordered the new arrivals to form a line. The Jews then went through a selection process. An SS physician looked at each person to decide if he or she was healthy enough for forced labor.

The SS physician then sent the person to the right or to the left; one group would be kept for forced labor and the other would be killed. Babies, young children, pregnant women, the elderly, the disabled, and the sick had very little chance of making it through the first selection.

Prisoners chosen for forced labor would then be registered and given a prisoner number. At Auschwitz, this number would be tattooed onto their arm; for Jews, beginning in the spring of 1942, and starting for non-Jews in early 1943. Auschwitz was the only camp where prisoners were tattooed. At most other camps, their prisoner number was stitched onto their clothing.

After registration, the prisoners were told to undress. They were then forced to have their entire body shaved and to shower and were deloused.

Their regular clothing was taken away and replaced by a uniform (usually striped). Prisoners were then assigned to a barrack.

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This photograph was taken at Auschwitz-Birkenau and shows the arrival process. In the front, there is a selection taking place. In the background, you can see those who have already been through selection and are walking to the gas chamber.

Slide 7 – Daily Routine

Surviving the daily routine was a horrific ordeal for concentration camp prisoners.

This involved:

- early wake-up;
- lineup for *Appell*, or roll call;
- march to work;
- forced labor;
- the wait for a watery bowl of soup and half a piece of bread, which was insufficient for people doing hard labor;
- then marching back to the camp, lining up again for evening *Appell*; and
- return to the barracks.

The *Appell*, which took place every morning after wake-up and each evening after returning from work, was one of the worst parts of the prisoners' daily lives. They were forced to stand completely still, often for hours at a time, in the bitter cold, snow, rain, or extreme heat. During the *Appell*, prisoners would often be beaten, even murdered, by SS guards or kapos.

The SS maintained strict control over all aspects of prisoner life. A prisoner who did not follow an order, or perhaps for no reason at all, would be severely punished by whipping, solitary confinement, lost food rations or other forms of violent brutality, up to and including being killed on the spot.

Here we see prisoners standing during roll call at the Buchenwald concentration camp.

Slide 8 – Structure in Camps: The Perpetrators

The SS Death's Head Units were in command of the camp.

In this photograph you see SS officers socializing at an SS retreat.

Slide 9 – Key Concentration Camp Staff

The concentration camp staff was headed by the camp commandant and his staff, mostly junior officers.

Male and female camp guards were subordinate to the commandant and his staff.

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In this photograph you see SS guards in formation outside the house of the commandant of the Bełżec killing center.

Slide 10 – Medical Experiments

During World War II, a number of German physicians conducted painful and often deadly experiments on thousands of concentration camp prisoners without their consent.

Experiments centered around three areas:

First, survival of German military personnel. At Dachau, physicians from the German air force conducted experiments on prisoners to determine the physiological effects of extreme high altitude as well as extreme cold on the human body.

A second area was the testing of drugs and treatments for the German military. At multiple camps, Nazi physicians used inmates to test different drugs for the prevention and treatment of contagious diseases, exposed inmates to poison gas to test antidotes, and conducted bone-grafting and nerve regeneration experiments.

Third, experiments which sought to advance Nazi racial goals. The most infamous were the experiments of Josef Mengele on twins of all ages at Auschwitz. Other experiments sought ways to change eye color from brown to blue and attempted to develop different methods of mass sterilization.

Because of the inhumane conditions and lack of consent, modern scientists overwhelmingly reject the use of results from experiments in the camps on both scientific and ethical grounds.

This photograph is of Carl Clauberg, an SS doctor who carried out brutal sterilization experiments on women, mostly Jewish, in Auschwitz.

Slide 11 – Process of Killing

To carry out the “Final Solution,” the Nazis established killing centers for systematic and efficient mass murder. At the killing centers, Nazi officials used assembly-line methods to murder Jews and other victims, in effect killing people on an industrial scale.

Slide 12 – Death Camps and Camps with Selection – Process of Killing

At these killing centers, such as Bełżec, Sobibór, and Treblinka, incoming Jews did not face a selection process. Arrivals were sent directly to the gas chambers. In order to prevent panic, guards told the victims that in order to be processed into the camp, they had to take a shower to be disinfected.

