

# Belzec

## Study Guide



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# ***National Standards for Learning covered in this study guide:***

## **NSS-C.9-12.5 ROLES OF THE CITIZEN**

### **What are the Roles of the Citizen in American Democracy?**

- What is citizenship?
- What are the rights of citizens?
- What are the responsibilities of citizens?
- What civic dispositions or traits of private and public character are important to the preservation and improvement of American constitutional democracy?
- How can citizens take part in civic life?

## **NSS-WH.5-12.8 ERA 8: A HALF-CENTURY OF CRISIS AND ACHIEVEMENT, 1900-1945**

### **The student in grades 5-12 should understand**

- reform, revolution, and social change in the world economy of the early century.
- the causes and global consequences of World War I.
- the search for peace and stability in the 1920s and 1930s.
- the causes and global consequences of World War II.
- major global trends from 1900 to the end of World War II.

## **NSS-WH.5-12.9 ERA 9: THE 20TH CENTURY SINCE 1945: PROMISES AND PARADOXES**

### **The student in grades 5-12 should understand**

- how post-World War II reconstruction occurred, new international power relations took shape, and colonial empires broke up.
- the search for community, stability, and peace in an interdependent world.
- major global trends since World War II.

## ***Synopsis/Review of the Film***

### **Variety Magazine**

Published Thursday, September 8, 2005  
by Jay Weissberg

The horrifically efficient Nazi death camp Belzec was in operation for less than one year, but in that time witnessed the murder of at least 600,000 Jews. Once the Soviet counterattacks began, the SS eliminated all traces of the camp, and the name Belzec faded from the collective conscience. Novice helmer Guillaume Moscovitz is determined, however, that its infamous gas chambers not be forgotten, and in "Belzec" he's created a chilling account that's as much about remembrance as it is about the past. Although Jewish fests will be its natural home, docu deserves a wider distribution.

Belzec became a death factory soon after the Nazis devised the Final Solution, on a par with the better-known camps of Sobibor and Treblinka, all in eastern Poland. Unlike some places that presented the illusion of a work prison, Belzec went about its goals in a clear-eyed and open manner.

Operations began in March 1942: In those opening weeks 63,000 people were exterminated, but that figure is nothing compared to the approximately 330,000 Jews murdered between August and September, most just hours after being herded out of the train cars.

By December, with the Russians closing in, the Nazis shut down the camp, plowing up the buildings and planting trees to disguise both the architectural remains as well as the massive death pits. The place is now a patch of tranquility, where wind rustles the leaves and teens hang out in its sylvan setting. Only an out-dated Communist-era marker hinted at the site's former tenants.

Moscovitz arrived in Belzec once a systematic excavation had begun -- 31 mass graves were discovered, but due to the sandy quality of the soil, ground shifts mean that the entire area is covered with bones and ashes, the hidden remains of the hundreds of thousands gassed to death and later burned in ovens.

This contrast between the tree-covered plain and the death buried just below the surface is what intrigues Moscovitz. Much of the handsomely lensed docu is composed of interviews with locals, people who remember seeing the trains pulling up (the camp was built just 1,500 feet from the town's railroad station), hearing the screams, and, of course, smelling the foul air of burning corpses.

It's refreshing to finally hear villagers who don't claim to have been ignorant of what went on inside the barbed wire fences, although a few don't seem especially traumatized by what was happening in their backyard.

The only Jewish survivors of Belzec were those men forced to usher the prisoners into the gas chambers and later transport the bodies to the pits. Moscovitz makes superb use of their chilling written testimonies.

But even more devastating is listening to the sole living Jewish witness, Braha Rauffman. As a 7-year-old, she was hidden by a villager for 20 months, in a makeshift hole covered with firewood that didn't even allow her space to fully stretch her legs. Her testimony, almost unbearable to hear, contrasts sharply with the more generic recollections of the townspeople.

Camera (color), Guillaume Schiffman, Stephane Massis, Guillaume Genini, Carlo Varini, Malick Brahim; editors, Lise Beaulieu, Marie Liotard, Claire Le Villain; sound (Dolby Digital), Krzysztof Rzepecki, Dariusz Gorski; sound editor, Beatrice Wicz. Reviewed at Venice Film Festival (International Critics' Week -- Special Event), Sept. 8, 2005. Running time: 112 MIN. (Polish, French, Hebrew dialogue)

Available at <http://www.menemshafilms.com/belzec-reviews.html> and accessed 1 January 2010.

