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**CRITIC'S PICK**

## A Visit to the Unfathomable Past of Auschwitz

The Museum of Jewish Heritage's exhibition about the death camp depicts, in ways large and small, the horrors of the Holocaust.



A German National Railway freight car, like the ones used to carry prisoners to concentration camps, outside the Museum of Jewish Heritage in Manhattan, which is hosting “Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away.” Credit Elizabeth Bick for The New York Times

**By Ralph Blumenthal**

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**Auschwitz. Not long ago. Not far away.**

NYT Critic's Pick

Mass murder takes central planning.

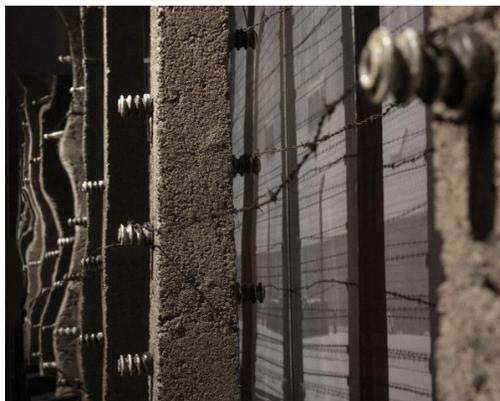
Killing as a communal business, made widely lucrative by the Third Reich, permeates the first traveling exhibition about the largest German death camp, Auschwitz, whose yawning gatehouse, with its converging rail tracks, has become emblematic of the Holocaust.

Well-timed, during a worldwide surge of anti-Semitism, the harrowing installation opened Wednesday — the anniversary of the Allied victory in Europe — over three floors of the Museum of Jewish Heritage at the Battery, in sight of Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty. It strives, successfully, for fresh relevance, starting with its haunting rubric: “Auschwitz. Not Long Ago. Not Far Away.”

In other words, as the author Primo Levi, a camp survivor, famously warned, “It happened, therefore it can happen again.”

From 1940 to 1945, at the vast complex covering almost 16 square miles in conquered Poland near the little town of Oswiecim, some 1.1 million Jews and 200,000 Poles, Russians, Roma and other non-Jews were murdered by the Nazis.

Many were worked to death in factories including a plant that made synthetic rubber. The SS calculated the profit from each prisoner’s slave labor at \$745, almost \$11,000 today. The exhibition also includes a startling find — half an original barracks from the Monowitz labor camp, the part of the Auschwitz complex where Levi and Elie Wiesel were imprisoned.



From the exhibition, concrete posts and barbed wire that were once part of Auschwitz’s electrified perimeter. Credit Elizabeth Bick for The New York Times

But 900,000 of those who arrived were never admitted to Auschwitz or its nearly 50 subcamps. They were sent directly from sealed boxcars to the complex’s gas chambers and crematories, ovens with a combined daily capacity of incinerating precisely 4,416 corpses.

“By the end of the war,” says the museum audio guide, “90 percent of Jewish children in occupied Europe had been murdered.”

From the moment visitors approach the museum, it’s clear what’s coming. Parked outside the building’s hexagonal ziggurat, evocative of a Star of David, is a Deutsche Reichsbahn railway car, one of 120,000 built between 1910 and 1927, to haul freight and cattle. They soon were put into service carrying human beings to their deaths. By making the most notorious Nazi camp a stand-in for the Holocaust, the exhibition offers a tighter focus than that of Yad Vashem in Jerusalem and the United States

Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. Its power is in the containment of its narrative to a set of artifacts left behind by individuals who came to a specific place of horror.

The pathos is captured in the details evoked by the many items on loan from the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Poland, which received a fee from the Spanish company Musealia, the for-profit organizer of the exhibition. Here a colossal wheel set from a freight train locomotive. There a woman's lone scarlet party shoe. Industrial strength meets fragile humanity.

First shown in Madrid, where it drew some 600,000 visitors, it will be in New York through at least January before moving on.



A prisoner's uniform. The red triangle meant the wearer was being held for political offenses. Credit Elizabeth Bick for The New York Times



A woman's red shoe from Auschwitz. Credit Elizabeth Bick for The New York Times

The bleakness is leavened with uplifting episodes of resistance, devotion and faith. The 1944 escape of two Slovakian Jews, Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler, whose eyewitness accounts, the [“Auschwitz Protocols.”](#) sounded a largely ignored alarm. The heroic if

doomed uprising in October 1944 of the Sonderkommandos, prisoners pressed into duty handling the corpses. And the inspired action of [Siegfried Fedrid, a young Viennese tailor](#) forced with 60,000 fellow prisoners to evacuate the camp in a death march as the Red Army approached. He snatched a blanket and shared it with four companions, saving their lives and his.

The exhibition, with its 700 objects and 400 photographs and drawings from Auschwitz; 30 other lenders; and the museum's own collection, avoids simplistic cause and effect. Rather, it illuminates the topography of evil, the deliberate designing of a hell on earth by fanatical racists and compliant architects and provisioners, while also highlighting the strenuous struggle for survival in a place where, as Primo Levi learned, "there is no why."

