

Helon Dobbins
HIST 597
Casey
March 20, 2022

Auschwitz: The Iconic Symbol of Genocide

The history of Auschwitz does not end after the camp's liberation. In the decades after the war, survivors began circulating their accounts of the atrocities they were subjected to at Auschwitz. More recently, a wave of secondary literature ranging from broad overviews to niche studies by various scholars are coming out. This study will explore the historiography of Auschwitz's legacy through analysis of survivor testimonies alongside the works of scholars like Laurence Rees, Chris Webb, and Eveline Goodman-Thau. Particularly examining the secondary sources reviewed in this study it was essential to see how they connected. Using historical research, it will also analyze the newfound developments in technology, in recent years especially, and the availability of information to those outside of the academic field in order to promote greater advocacy for studying Auschwitz's history and legacy in the future when firsthand access to survivors is no longer possible. **The goal of this study is to present the argument that the historiographical analysis of Auschwitz's legacy was built on the foundation of survivor testimony and has a history all its own, adapting to changing technological advances to circulate the history of Auschwitz using different tools ranging from published memoirs to a recent foray into social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Tik-Tok for easier access to research for future generations of historians.**

I. Auschwitz 1940-45: A Brief Historiographical Overview

To understand how the memory of Auschwitz developed, the history of the place must be given its due. Without historical context, the advances in Auschwitz-centric Holocaust remembrance have little meaning. The history of Auschwitz is not long, but it is vast. The most logical place to start would be with an overview like that of Laurence Rees' *Auschwitz: A New History*. The book offers a chronological look at topics that range from the location selection for

the camp to the aftermath of the war. One of the most interesting things Rees brings to his overview, however, is how he tackles the beginnings Auschwitz. Following the first commandant, Rudolf Hoess, through Auschwitz's establishment insight into many different factors that led to Oswiecim, Poland's selection as the location for this new extermination center that would later be Auschwitz-II-Birkenau come to light. Rees wrote: "From Hoess' perspective, that summer [1940] it was clear that his energy and focus should switch to this second camp and killing operation. The gas chambers inside the two converted cottages and the burning of bodies in the open air still represented only interim solutions to the murderous task the Nazis had created for themselves."¹ Placing emphasis on the formation of the Birkenau death camp early in the Auschwitz complex's history shows that the end goal was there all along. With the seeds of Birkenau planted, the Auschwitz name was about to transform from small prison camp to one of the most recognizable symbols of modern genocide.

Much like Rees' book, Chris Webb's *The Auschwitz Concentration Camp: History, Biographies, Remembrance* follows the overview pattern but is of interest due to previously unseen documents, newspaper clippings, and photographs. Webb uses to discuss wartime knowledge of the camp and postwar memory. On the topic of outside knowledge, he notes that, "The Polish underground movement fed reports about Auschwitz and the Nazi persecution of the Jews and Poles to the Allies throughout the occupation. The Polish Ministry of Information in London published a regular fortnightly publication called '*Polish Fortnight Review*.'"² Placed in conversation with each other, Rees and Webb do an excellent job scratching the surface of Auschwitz's history by emphasizing different important topics. But with Auschwitz being not so

1) Rees, Laurence. *Auschwitz a New History* New York: Public Affairs, 2005. 107.

2) Webb, Chris, and Cameron Munro. *The Auschwitz Concentration Camp: History, Biographies, Remembrance*. Berlin: Ibidem Verlag, 2018. 333.

far removed from today, the bulk of the important sources comes with primary sources which both authors use as the anchor to analyses they cover and these primary sources can be found in varying forms.

There are many platforms that historians use for access to firsthand survivor accounts of Auschwitz. These firsthand accounts provide the backbone for the secondary scholarship boom in Holocaust studies in the past 40 years as Rees, Webb, and numerous others incorporate them as a needed piece in their own works. As the years went on, more survivors would be encouraged to add their stories to the lexicon which would set the stage for the development of the study of Auschwitz's legacy and the need to continue to tell these important histories to reach the general public. With all of the secondary material on Auschwitz based in survivor testimony the historical methods used by these scholars rely heavily on evidence analysis and oral traditions. But the analysis of documents, which are plentiful, give historians a sketch of Auschwitz from the perspective of those who ran the camp and the outside world's reaction to Auschwitz's operations.

II, What the Outside World Knew

While the overall history of Auschwitz has been covered in numerous volumes few seem to add material to the story that was previously uncovered. The scope of outside awareness of the atrocities at Auschwitz is fascinating in that most of the world was aware in some capacity or another. Nothing (or little) was done to aid the victims by the Allies who were frequently receiving reports. The *Polish Fortnight Review* reports offered incredible detail about topics like the transports and the selection process upon arrival at Auschwitz. These publications date throughout the camp's operational years with the last of them Webb used dating shortly before the end of the war in May, 1945. Although the camp was liberated in January, the Polish

Underground had already begun collecting survivor testimonies to bring the attention to them as an effort to continue circulating these accounts. With access to outsider accounts of the camp, Webb's study helps inform the research of historians who want to delve into more little talked about aspects of Auschwitz's history with information not previously covered which helps researchers add their own voice to the discussion through potentially uncovering new material through extensive research as Webb did.