## ***Special notes about the film Belzec:***

Prospective viewers/users should be aware that the film is entirely subtitled in English over spoken French, Polish, and Hebrew. While full meaning of the narratives can certainly be garnered while reading the translations, the prospective teacher should make students aware of this characteristic of the film prior to using it in a classroom setting.

Additionally, the film has 11 chapter breaks that can be used for quick navigation to specific points in the video. However, the chapters are primarily organized simply as ten-minute increments, and not as specific topical subdivisions. Therefore, the prospective teacher will need to monitor the film's time counter if desiring to view only a specific topic or anecdote.

One last note – the film's editors chose not to identify the various interviewees until the conclusion of the film, which is somewhat distracting and makes discussion of the various anecdotal evidence difficult. At the film's conclusion, there is a listing of names of the citizens of Belzec who gave commentary, but the viewer is not instructed as to whether or not the names are in order of appearance.

## ***Chapter outline, with general topics:***

1. 0:00-9:58 –
  - a. begins with lengthy letter from deportee of Warsaw Ghetto
  - b. lengthy survey of photo of Belzec from 1946, discussing how it looked in the image, what it had looked like before the Nazis destroyed it and how it looks today
  - c. begin interview with elderly man who was one of the Poles who built the camp in 1942
2. 9:59-19:58 --
  - a. continue with old man who draws diagram of two camp buildings (he scratches them out of the dirt at the end of the conversation)
  - b. interview with archeologist who is in charge of excavations prior to the installation of a new memorial – details concrete poured on the site in the 1960's to mark mass graves and the human remains that were found on the site
3. 19:59-29:58 –
  - a. interview with four teens from Belzec who ride their bikes in the former camp site and why they do
  - b. interview with woman whose father worked with Germans from camp – tells of mills in village being used to separate the ashes of the burned corpses, looking for gold teeth and hidden valuables
  - c. begin story with old timer who tells of his aunt who used to work at the station restaurant – she wasn't allowed to give the Jews on the transports any relief (except for one time when she was allowed to dispense water) – when the transport doors opened Jews who ran to the wells were shot on the spot
4. 29:59-39:56 –
  - a. interview with grandfather and one of the boys from earlier – grandfather tells of, as a boy, going each day to see the transports arrive – also mentions the prisoners clamoring for water. Tells that he feared being shot by the Germans – claims he went to the station every day because he had nothing better to do – tells that later the Jews were transported

naked so if they ran away it would be immediately obvious that the person was a Jew – the man’s wife speaks up and says that Poles also killed Poles (it wasn’t just Germans) – the grandfather is asked how old he was back in 1942-43 and he answers 14 or 15, the same age as the grandson – the grandmother says that they are going to turn the camp into a sort of cemetery and what’s the point? It was laid bare all those years ago

- b. pan of the camp site today with statistics from deportations in the first days/weeks/months of the camp’s existence
  - c. begin interview with elderly couple who lived by the tracks and saw/heard the transports come by each day – occupants screamed for water
5. 39:57-49:56 –
- a. continue interview with couple about the transports – couple says they were at first suspicious and that their suspicions turned out to be true – talk about the burning and the horrible smell – they’d go up on a hill to watch the burnings – couldn’t open the windows or even go outside for the smell – ended up getting used to it because where could you go? You couldn’t move the entire village of Belzec away
  - b. testimony of former prisoner Rudolf Reder – Ukrainians have been mentioned several times in testimonies (sometimes referred to as “the Blacks”, meaning Black-shirted guards); Reder describes the asphyxiation process and says it lasted 20 minutes
  - c. barber shop/beauty parlor scene where woman talks about hatred and states that if the war happened again it would be today just like it was back then; man in barber chair states that his uncle was a survivor of the camp, but as someone who lived near it not as a deportee
6. 49:57-59:56 –
- a. continue interview with people in beauty parlor
  - b. begin story with Braha Rauffmann, one of only three survivors of Belzec (Rudolf Reder and Chaim Hirszman were the others) and the only one still living. She discusses how her Gentile friend Julia helped her to hide, first in her cellar, then in a wheat field, then in the cemetery. Braha was only 6 when the war began
  - c. stories from woman who recalled three runaways – a woman who hanged herself on the family’s fence and a young couple who was denied help from her grandfather and found killed the next morning
7. 59:57-1:09:56 –
- a. continue story from Braha, who tells that she was now hidden in a storage area normally used for wood; the area wasn’t long enough for her to lie



down, so she had to sit or lie in the fetal position. The only vision/ventilation came from a window 4"x8" wide. Julia brought her food daily when she could; she also gave her a baby jar for waste. Braha only told time by seeing people she recognized in nice clothes – that's how she discerned the Sundays. Braha was in the wood storage area for 20 months