Some Jews were not sent to the killing centers just mentioned, but to concentration camps which included both forced labor and killing units, as was described earlier in this lesson; in these

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camps the prisoners would undergo selection upon arrival. In this photograph we see Jews who have just arrived on the ramp at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Slide 13 – Arrival, Selection, and Killing

After selection, Jews who were not chosen for forced labor were marched to a building where the guards ordered them to undress. They were then driven naked into the “showers,” which were really gas chambers.

After the gassing, other prisoners – the *Sonderkommandos* – were forced to drag the bodies out of the gas chambers and the bodies were burned.

Here we see the process of arrival, selection, walking to the gas chamber, waiting outside the gas chamber, and the burning of bodies.

Slide 14 – Resistance in the Camps

Just as there was cultural, spiritual, and armed resistance in ghettos, there was also similar resistance in the camps.

In the photograph we see the four women who were involved in smuggling small amounts of gunpowder to members in the resistance in Birkenau. The gunpowder was used to make grenades, and Crematorium IV at Birkenau was set on fire. The women were Ella Gärtner, Roza Robota, Regina Szafirsztain, and Estusia Wajcblum. All four women were executed by the Germans.

Slide 15 – Spiritual and Cultural Resistance

The ability and decision to resist in the camps was as difficult, and even more dangerous, than in the ghettos. The SS maintained strict control over all aspects of prisoner life, but many prisoners still managed to “organize,” or steal, food, and other necessities, establish secret communications, sketch scenes of daily life, keep diaries, and hold secret religious services.

Here we see a pen and ink drawing of the sleeping quarters in Terezin.

Slide 16 – Treblinka Uprising

The uprising in the Treblinka killing center was inspired by the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, which had occurred 4 months earlier.

On August 2, 1943, about 1,000 Jewish prisoners participated in the Treblinka Uprising. Prisoners stole weapons from the camp armory but were discovered before they could take over the camp. Hundreds of prisoners stormed the main gate and attempted to escape.

Many were killed by machine gun fire. More than 300 did escape, but more than two thirds of them were eventually hunted down and killed. The prisoners managed to kill a number of camp guards during the uprising.

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In this photograph one can see smoke rising from the Treblinka killing center during the August 2, 1943, prisoner uprising.

Slide 17 – Sobibór Uprising

In the summer of 1943, there was a rumor among the prisoners in the Sobibór killing center that it would soon be dismantled, and all the prisoners murdered.

A group of prisoners formed a secret committee to plan a mass escape.

The uprising began around four in the afternoon on October 14, 1943. In Camp One, prisoners invited the deputy commandant into the tailor shop to be fitted for a suit. They then killed him with an axe.

In Camp Two, prisoners asked an SS guard to try on a coat in a warehouse. They also killed him with an axe. Over the next hour, more SS personnel were killed in a similar manner.

When the prisoners gathered for roll call, the guards became alarmed and opened fire on the prisoners. Prisoners who had stolen weapons returned fire. Over 300 prisoners fled from the camp.

Many prisoners were shot during the escape or died in the minefields around the camp. At least 100 others were caught and killed during the massive manhunt conducted by the Germans after the uprising. Of the perhaps 200 escapees who were not immediately caught, only about 50 survived the war.

In the end, prisoners killed SS guards as part of the planned escape. All of the prisoners remaining in Sobibór – some of whom continued to fight with guns and axes throughout the night – were shot and the camp was closed.

This is a group photograph from August 1944, of participants in the Sobibór Death Camp Uprising.

Slide 18 – Birkenau Uprising

On October 7, 1944, prisoners revolted near Crematoria IV and II at Birkenau, after learning that they were going to be killed. These prisoners were members of the *Sonderkommando*, the special squad of prisoners who were responsible for clearing the bodies out of the gas chambers and bringing them into the crematoria.

For months, young Jewish women working as forced laborers in the munitions factory, had been smuggling small amounts of gunpowder to the camp's resistance movement.

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The gunpowder was then passed to the *Sonderkommando*. Using this gunpowder, the leaders of the *Sonderkommando* rose in revolt, intent on destroying the gas chambers and crematoria and launching an uprising.

The Germans crushed the revolt. Several days later, the SS identified the four Jewish female prisoners who had been involved in supplying explosives.

