

## Vera Laska, Political Prisoner

### The Power of Resistance

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*The following glossary was created to assist students and teachers with potentially unfamiliar words, phrases, or concepts in Vera's testimony.*

**1984**<sup>4</sup> Written by George Orwell, a satirical novel set in London in the fictional future year 1984, published in 1949. Winston Smith lives in a society in which “the Party” maintains a ruthless stranglehold on power via total control over the thoughts and actions of its members.

**Appell**<sup>1</sup> The process by which prisoners are forced to stand at attention in straight rows, often for hours, to be counted.

**Auschwitz II-Birkenau**<sup>1</sup> In October 1941 10,000 Soviet POWs began the construction of Auschwitz II-Birkenau. After construction was completed, the camp had nine sections separated by electrified barbed wire fences. Originally intended as a camp for 100,000 Soviet POWs, Auschwitz II-Birkenau's main function became the murder of European Jews. The insecticide Zyklon B was used in the camp's gas chambers. Four large gas chamber and crematoria facilities became operational between March 1943 and June 1943. When all four were operational, Auschwitz II-Birkenau possessed an unsurpassed capacity for mass murder and body disposal. Gassing operations continued until November 1944. On January 27, 1945, the Auschwitz camp complex was liberated by Soviet forces; at Auschwitz II-Birkenau 5,800 prisoners remained. During the course of its existence, prisoners in the camp represented many categories, including Jews, political prisoners, Poles, criminals, Soviet POWs, and Sinti and Roma (“Gypsies”). It is estimated that 1.1 to 1.6 million predominantly Jewish men, women, and children were murdered at Auschwitz, nearly all of them in the gas chambers at Auschwitz II-Birkenau.

**Dante's Hell**<sup>4</sup> The reference is from the *Inferno*, set in Hell in 1300. The *Inferno*, written by Dante Alighieri in Italy between 1307 and 1314, is part of the *Divine Comedy*.

**Death marches**<sup>1</sup> Forced marches of prisoners over long distances, under heavy guard and in extreme conditions. (The term was probably coined by concentration camp prisoners.)

**Gross-Rosen concentration camp**<sup>1</sup> The Gross-Rosen concentration camp, located south of the town of Gross-Rosen in Lower Silesia, was established as a subsidiary camp of Sachsenhausen in July 1940. In May 1941 it became an autonomous concentration camp. The increasing need to use concentration camp prisoners in the production of armaments led to the expansion of the Gross-Rosen camp. It became the center of a vast network of more than 60 subsidiary camps. The evacuation of the main camp began in early February 1945. The Gross-Rosen inmates were transferred to Mittelbau-Dora, Flossenbürg, Buchenwald, Mauthausen, Dachau, Bergen-Belsen, and Sachsenhausen concentration camps. The Soviet Army liberated Gross-Rosen on February 13, 1945.

**Levi, Primo**<sup>1</sup> Primo Levi was born in Turin, Italy, on July 31, 1919. During World War II, Levi, an Italian Jew, was arrested in northern Italy while trying to join the resistance movement. He was sent to Auschwitz. Levi discusses his wartime experiences in such books as *If This is a Man* or *Survival in Auschwitz*, *The Truce* or *The Reawakening*, and *The Drowned and the Saved*. (Primo Levi died in Turin on April 11, 1987.)

**Mittelbau-Dora concentration camp**<sup>1</sup> Dora was built in August 1943 as a satellite camp of Buchenwald in the industrial area of Nordhausen. During spring 1944, the camp was expanded and eventually included more than

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40 subcamps. On October 1, 1944, Dora became an independent concentration camp, and its name was changed to “KZ Mittelbau.” From September 1943 to April 1944, camp inmates worked and lived inside a tunnel system, where they produced rockets for Mittelwerke GmbH. By spring 1944, the Nazis began moving prisoners to barracks above ground. Transports from Auschwitz and Gross-Rosen began arriving in Mittelbau in early 1945; the resulting overcrowding led to more frequent illness and death among the prisoners. At the same time, executions in the camp increased. U.S. troops liberated the camp on April 11, 1945.

**Phantasmagorical**<sup>3</sup> A bizarre or fantastic combination, collection, or assemblage.

**Prisoners, political**<sup>1</sup> Political prisoners are people incarcerated before and during World War II because they were regarded as political opponents of the Nazis and their allies.

**Puszta**<sup>5</sup> arid grasslands that once covered a large part of eastern Hungary.

**Sabotage**<sup>1</sup> the deliberate destruction of property or the slowing down of work with the intention of damaging the German or Axis war economy or thwarting the destruction of European Jewry.

**Shoah**<sup>6</sup> A Hebrew word meaning “catastrophe,” referring to the Holocaust

**Typhoid fever**<sup>1</sup> An acute, infectious disease caused by the bacterium *Salmonella typhi*. The bacterium usually enters the mouth after ingesting contaminated water or food.

**Wiesel, Elie**<sup>1</sup> Born in Sighet, Transylvania, Romani, in 1928, Elie Wiesel was known throughout the world for his writings on the Holocaust and his personal experiences as a survivor. Wiesel and his family were deported to Auschwitz in 1944, and he was later transferred to Buna and liberated in Buchenwald. After the war, Wiesel worked as a journalist in Paris and New York City. His 1956 Yiddish-language memoir, published in English as *Night*, was one of the first personal accounts of the Holocaust to receive international attention. His subsequent books dealt with Jewish themes and Jewish faith, reflecting his religious upbringing. In 1986 Wiesel was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Wiesel’s position as chairman of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council from 1980 to 1986 led to the creation of the Days of Remembrance and Holocaust education programs.

### Source of Definitions

<sup>1</sup> USC Shoah Foundation Institute’s Visual History Archives Search Terms and Definitions

<sup>2</sup> The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum online glossary and/or *Holocaust Encyclopedia*

<sup>3</sup> Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary 2009

<sup>4</sup> *Literature and Its Times: Profiles of 300 Notable Literary Works and the Historical Events that Influenced Them*. Joyce Moss and George Wilson. Vol. 5. Detroit: Gale, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> www.dictionary.com

<sup>6</sup> *Echoes and Reflections: a Multimedia Curriculum on the Holocaust*