

Episode Guide: Corruption

April 1943–March 1944

Reichsführer SS Heinrich Himmler tours the Monowitz-Buna building site in the company of SS officers and IG Farben engineers.

Overview

"Corruption" (**Disc 2, Title 1, 47:35**) reveals the financial contributions Auschwitz made to the Third Reich. The Nazi plan was to kill "useless mouths" instantly upon arrival at Auschwitz and to work stronger prisoners to death as slave laborers in places like the nearby IG Farben factory. The SS also profited from the belongings of those they killed—so much so, that in the summer of 1943, an investigation was launched into corruption in the camp and Rudolf Höss, the commandant, was removed. Elsewhere, although infrequently, some individuals and groups were finding ways to resist the spread of deportations. Denmark, for example, was able to protect its Jewish citizens from Auschwitz.

In the Follow-up Discussion (**Disc 2, Bonus Features, Title 10, Chapter 1, 8:07**), Linda Ellerbee talks with David Marwell, a historian and director of the Museum of Jewish Heritage—A Living Memorial to the Holocaust in New York City; Doris Bergen, associate professor of history at the University of Notre Dame and author of *War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); and Deborah Lipstadt, Dorot Professor of Modern Jewish and Holocaust Studies and director of The Rabbi Donald A. Tam Institute for Jewish Studies at Emory University and author of *Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust, 1933–1945* (Free Press, 1986), *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (Plume, 1994), and *History on Trial: My Day in Court with Holocaust Denier David Irving* (Ecco, 2005).

Target Audience: Grades 9-12 social studies, history, and English courses

Student Learning Goals

- Citing specific examples from the film, describe the range of behaviors exhibited by Nazi personnel.
- Develop a working definition of corruption and identify the kinds of corrupt practices that existed at Auschwitz.
- Consider what happens in a society that tolerates corruption.
- Develop a working definition of resistance and describe several examples from the film.

- Compare the French and the Danes' reactions to the Nazi roundups of Jews, considering the role of geography and the manner in which each country defined its Jewish population.
- Discuss professional medical ethics with regard to the experiments of Dr. Josef Mengele.
- Analyze reasons for prosecuting the perpetrators after the war.
- Consider whether journalists should provide equal time to presenting the views of Holocaust deniers, and develop criteria for recognizing Internet sites that are developed by Holocaust deniers.

Content Synopsis

The chapter numbers, titles, and times below correspond to the two-videodisc set of Auschwitz: Inside the Nazi State published by BBC Video (E2113).

- 1. Self-Contained Universe (Start: 00:00; Length: 5:36):** By 1943 Auschwitz had grown significantly and now had 45 subcamps. Many of these provided slave labor for industry, eventually generating 60 million *Reichsmarks* for the Nazi state. In March a combination crematorium and gas chamber opened at Birkenau, in the middle of Auschwitz. Most prisoners at Auschwitz would ultimately be sent there.
- 2. "Canada" (Start: 5:36; Length: 7:03):** Inmates' possessions were taken from them upon arrival and brought to a subcamp that the prisoners referred to as "Canada," where the items were sorted and sent back to Germany, although much was stolen by SS guards. Those inmates who worked in "Canada" had special privileges and access to prized items like food, jewelry, and currency. On occasion, relationships developed in "Canada" between German guards and women prisoners. One such relationship resulted in a prisoner's sister being saved from an incoming transport, although her children were sent directly to the gas chamber. SS guards liked working at Auschwitz because it kept them from the dangers of military combat against the Red Army on the Eastern front.
- 3. A Small Town (Start: 12:39; Length: 6:47):** Oskar Gröning describes the small-town quality of living and working at Auschwitz, which had a grocery, canteen, cinema, sports club, and other places where officers could relax at the end of the day. Liquor was in ready supply and military discipline was lax. A black market existed for just about everything. Women also served as SS guards, and at times they were as brutal to prisoners as the men. Vera Alexander, a Jewish prisoner, describes her experiences with Irma Grese, an SS guard who supervised the women's camp at Birkenau.