Crematorium IV was set on fire and damaged beyond repair and never used again. Himmler ordered the destruction of the Auschwitz-Birkenau gas chambers and crematoria in an attempt to destroy the evidence of mass murder.

This photograph, taken after liberation in January 1945, shows one of the destroyed crematoria at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Slide 19 – Summary – Life in Camps

In summary, life for prisoners in German camps was highly structured and very brutal.

The SS Death's Head Units ran the camps with an iron fist.

Those camps that were dedicated to killing, such as the Operation Reinhard camps of Belzec, Sobibór, and Treblinka, as well as Chełmno and Auschwitz-Birkenau, were efficient and deadly.

While there was armed resistance in a number of camps, most attempts at rebellion and escape were unsuccessful.

Thank you for joining us today as we learned about “Life in Camps.” Please continue your educational journey with us. This concludes our presentation of Lesson 6.2 from *How Was it Possible? A Holocaust Curriculum For and By Teachers™*. On behalf of The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous, thank you.

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Name: _____

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Circle the correct answers below.

1. How did Nazis identify the racial, religious, and ethnic makeup of prisoners?
 - a. Hats
 - b. Badges
 - c. Uniforms
 - d. Neck bands
2. Which of the following was not a focus area of medical experiments conducted by the Nazis?
 - a. Nazi racial and ideological goals
 - b. Survival of the German military
 - c. Testing of drugs and treatments
 - d. Straightening of teeth to prevent disease
3. What event inspired the Treblinka Uprising?
 - a. Sobibór Uprising
 - b. Warsaw Ghetto Uprising
 - c. The Łódź ghetto revolt
 - d. The Auschwitz ghetto revolt
4. What was the goal of the Birkenau Uprising?
 - a. To save children at the camp
 - b. To kill German officers
 - c. To highlight cultural and spiritual resistance
 - d. To destroy the gas chambers and crematoria
5. How successful was armed resistance?
 - a. The attempts stopped the killing of Jews
 - b. The attempts killed a majority of Nazi soldiers at camps
 - c. Most attempts at rebellion and escape were unsuccessful
 - d. Many of the people who resisted escaped and survived the war

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Lesson Quiz with Answers Highlighted and Bolded

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Link to Google Form Quiz (Instructions Available in the Appendix)

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1gE6VNOpMV3FLWncLiNOJBWf_1NKd3k1f04gHKzEAo/copy

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Slide 1 - Yevgeny Khaldei via Getty Images

Slide 2 - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of KZ-Gedenkstaette Neuengamme

Slide 3 - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Leopold Page Photographic Collection

Slide 4 - Kennzeichentafel für Schutzhäftlinge, 10.9.1.134 ITS Archives, Arolsen Archives

Slide 5 - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Anna Hassa Jarosky and Peter Hassa

Slide 6 - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Yad Vashem (Public Domain)

Slide 7 (Top) - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Robert A. Schmuhl

Slide 7 (Bottom) - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Yad Vashem (Public Domain)

Slide 8 - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Anonymous Donor

Slide 9 - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Muzeum Regionalne w Tomaszow Lubelski

Slide 10 - Yad Vashem, Photo Archive, Jerusalem

Slide 10A - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Anonymous Donor

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Slide 12 - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Yad Vashem (Public Domain)

Slide 13 (Top Left) - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Yad Vashem (Public Domain)

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Slide 13 (Bottom Left) - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Yad Vashem (Public Domain)

Slide 13 (Bottom Center) - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Yad Vashem (Public Domain)

Slide 13 (Bottom Right) - Yad Vashem, Photo Archive, Jerusalem

Slide 14 (Top Left) - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Anna and Joshua Heilman

Slide 14 (Top Right) - Yad Vashem, Photo Archive, Jerusalem

Slide 14 (Bottom Left) - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of J.L. Murawiec

Slide 14 (Bottom Right) - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Anna and Joshua Heilman

Slide 15 - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Michael Gruenbaum

Slide 16 - Yad Vashem, Photo Archive, Jerusalem

Slide 17 - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Misha Lev

Slide 18 - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Mark Chrzanowski

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Slide 18A - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Anna and Joshua Heilman

Slide 18B - Yad Vashem, Photo Archive, Jerusalem

Slide 18C - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of J.L. Murawiec

Slide 18D - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Anna and Joshua Heilman