It properly spotlights the perpetrators as well as the victims. There are photos of the family of the camp commandant Rudolf Höss at play. A rogue's gallery of the camp's leadership fills a wall, across from some of the 30,000 salvaged mug shots of prisoners. One array includes Charlotte Delbo, 29, sent to Auschwitz with 229 other French resistance fighters. Only 49 survived.

The exhibition also juxtaposes filmed reminiscences of survivors with period footage of the deportations and, later, the life-and-death-selections at the Auschwitz arrival Rampe where trainloads of up to 5,000 men, women and children at a time would be herded out in chaos and terror. It preserves their testimony and makes it accessible to younger generations without resorting to the [Instagram recreations](#) that drew tremendous audiences in Israel but also some criticism from those who said they trivialized the Holocaust.



Barracks from the Auschwitz-Monowitz satellite camp. Credit Elizabeth Bick for The New York Times

The installation in Manhattan, curated by the leading Auschwitz historian [Robert Jan van Pelt](#), was replete with challenges. How do you objectify evil? Glassed-in artifacts like the three-tier bunks where ill and starving prisoners slept two or more to a billet, head to toe, seem incongruently antiseptic. An adjustable steel chaise for medical experiments on humans is particularly chilling.

Conversely, it's hard to showcase gleaming accouterments like SS belt buckles, Hitler Youth bugles and ebony daggers without glamorizing the Nazi penchant for using bold iconography on flags and uniforms to convey an aura of romance, power and invincibility.

Anti-Semitism, actually, had infected German society long before the Nazis, a point made by the display of a proclamation by Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand I in 1551 ordering Jews to wear a yellow circle on their clothing. The document was proudly presented to Hitler's deputy [Hermann Göring](#) in 1940.

Hitler's rise is depicted and explained in the context of a German society fractured in the aftermath of World War I, with burning resentments over reparations to the victors, and rampant inflation that left a trillion mark note worth barely \$15.

One entire wall is given over to a photo mural of a 1933 Nazi rally in Nuremberg, with an overhead monitor beaming silent excerpts from Leni Riefenstahl's worshipful documentary, "[Triumph of the Will](#)." Delirious crowds lining the road hail Hitler in regimented adulation, but the camera also picks out bystanders. They are ordinary Germans, says the audio guide. "They've chosen to take part."

Some Germans, the exhibition points out, resisted the pull of Nazism and their opposition could sway policy. A glass case displays the white smock and thermometer of Georg Renno, senior doctor of Hartheim Castle in Austria where mentally and physically disabled Germans and Poles were euthanized. When news of the mass murders leaked in 1941, the program was halted due to protests, although it secretly started up again, claiming a total of 200,000 lives.



The coat and thermometer of Georg Renno, who euthanized victims for the Nazis. Credit Elizabeth Bick for The New York Times



Bags and items carried by people shipped to Auschwitz. Credit Elizabeth Bick for The New York Times



A reproduction of a column used to disperse deadly gas. Credit Elizabeth Bick for The New York Times

The exhibition traces how German leaders, meeting for 90 minutes on Jan. 20, 1942, in the Berlin suburb of Wannsee, settled on the Final Solution — the killing of the carefully tabulated 11 million Jews remaining in Europe. Some 800,000 had already been murdered, mostly by mobile killing units, and the toll would ultimately reach six million. Six killing centers were designated, including Auschwitz-Birkenau, originally designated to hold Soviet P.O.W.s. An underground morgue was converted into a gas chamber. Four others with connecting crematories followed.

When even these proved insufficient, bodies were burned in outdoor pits. One Sonderkommando, Alberto Errera, risked his life to photograph it — actual graphic images of mass killings at Auschwitz.

Artifacts from the gas chambers and crematories are some of the most charged in the exhibition. A wire mesh column to lower Zyklon B pellets into the gas chamber away from desperate victims' hands is a reproduction, as are the gas chamber doors. They were hinged to open out as bodies piled up inside in frantic efforts to escape. The original doors were destroyed when the retreating Germans blew up the buildings. But a rake for ashes and the heavy iron crematory latches, fabricated by the ovenmaker Topf & Sons, survive, as does a rare fake showerhead used to persuade the doomed that they were entering a bathhouse, not a death chamber soon to fill with Zyklon B. Developed as a pesticide to emit cyanide, the gas could take up to 24 hours to kill lice, the exhibition notes. Humans just 15 minutes.

Sonderkommandos working 12-hour shifts gave instructions in the undressing rooms, hauled bodies from the gas chambers to the hoists, cut hair, extracted gold teeth and loaded the ovens. Five trains daily carried the loot from Auschwitz to Germany. Left behind were the artifacts that gave witness, like a child's shoe displayed in one small case. The sock is stuffed inside it.

Who puts a sock in his shoe? Someone who expects to retrieve it.