- b. story from woman whose mother ran a bakery in a cellar adjacent to the camp. They turned out 1000 loaves of bread per day. The woman said a neighbor drove the horse and cart, accompanied by her or her sister, to the camp – a soldier came out and took the horse inside, then returned with it and signed an invoice with the date and the number of loaves shipped. The woman said she never went into the camp. "You couldn't complain – it was the Occupation!" "Orders were orders." The Germans paid for the bread. The woman stated that she was afraid of the Germans, but more afraid of the Russians (she didn't elaborate further)
  - c. Braha said all human beings were dangerous to her because she was a Jew and Jews were being killed; but she had no idea what being a Jew meant
8. 1:09:57-1:19:55 –
- a. Braha says she lost the power of speech because all she could do to speak to Julia was to whisper, and that whisper gradually became softer and softer
  - b. interview with a man about the Belzec stationmaster, Forsztand Goekel – he testifies that Goekel was a kind man because he let them give the Jews water and he never harmed the Poles who worked for him. He details how after some time he was old enough to be the telegraph operator and transcribed information about incoming transports and gave that data to the stationmaster. He says that not every special transport contained Jews; some were military transports that had to be allowed to move through each station to the last station as quickly as possible. He details that Goekel's job was to check the train full of Jews against his paperwork and then escort the train into the camp. He personally gave the order to switch the tracks, and supervised the splitting of the transport, as the camp could only accommodate half of it at one time. Once Belzec finished as a killing center, Goekel was transferred out of the station and it was operated by Poles
  - c. testimony of former prisoner Chaim Hirszman – his testimony somewhat contradicts that of Rudolf Reder, who says the women's hair was shaved prior to gassing. Both men mention "showers". Hirszman also reports that the gas chambers were closed for 40 minutes, as opposed to Reder's testimony that it was 20 minutes

9. 1:19:56-1:29:53 –

- a. Hirszman's testimony is continued, but from his wife – dead bodies were buried and burned later on. Children were often thrown on top of mass graves and buried alive; Hirszman told his wife of his horror as the ground heaved as the children suffocated. She also relates that he talked about sonderkommando eating meat from the dead... She also tells about the Jewish prisoners having to form a soccer team to play against the SS guards on Sundays. Hirszman also testified briefly of a Jewish revolt in the camp that never happened due to betrayal of the plan. Hirszman estimated that 800,000 Jews died in Belzec
- b. Braha tells of her legs atrophying from being bent at the knees all of the time, and of masochistic behavior as a way to stem the urge to cry out or to attempt to dig out from under the wood pile. She talks of the help of the good Lord for her survival, but then quickly changes the perspective to "Julia's good Lord, the one she prayed to all the time"
- c. A man details story of helping, against his father's will, a pretty young woman and her child to hide. The woman had thrown her child off a slowing train, and then jumped herself. She was eventually found out by the Germans while hiding in a nearby village and she and her daughter were killed
- d. Braha tells that she knew when the bodies had been dug up and began to burn. She asked Julia what the smell was, and Julia's reply was, "Don't worry, they aren't burning people alive – they're all dead!" The smell permeated the wood pile and was almost suffocating

10. 1:29:54-1:39:53 –

- a. Braha estimates that the burning went on for 3 months and was a stench she'll never forget
- b. interview with a man whose father worked on the railroad and began to paint after his retirement. The father painted a landscape of the killing center, as well as images that he saw in the camp area. Some images show the Germans using heavy equipment to extricate the bodies from the earth, and rails being fashioned into makeshift grills for burning the bodies. He says that railroad workers knew what was going on, as they had to repair the lines where rails had been removed. Additionally, there were no trees in the area in 1942-43, and the camp was on a hill – everyone or anyone would have known what was going on
- c. Braha tells of her liberation from the wood pile, how her legs wouldn't support her weight, and how she had forgotten what the sky looked like
- d. begin story about construction of the Belzec memorial and museum. Josef Pizun, Contractor & Marcin Roszczyk, Architect of the new memorial