4. **Dr. Josef Mengele (Start: 19:26; Length: 10:49):** Dr. Josef Mengele, a physician and member of the SS, arrived at Auschwitz in May, and he performed atrocious experiments on pregnant women, children, twins, infants, and others. Some of these are described by Vera Alexander and Eva Mozes Kor. Although the Nazi leadership sanctioned the murder of hundreds of thousands of people, they were bothered by the rampant looting by Nazi functionaries at Auschwitz and sent an officer there to investigate. Clever guards, including Oskar Gröning, found ways to outwit him, continuing to profit personally from the murder of innocent people.
5. **Fighting Back (Start: 30:15; Length: 11:04):** At Sobibor, a Nazi death camp where the SS were as corrupt as they were at Auschwitz, a group of Jews working in a tailor shop lured Germans in to look at purloined goods, killed them, and took their weapons, enabling approximately three hundred Jews to escape, about one hundred of whom survived the war. By autumn 1943 whole countries were beginning to resist cooperating with the Nazis, although some, like Bulgaria and Romania, had done so earlier. The Danes, in particular, began a major organized rescue effort, with the help of a German diplomat who informed them of an upcoming roundup of Jews. This permitted the Jewish citizens of Denmark to flee, mostly to Sweden, helped by many of their fellow Danes.
6. **A Brothel (Start: 41:19; Length: 6:16):** Himmler established a brothel in Auschwitz to provide incentives to relatively privileged prisoners (e.g., those who supervised others or whom the Nazis considered more valuable). Little is known about the women who worked in the brothel, but it is thought they were already inmates at the camp. In autumn 1943 Höss was removed as camp commandant, but his family so liked living there that they stayed on after his departure. He would return in 1944.
7. **Follow-up Discussion (Disc 2, Bonus Features, Title 10, Chapter 1, 8:07):** Dr. Marwell and Professors Bergen and Lipstadt discuss the ways in which society confronts genocide. Among the questions they consider are the lack of reporting on the Holocaust during World War II, the prosecution of perpetrators, Holocaust deniers, journalistic balance in reporting on the Holocaust, and the connection of the Holocaust to other genocides.

Learning Resources

Timeline: April 1943–March 1944

Biographies: Vera Alexander, Werner Best, Thomas Blatt, Libusa Breder, Helena Citronova, Ryszard Dacko, Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz, Knut Dyby, Dario Gabbai, Irma Grese, Oskar Gröning, Heinrich Himmler, Adolf Hitler, Rudolf Höss, Eva Mozes Kor, Bent Melchoir, Josef Mengele, Konrad Morgae, Józef Paczynski, Otto Pohl, Tadeusz Rybacki, Arkadiy Vajspapir, Franz Wunsch

(**boldface** indicates people interviewed in the program; others are mentioned or seen in archival films or dramatizations)

Glossary: Auschwitz, Birkenau, Canada, corruption, crematoria, Eastern Front, extermination, Final Solution, forensics, gas chamber, gestapo, libel, Nazi, noma, Nurenberg Trials, Poznan, Red Army, Reichsmarks, resistance, Sobibor, SS, transports

Readings:

- 4.1. "The Sonderkommando" (Lily Brett).
- 4.2. "Buna" (Primo Levi).
- 4.3. "A Nation Divided" (Margot Stern Strom).
- 4.4. "Aftermath" (Florida Center for Instructional Technology).

Before Viewing the Episode

Two important concepts underlie this episode: corruption and resistance. Students will observe many different forms of each in the program. Before viewing, have students develop a working definition of each term and provide examples from their own life experience. See if students can achieve some degree of consensus on the concepts. Pose this question about each word in their definitions: Is it both necessary and sufficient to define the concept and is the definition unique to that concept? Divide the class in half and direct one half to take notes on examples of corruption and the other half to take notes on examples of resistance shown in the episode.

Post-Viewing Discussion

- Return to the discussion of corruption and resistance that began the lesson. Review the definitions students developed prior to viewing the film and discuss whether any editing is needed. Have students identify examples of corruption and resistance seen in the program and analyze the degree to which their definitions apply to the actions.
- People often use the term *slippery slope* when discussing corruption. Ask students to organize the corrupt actions they saw in the film from relatively minor to major along such a slippery slope. Other categories that you might use for sorting are *degree of risk* and *degree of payoff*. Discuss: Is it any less corrupt to be involved in a minor action than it is to perpetrate major corruption?
- Primo Levi writes about questions that Holocaust survivors often are asked: Why did you not escape? Why did you not rebel? Why did you not evade capture before they got to you? The series details some specific escapes as well as some major actions of resistance. Discuss the factors that prevented most inmates of concentration camps from escaping and the factors that enabled certain resisters to succeed.

