

“No Human Can Understand”: The *Sonderkommando* and Revolt in Auschwitz

By Jonathan Young, Esperanza Academy Charter High School, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Graduate of the USC Shoah Foundation’s 2010 Master Teacher Workshop

LESSON

Target Audience:

Grades 11-12
Holocaust/Genocide Studies

Time Required:

90 minutes

Content Standards Addressed:

Pennsylvania State Academic
Standards for History

- 8.1.12.C — Evaluate historical interpretation of events.
- 8.4.12.B — Evaluate historical documents, material artifacts and historic sites important to world history since 1450.
- 8.4.12.C — Evaluate how continuity and change throughout history has impacted the roles of women since 1450.
- 8.4.12.D — Evaluate how conflict and cooperation among social groups impacted world history from 1450 to the Present in Europe.

Lesson Overview

Through the use of excerpts of testimony from the USC Shoah Foundation’s Visual History Archive, this lesson will be used to accomplish three specific goals:

- To inform and educate students about the *Sonderkommando*.
- To inform students about the October 7, 1944 revolt at Auschwitz.
- To aid students in examining the significance of men and women contributing to the revolt, as well as, the impact of the revolt on Auschwitz.

Student Objectives

Through the use of testimony from the USC Shoah Foundation’s Visual History Archive:

- The student will be able to identify and evaluate the experiences of the *Sonderkommando*.
- The student will be able to analyze the *Sonderkommando* revolt.
- The student will be able to assess the significance and value of the revolt.

Materials

- The following testimony clips from USC Shoah Foundation’s Visual History Archive:
 - Dario Gabbai Part 1 (3:27)
 - Morris Venezia Part 1 (4:07)
 - Henry Levy Part 1 (1:58)
 - Henry Levy Part 2 (0:55)
 - Morris Venezia Part 2 (2:10)
 - Linda Breder Part 1 (1:58)
 - Morris Kesselman (3:39)
 - Dario Gabbai Part 2 (3:19)
 - Morris Venezia Part 3 (4:07)
 - Anna Heilman Part 1 (2:09)
 - Linda Breder Part 2 (0:48)
 - Anna Heilman Part 2 (2:54)

“No Human Can Understand”: The *Sonderkommando* and Revolt in Auschwitz

By Jonathan Young, Esperanza Academy Charter High School

LESSON

Materials (cont'd)

- Biographical Profiles handout
- *Sonderkommando* reading, available through Yad Vashem’s website at http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206031.pdf
- Description of the *Sonderkommando* Uprising on October 7, 1944, available through the Yad Vashem’s website at: <http://www1.yadvashem.org/yv/en/holocaust/timeline/description.asp?cid=309&width=650&height=240>
- Transcribed Poem from *The Grey Zone* (2001), quote is available online at: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0252480/quotes>
- Dario and Morris Graphic Organizer Handout

Prior knowledge/Background

- Students should be aware of the living conditions in the death camps.
- Students should have an understanding of the “Final Solution,” specifically the mass extermination policy within the camps.
- Students need to be mentally and emotionally prepared for the horrific conditions and situations the *Sonderkommando* experienced, which requires not only context and preparation, but opportunities throughout the lesson to reflect and debrief.

Warm-up/Pre-viewing Focus

Print and hand out or provide the link to the *Sonderkommando* reading from Yad Vashem’s website. Have students in class read the basic information about the *Sonderkommando* and then have them answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper:

1. What does the term ‘*Sonderkommando*’ mean?
2. What types of tasks were assigned to the *Sonderkommando*?
3. In what ways did the *Sonderkommando* resist the Nazis?

Suggested Teaching Methods

The Biographical Profiles handout should be distributed and reviewed with students on the first day when the lesson begins. This enables students to peer into the future experiences of the individuals whose testimonies they will be viewing and it will also provide students with a greater personal connection to the interviewees. Also, through class discussions after viewing each of the testimony clips students will have the opportunity to gain a greater breadth of knowledge of the roles and emotional burden of the *Sonderkommando*.