& David Szpilman, representative of the Grand Rabbi of Warsaw meet over details of the excavation, and the history of the project to this point. Szpilman takes notes on what they've found concerning human remains, mass graves, etc. Pizun points to an area where a mass grave had held 100,000 bodies

11. 1:39:54-1:45:36 –

- a. Puzin says that because of the sandy soil and rain, remains have been scattered, washed, throughout the camp area. He says the camp area is basically one big grave. Their goal is to keep people from walking on the area. They comment that in one part of the camp the grass is white from being covered with ground up bones; the rabbi asks if they found skeletons and is told that they found only bone fragments which weren't identifiable until the archeologist said what they were. Now those remnants can be seen everywhere on the camp site
- b. at the conclusion of the film, text states, "We will never know the exact number of Jews gassed at Belzec. In 1946, the Polish inquiry commission into Nazi crimes in Poland concluded its report: at least 600,000 Jews were murdered at the Belzec death camp."

## ***History of the Holocaust — An Introduction***

[Guidelines for Teaching about the Holocaust](#) – before beginning to teach any unit on the Holocaust, it is advised that the teacher consider the information and suggestions available from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum ([www.ushmm.org](http://www.ushmm.org)).

[Why Teach about the Holocaust?](#)

[Methodological Considerations](#)

[Five Guidelines for Teaching about a Genocide](#)



The [Holocaust](#) (also called *Shoah* in Hebrew) refers to the period from January 30, [1933](#), when [Adolf Hitler](#) became chancellor of Germany, to May 8, [1945](#) (VE Day), when the war in Europe ended. During this time, [Jews](#) in Europe were subjected to progressively harsh persecution that ultimately led to the murder of 6,000,000 [Jews](#) (1.5 million of these being children) and the destruction of 5,000 Jewish communities. These deaths represented two-thirds of European Jewry and one-third of world Jewry. The [Jews](#) who died were not casualties of the fighting that ravaged Europe during [World War II](#). Rather, they were the victims of Germany's deliberate and systematic attempt to annihilate the entire Jewish population of Europe, a plan [Hitler](#) called the "[Final Solution](#)" (*Endlösung*).

After its defeat in World War I, Germany was humiliated by the Versailles Treaty, which reduced its prewar territory, drastically reduced its armed forces, demanded the recognition of its guilt for the war, and stipulated it pay reparations to the allied powers. The German Empire destroyed, a new parliamentary government called the Weimar Republic was formed. The republic suffered from economic instability, which grew worse during the worldwide depression after the New York stock market crash in 1929. Massive inflation followed by very high unemployment heightened existing class and political differences and began to undermine the government.

On January 30, [1933](#), [Adolf Hitler](#), leader of the [National Socialist German Workers \(Nazi\) Party](#), was named chancellor by president Paul von Hindenburg after the Nazi party won a significant percentage of the vote in the elections of 1932. The Nazi Party

had taken advantage of the political unrest in Germany to gain an electoral foothold. The Nazis incited clashes with the communists, who many feared, disrupted the government with demonstrations, and conducted a vicious propaganda campaign against its political opponents—the weak Weimar government, and the [Jews](#), whom the Nazis blamed for Germany's ills.

Propaganda: “The [Jews](#) Are Our Misfortune”

A major tool of the Nazis' propaganda assault was the weekly Nazi newspaper [Der Stürmer](#) (The Attacker). At the bottom of the front page of each issue, in bold letters, the paper proclaimed, “The [Jews](#) are our misfortune!” *Der Stürmer* also regularly featured cartoons of [Jews](#) in which they were caricatured as hooked-nosed and apelike. The influence of the newspaper was far-reaching: by 1938 about a half million copies were distributed weekly.

Soon after he became chancellor, [Hitler](#) called for new elections in an effort to get full control of the Reichstag, the German parliament, for the Nazis. The Nazis used the government apparatus to terrorize the other parties. They arrested their leaders and banned their political meetings. Then, in the midst of the election campaign, on February 27, [1933](#), the Reichstag building burned. A Dutchman named Marinus van der Lubbe was arrested for the crime, and he swore he had acted alone. Although many suspected the Nazis were ultimately responsible for the act, the Nazis managed to blame the Communists, thus turning more votes their way.

The fire signaled the demise of German democracy. On the next day, the government, under the pretense of controlling the Communists, abolished individual rights and protections: freedom of the press, assembly, and expression were nullified, as well as the right to privacy. When the elections were held on March 5, the Nazis received nearly 44 percent of the vote, and with 8 percent offered by the Conservatives, won a majority in the government.