Through research for their works, historians are opened to stories that, while unique, illustrate a collective traumatic experience shared by survivors. In the immediate years following liberation the willingness to speak on their experiences put survivors at the head of a growing campaign to recognize the horrors of Auschwitz and educate the public. This commitment to do so was the first step in developing more advanced studies and more accessibility to survivor stories. With historians having access to this growing lexicon, more niche areas of Auschwitz's history are addressed and the scholarship ventures into areas that allow for the injection of these new materials like Webb used while discussing the Polish Underground. A target area of late has come in the form of analyzing memory and the impact it has on Auschwitz's postwar legacy. While very testimony heavy, this allows historians to integrate their studies with other areas in the humanities to enrich their analyses.

III. Remembrance and Trauma

In the first few decades after liberation, survivors rarely spoke about their experiences at Auschwitz. However, an early example of a notable memoir is Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* which was published in 1946 in Europe and 1959 in the United States. Around that same time, survivor Primo Levi published his account of Auschwitz, *If This Is a Man*, in his native Italian. In it, Levi described the dehumanization Jews faced. Later memoirs like Elie

Wiesel's *Night* (published in 1960) became modern hallmarks of Holocaust awareness by the public and the influence of these collective works are still prevalent in society's collective memory. These were fundamental in educating the outside world on the experience of Auschwitz and they served the purpose of igniting an interest in Auschwitz in academia. Survivor stories boomed in the late 20th Century and that bled over into academic literature of the 21st Century.

Recent scholars have started to examine how the world remembers Auschwitz in different ways using these new survivor testimonies that emerged. Eveline Goodman-Thau's 2017 book *Memory and Morality after Auschwitz* is a monograph where the growing interest in the topic of memory amongst Holocaust scholars is analyzed. Quoting one of the prominent Holocaust scholars, Goodman-Thau noted, "We are asking about the human response to tragedy, about the feeling of community between groups and individuals, about the community of interest between people who care for and respect each other's legitimately different traditions. The Holocaust is a touching stone of such inquiry."³ The topic of memory is an umbrella just as the history of Auschwitz is. Goodman-Thau's use of survivor testimonies provides excellent emphases on how the experience of Auschwitz was an individual one, unique to that survivor. There is also a deeply philosophical look at what the lasting effects of Auschwitz are on survivors as a collective group. As Goodman-Thau pointed out, building on the ideas of scholar Emmanuel Levine, "Dealing with the Jewish Question after Auschwitz is thus not only a political issue, a form of restitution or reparation, but rather about the intellectual survival of society as a whole and about the necessary consideration of the renewed role of the humanities..."⁴ The idea that the memory of Auschwitz crosses over from the 'Jewish' sphere to

3) Goodman-Thau, Eveline. *Memory and Morality after Auschwitz*. Nordhausen: Traugott Bautz Verlag, 2017. 80.

4) Goodman-Thau, *Memory and Morality after Auschwitz*, 34.

the overall ‘academic’ one is an interesting point that capsulizes the crux of history. If the memory of Auschwitz were to remain a ‘Jewish’ tradition rather than crossing into an issue concerning the ‘humanities’ then non-Jewish collective awareness would eventually dull. Goodman-Thau and Levine’s ideas form the basis of what modern public Holocaust awareness looks like. It is now, more than ever, readily accessible information and abundant sources that keep the memory of Auschwitz in the minds of people.

IV: Historiographical Analysis of Sources and Method

In Holocaust studies focusing on memory while these scholars are important, they’re starting to take a backseat to more hands-on approaches. With the dawn of the digital revolution and fewer people reading long books the need to adapt the field for this new era is an ongoing effort. These changes are already so prevalent in mainstream culture that academia and public history institutions have started to catch up. Luckily, thanks to the creation of new initiatives that incorporate technology the academic world has the tools needed to promote the study of Auschwitz’s history inside and outside of the classroom

The question of how this scholarship fits together has layers to the answer. As historians look at source material they understand that it is critical to the study of Auschwitz. With works like Webb’s, Rees’, and Goodman Thau’s a context is created that leads to the survivor testimonies. One without the other leaves the topic open and disconnected. As sources continue emerge on Auschwitz’s history more rapidly than ever, the future of the field begins to spill over into fields outside of academia and into public consciousness. With the foundation set by accounts of the survivors, scholars contributed to the enduring interest in Auschwitz by publishing their volumes of concise histories or more nuanced studies and in the research for this

analysis, primarily the various materials used worked together to create the ideas presented here. To further understand this, a look at the historical methods employed by these works needs attention.