- To understand more fully the role of the *Sonderkommandos*, distribute **Reading 4.1. "The Sonderkommando,"** a poem by Lily Brett. Brett was born in Germany after World War II and grew up in Australia. Thus she did not have direct experience in the camps. However, as a poet, she chose to write a poem about those prisoners who were forced to remove bodies from the gas chambers and transport them to the crematoria. *Discuss:*
 - Look at the form of the poem. Why do you think Brett chose to use such short lines and so little description? What effect does this have on the reader?
 - According to the poem, what did *Sonderkommandos* have to do?
 - What tone does Brett use to describe the work of the *Sonderkommandos*? What effect does this tone have on the reader?
 - Compare Brett's description with those reported in the film by *Sonderkommandos* who survived.
 - Why do you think the Nazis chose Jews to do this odious task?
 - In considering this poem, does it matter that Brett herself was neither a survivor nor a *Sonderkommando*?

- We learn that people like the guard Irma Grese, who was an uneducated farmer's daughter, could become notorious for cruelty, and that doctors like Mengele could use their medical skills in perverted and heinous ways to fulfill their own personal goals. We also learn that an SS guard saved Helena Citronova's sister's life. What circumstances enabled Irma Grese to act so cruelly? What enabled Mengele's behavior? How do particular roles (scientist, citizen, guard) allow people to behave in ways they might not otherwise chose? Why did most guards and SS men behave in vicious and inhumane ways while a very few occasionally did something to help a prisoner?

- As prisoners arrived at Auschwitz, typically they were separated into those who could work and those who could not. The latter were murdered. The former were sent to work as slave laborers in nearby factories, from which the Nazis profited. Compared to being killed immediately, being assigned to work was most likely preferable. It was certainly not easy to be starved slowly, however, as described in a poem by Primo Levi in **Reading 4.2. "Buna."** *Discuss:*
 - What tone does the poem's speaker convey? Why do you think Levi chose this tone?
 - How does the narrator describe the "tired companion"? Given this description, what impact has Buna had on this prisoner?
 - Why do you think Levi ends the poem with a question? What does the narrator's question about meeting again "Up there in the world, sweet beneath the sun" suggest about the circumstances?

- Denmark was among only a few countries that actively interceded to save its Jewish population from deportation. In **Reading 4.3. A Nation United**, Margot Stern Strom, president and executive director of Facing History and Ourselves, provides historical context and introduces Leo Goldberger's description of his experience as a 13-year-old boy in Copenhagen. *Discuss:*
 - What factors made it possible for the Danes to protect their Jewish population when other countries did not or could not? (Review the behavior of the French shown in Episode 3 and compare the geographical proximity of Denmark and Sweden with France and Sweden.)
 - What objects did people choose to take with them on their journey to Sweden, and what do you think the significance of these items was for them?
 - In 1971 the state of Israel recognized Georg Ferdinand Duckwitz as a "Righteous Gentile" (now called "The Righteous Among the Nations") for what he did to save the Danish Jews. What do you think motivated him? For more information on nonJewish individuals who helped save Jews during the Holocaust, have students conduct research on the Web sites of the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous (www.jfr.org) and Yad Vashem (www.yad-vashem.org.il).
- In the Follow-up Discussion to the program (**Disc 2, Bonus Features, Title 10, Chapter 1, 8:07**), Linda Ellerbee asks how the various trials of Nazi perpetrators have succeeded and how have they failed. To provide more background information on these important trials, direct students to **Reading 4.4. Aftermath**, which is a post-World War II timeline that details the various trials that took place. Students may also conduct additional Internet research about the Nuremberg Trials. *Discuss:*
 - On what basis were Nazi perpetrators brought to trial after the war? What kind of evidence was needed to convict them? How did the trials succeed and how did they fail?
 - In addition to the Nuremberg Trials, described here, Israel captured and tried Adolf Eichmann in 1962. He defended his actions on the basis of the fact that he was "obeying orders." The same defense was used by others who were subsequently put on trial. Do you think this is an adequate defense? Why or why not? (Eichmann was found guilty and was hanged.)
- Professor Lipstadt briefly describes her legal case with Holocaust denier David Irving. Help students develop a working definition of the term Holocaust denier and generate some criteria they can use when looking at Internet sites to determine whether they represent the views of Holocaust deniers. *Discuss:* What do you think Holocaust deniers have to gain by propagating lies? Given the amount of documentary evidence that the Holocaust did indeed take place, do you think Holocaust deniers should be given the opportunity to present their views publicly in order to "balance" those of Holocaust scholars and survivors?