“No Human Can Understand”: The *Sonderkommando* and Revolt in Auschwitz

By Jonathan Young, Esperanza Academy Charter High School

LESSON

Day 1 Procedure

1. View Dario Gabbai Part 1 clip followed by Morris Venezia Part 1 clip.
After the students view the testimony clips, initiate a class discussion utilizing the following prompts [Note, teacher may also want to use these as the basis for written assignments]:
 - What was Dario’s experience as a *Sonderkommando*? In what ways was he forced to participate in the mass murder of other Jews?
 - How did Dario deal with the tasks he was forced to do? How does his body language communicate his feelings?
 - What do you think was the most significant part of the testimony?
 - What events occurred prior to entry to the gas chambers?
 - What seemed to have the greatest emotional impact on Morris (think about what he hears)?
 - Why do you think Morris focused on the actions of the SS women?
2. Ask students to consider what difficulties might the *Sonderkommando* have faced. Then play the clip, Henry Levy Part 1. After the students view the excerpt of testimony, discuss the following questions as a class:
 - Henry is devastated to find the body of his childhood friend. He calls the event “indescribable.” What is the significance of him calling it indescribable? How does he try to treat her remains differently and deal with her loss?
 - Despite his personal attachment to her, what is Henry still ultimately forced to do to her remains?
3. Play the clip, Henry Levy Part 2 and then use the following prompts for a class discussion:
 - The interviewer asks a similar question twice. Both times Henry is adamant in his response that he was forced to do it. Why do you think it was important for him to stress the response that he was forced to do it?
 - What types of emotions did Henry have and how did his forced participation affect how he viewed himself?
4. The *Sonderkommando* bore great personal guilt for their forced actions. Many of them felt horrible about their actions and others become enraged at their “Nazi Masters.” Communicate to students that the next excerpt of testimony will help them peer into the emotional burden of the *Sonderkommando*.
5. Prior to viewing the next clip in which Morris claims that no one can understand what they have gone through, ask students, “What is the difference between “knowing,” “understanding,” “feeling,” and “imagining”?”
6. Play clip, Morris Venezia Part 2. After students view the excerpt of testimony, ask students, “Who is Morris’ anger directed towards and why?”

“No Human Can Understand”: The *Sonderkommando* and Revolt in Auschwitz

By Jonathan Young, Esperanza Academy Charter High School

LESSON

Day 2 Procedure

1. As a pre-viewing activity, print and handout the description of the *Sonderkommando* Uprising at Auschwitz on October 7, 1944 from Yad Vashem’s *The Holocaust Timeline*. Have students read the description and then answer the following questions:
 - Why did the *Sonderkommando* decide to finally revolt?
 - What happened to the participants in the revolt?
 - Where did the explosives come from that enabled the revolt?
2. Play the clips of Linda Breder Part 1 and Morris Kesselman. Then, use the following prompts to have a class discussion:
 - Linda recalls the day the revolt began. How does Linda describe the beginning of the revolt?
 - Linda describes her fear. She states, “this was the end of us.” Does she mean the end of those who knew what was happening in the crematoriums or does she mean the end of the processes which led to mass extermination?
 - According to Linda, what was the fate of the *Sonderkommandos*?
 - Despite her focus on the murder of the *Sonderkommandos*, Linda does explain that there was a major change after the revolt. What was the change and why is it important?
 - What was happening to the *Sonderkommando* every few months, according to Morris? If Morris knew this, what reasons would he have for continuing to participate in the process?
 - How did the revolt or uprising affect the crematoriums?
 - According to Morris, who was blamed for the revolt and why?
 - Why did the revolt “fail” according to Morris?
3. Play the clips, Dario Gabbai Part 2 and Morris Venezia Part 3. Have students use the Dario Gabbai and Morris Venezia Graphic Organizer handout to take notes about the actual revolt as described in the testimony clips.
4. Have students view the clips, Anna Heilman Part 1, Linda Breder Part 2, and Anna Heilman Part 2. Then, have students answer the following questions as part of a class discussion:
 - How were Anna and her sister, Roza, able to smuggle gunpowder out of the factory?
 - How dangerous of a situation were Roza and Anna in? Think about the guards and the possible punishment.
 - Do you think Anna and her sister were good candidates to smuggle the gunpowder? Why or why not?
 - According to Linda, how did the gunpowder make it to the *Sonderkommando* barracks from the women?

**“No Human Can Understand”:
The Sonderkommando and Revolt in Auschwitz**

By Jonathan Young, Esperanza Academy Charter High School

LESSON

Day 2 Procedure (cont'd)

- Considering the food, wine, and extra freedoms given by the Nazis to the *Sonderkommando*, do you think the Nazis actually made a revolt a great possibility? Why or why not?
 - What did the *Sonderkommando* make with the gunpowder?
 - How were Anna's sister and the three other women eventually caught and what was their ultimate fate?
5. As a closure activity, have each student read the small monologue excerpt from the end of *The Grey Zone*. Each student should immediately free write their reaction (emotions, wording, and/or phrases) to the excerpt and then pair up with another student to discuss what they wrote. The teacher should ask students if they think that anyone but the *Sonderkommandos* could understand the poem from *The Grey Zone*. Do students think they have a better grasp of how truly no one will ever understand?

Assessment

Provide the following assignment to students:

Using the information you have gained over the past two days, respond to the following question in a typed double spaced 12 pt. font two page paper, with proper heading:

Most of the testimony we saw viewed the revolt as “a failure” or “unsuccessful.” While it is true that the Sonderkommandos did not overcome the Nazis and there was no camp revolution, is that the only way to measure success? Step back and look at the whole picture. In what way did the revolt actually succeed? And why do you think the Sonderkommandos survivors saw things differently? Consider that we now have the gift of hindsight and can look back, whereas, the Sonderkommandos were unaware of the future.