Methods used to accomplish this goal of presenting a comprehensive study vary by historian but overlap occurs. Rees' volume, for example, is 600 pages long and in it the majority of his sources rely on interviews done with numerous Auschwitz survivors. Goodman-Thau uses this well, as her study of trauma hinges on the stories of survivors and analyzing how survivors' experiences at Auschwitz affected them into their postwar lives. Webb also considers survivor testimony, but his book is unique in that he was able to unearth new documents from outside the camp. He used those sources alongside the survivor stories to paint a picture that extended the wartime horrors of Auschwitz into the world beyond the camp. Emphasis on reports coming into occupied Poland meant for Polish resistance fighters and others place Webb in an advantageous position within scholarship since so much of what has been written on Auschwitz has been said over and over again in different ways over the years. In this study, it was interesting to see how these different monographs employed the same method and it informed much of the research done for this study.

Each historian had a unique argument they presented and although they ranged from broad to niche in their topic they completed these important studies that appeal to groups ranging from academics to the public. Webb's volume is the most accessible due to its concise coverage of Auschwitz's history and it serves as a prerequisite to more in-depth studies like Rees'. Rees targets his history of Auschwitz more towards academics, or to those genuinely interested in a very detailed chronological history. Goodman-Thau gets to tackle the most niche area of the monographs with her study on memory which would serve as an intersectional point of interest

between history and psychoanalysis. Despite their differences in the approach to the same topic, these scholars had a common goal of analyzing Auschwitz in the context of the Holocaust and how it impacted the generation of survivors and the generations of historians who will continue these efforts.

Another example of a commonly used method for studying Auschwitz used by historians is the use of material evidence. That is, the use of documents about Auschwitz to help conduct these studies. Along with eyewitness accounts, this method is used particularly well by Webb. Webb's uncovering of the new Polish documents was the most shining example of this method's use as he placed them in context with the material on Auschwitz that historians reiterated from different viewpoints. These emerging new documents could hold answers to questions historians have asked about Auschwitz. A popular one is the question of how Auschwitz became an end result to festering hatred of Jews that dates back centuries in Europe. Varying answers are suggested although a concrete answer may never arise, the use of documents provides a look into the psyches of survivors, perpetrators, and even outsiders to the history of Auschwitz. Perhaps a yet to be discovered document holds an answer to one of these frequently debated questions that will in the future be considered definitive. These documents emerging become almost as important as the copious amount of eyewitness testimony and will endure just as long with the search for new information ongoing.

V. Memory in the Digital Age

With these studies of memory taking off in recent decades, memory is now an integral part of the Auschwitz story. Thus, countries began taking memory of the Holocaust into the political and educational spheres. The anniversary of Auschwitz's liberation, January 27th, was declared International Holocaust Remembrance Day by the United Nations in November, 2005.

Holocaust education in schools is an important tool to ensure the endurance of these stories. On the Auschwitz State Museum's website, the educational resources include sources for students, teachers, and the public. Under teachers and educators, the website offers online lesson plans, prepared visual aids for lessons on Auschwitz, and videos.⁵ For those students who can travel to Auschwitz on school trips, the museum offers a guide for teachers to prepare for the visit. The Museum also hosts events such as conferences. The annual March of the Living, a walk from Auschwitz to Birkenau, draws thousands of participants worldwide including many survivors and young people. The website states that, "Since its inception in 1988, more than 260,000 alumni from 52 countries have marched down the same kilometer path leading from Auschwitz to Birkenau on Holocaust Remembrance Day – Yom HaShoah – as a tribute to all victims of the Holocaust."⁶

In recent years, the rise of social media has encouraged survivors and their families to use these platforms to share their stories. These could be Twitter, YouTube, or other social media accounts. These tools allow the survivors and their families instant and easy access to the world and offer historians new interactive sources to look at. Prior to her death in 2019, Auschwitz survivor Eva Mozes Kor had 36,500 followers⁷ and as of 2022 her account remains online as a memorial to her and to help continue to spread her message of hope. Kor's Facebook accounts and Instagram accounts are both, like her Twitter, archived for people to look back on her posts on those platforms. With multiple accounts, survivors can reach audiences who may only

5) Resources for teachers / Education / Auschwitz-Birkenau. Retrieved October 6, 2021, from <http://auschwitz.org/en/education/resources-for-teachers/>.

6) "About the March." International March of the Living. Accessed October 6, 2021. <https://www.motl.org/about/>.

7) "@EvaMozesKor." Twitter. Twitter, 2013. <https://twitter.com/EvaMozesKor>.

subscribe to certain social media sites and increase their visibility to those who have multiple accounts. As for historians conducting research these accounts offer easy access to primary source material perhaps not found elsewhere or a way to analyze how the public interacts with history outside a classroom setting. As these digital platforms help survivors communicate through written posts, they can also preserve video clips of survivor testimonies which can be archived into a digital database for academic use.

This social media based use of video is seen heavily on the platform Tik-Tok. The account of 98-year-old Hungarian Auschwitz survivor Lily Ebert is run by her grandson Dov Forman, and the account has over 1.4 million followers as of October 2021.⁸ On the platform, users can submit questions and Ebert makes videos to respond. Topics she discusses include her life before the war, her experience in Auschwitz, and how it affects her years later. Due to relative Tik-Tok fame, Ebert secured a publishing deal for her memoir, *Lily's Promise: Holding on to Hope Through Auschwitz and Beyond*, which will debut in May 2022. With the grandchildren of survivors being familiar with social media, these types of accounts reach younger audiences who are interested to learn from these survivors. Having technology like this is something previous generations did not have available and so now there are multiple easy ways for survivors to engage the world with their stories. This, in turn, has the potential to interest people who want to learn more and do so by communicating with the survivor. This also encourages people to share information with others and seek out scholarship by historians for further information.

8) Ebert, Lily. *Lily Ebert & Dov Forman (@lilyebert)*. Tik-Tok. (n.d.). Retrieved October 5, 2021, from <https://www.tiktok.com/@lilyebert>.

As more survivors die in recent years, luckily with these advancing technologies survivor testimonies are preserved in new digital ways for future generations of historians to study Auschwitz. The Shoah Foundation's recently began a digital archive project called "Dimensions in Memory." Using pre-recorded survivor interviews, this new interactive option allows viewers to select topics that interest them and the corresponding clip from the interview plays. One of the most notable survivors to take interest in the project was Eva Mozes Kor. The "Dimensions in Memory" website states that the goal of the initiative is to, "create an interactive biography. Now and far into the future, museum goers, students, and others can have conversational interactions with these eyewitnesses to history to learn from those who were there."⁹ As more of these types of digital archives come to life, the future for remembering Auschwitz, and the Holocaust at large, looks more accessible than ever. Even as survivors pass away, historians and the public have paved the way for them to still lead the effort to spread awareness about these topics to prevent such things from happening again. This new advancement in Auschwitz's story is one of the most crucial pieces to the future of Holocaust memory. Through the immortalization of sorts that these stories acquire thanks to technology lets them outlive those who tell them but not be lost to history or footnotes in a text book. With new means of defining how social media aids historical research thanks to survivor accounts they ensure that the story of Auschwitz is heard in and out of a classroom or museum. The digital age has provided historians with a new way to study Auschwitz and revolutionized the tools to do so.

VI. Conclusion

9) "Dimensions in Testimony," USC Shoah Foundation, May 18, 2021, <https://sfi.usc.edu/dit>.

The history of Auschwitz concentration camp is a vital piece of the Holocaust. In just the span of five years, the name became a symbol of death and genocide. Yet, how society remembers the history of Auschwitz is a more recent development. With an academic and cultural interest in Holocaust remembrance spawning over the last few decades due to technological and social media advances, more survivors have come around to share their experiences at Auschwitz with the world. With the help of these modern tools, stories have an audience greater than ever. Through these testimonies historians and the world at large have observed the lasting impact of the memory of individuals that turn into memories of a collective group in the generations.

Bibliography

Primary Sources:

- 1) “@EvaMozesKor.” Twitter. Twitter, 2013. <https://twitter.com/EvaMozesKor>.
- 2) Ebert, Lily. *Lily Ebert & Dov Forman (@lilyebert)*. Tik-Tok. (n.d.). Retrieved October 5, 2021, from <https://www.tiktok.com/@lilyebert>.

Secondary Sources:

- 1) “About the March.” International March of the Living. Accessed October 6, 2021. <https://www.motl.org/about/>.
- 2) “Auschwitz: Key Dates.” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accessed October 4, 2021. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/auschwitz-key-dates>.
- 3) “Dimensions in Testimony,” USC Shoah Foundation, May 18, 2021, <https://sfi.usc.edu/dit>.
- 4) Goodman-Thau, Eveline. *Memory and Morality after Auschwitz*. Nordhausen: Traugott Bautz Verlag, 2017.
- 5) Rees, Laurence. *Auschwitz a New History* New York: Public Affairs, 2005.
- 6) Resources for teachers / Education / Auschwitz-Birkenau. Retrieved October 6, 2021, from <http://auschwitz.org/en/education/resources-for-teachers/>.
- 7) Webb, Chris, and Cameron Munro. *The Auschwitz Concentration Camp: History, Biographies, Remembrance*. Berlin: Ibidem Verlag, 2018.

/.