The Nazis moved swiftly to consolidate their power into a dictatorship. On March 23, the Enabling Act was passed. It sanctioned [Hitler's](#) dictatorial efforts and legally enabled him to pursue them further. The Nazis marshaled their formidable propaganda machine to silence their critics. They also developed a sophisticated police and military force.

The *Sturmabteilung* (S.A., Storm Troopers), a grassroots organization, helped [Hitler](#) undermine the German democracy. The [Gestapo](#) (*Geheime Staatspolizei*, Secret State Police), a force recruited from professional police officers, was given complete freedom to arrest anyone after February 28. The [Schutzstaffel](#) (SS, Protection Squad) served as [Hitler's](#) personal bodyguard and eventually controlled the [concentration camps](#) and the [Gestapo](#). The [Sicherheitsdienst des ReichsführersSS](#) (S.D., Security Service of the SS) functioned as the Nazis' intelligence service, uncovering enemies and keeping them under surveillance.

With this police infrastructure in place, opponents of the Nazis were terrorized, beaten, or sent to one of the [concentration camps](#) the Germans built to incarcerate them. [Dachau](#), just outside of Munich, was the first such camp built for political prisoners. Dachau's purpose changed over time and eventually became another brutal concentration camp for [Jews](#).

By the end of [1934](#) [Hitler](#) was in absolute control of Germany, and his campaign against the [Jews](#) in full swing. The Nazis claimed the [Jews](#) corrupted pure German culture with their "foreign" and "mongrel" influence. They portrayed the [Jews](#) as evil and cowardly, and Germans as hardworking, courageous, and honest. The [Jews](#), the Nazis claimed, who were heavily represented in finance, commerce, the press, literature, theater, and the arts, had weakened Germany's economy and culture. The massive government-supported propaganda machine created a racial [anti-Semitism](#), which was different from the longstanding anti-Semitic tradition of the Christian churches.

The superior race was the "Aryans," the Germans. The word Aryan, "derived from the study of linguistics, which started in the eighteenth century and at some point determined that the Indo-Germanic (also known as Aryan) languages were superior in their structures, variety, and vocabulary to the Semitic languages that had evolved in the Near East. This judgment led to a certain conjecture about the character of the peoples who spoke these languages; the conclusion was that the 'Aryan' peoples were likewise superior to the 'Semitic' ones" (Leni Yahil, *The Holocaust: The Fate of European Jewry*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 36).

### The Jews Are Isolated from Society

The Nazis then combined their racial theories with the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin to justify their treatment of the [Jews](#). The Germans, as the strongest and fittest, were destined to rule, while the weak and racially adulterated [Jews](#) were doomed to extinction. [Hitler](#) began to restrict the [Jews](#) with legislation and terror, which entailed burning books written by [Jews](#), removing [Jews](#) from their professions and public schools, confiscating their businesses and property and excluding them from public events. The most infamous of the anti-Jewish legislation were the [Nuremberg Laws](#), enacted on September 15, [1935](#). They formed the legal basis for the Jews' exclusion from German society and the progressively restrictive Jewish policies of the Germans.

Many [Jews](#) attempted to flee Germany, and thousands succeeded by immigrating to such countries as [Belgium](#), Czechoslovakia, [England](#), [France](#) and [Holland](#). It was much more difficult to get out of Europe. [Jews](#) encountered stiff immigration quotas in most of the world's countries. Even if they obtained the necessary documents, they often had to wait months or years before leaving. Many families out of desperation sent their children first.

In July [1938](#), representatives of 32 countries met in the French town of [Evian](#) to discuss the refugee and immigration problems created by the Nazis in Germany. Nothing substantial was done or decided at the Evian Conference, and it became apparent to

[Hitler](#) that no one wanted the [Jews](#) and that he would not meet resistance in instituting his Jewish policies. By the autumn of 1941, Europe was in effect sealed to most legal emigration. The [Jews](#) were trapped.

On November 9-10, [1938](#), the attacks on the [Jews](#) became violent. Hershel Grynszpan, a 17-year-old Jewish boy distraught at the deportation of his family, shot Ernst vom Rath, the third secretary in the German Embassy in Paris, who died on November 9. Nazi hooligans used this assassination as the pretext for instigating a night of destruction that is now known as [Kristallnacht](#) (the night of broken glass). They looted and destroyed Jewish homes and businesses and burned synagogues. Many [Jews](#) were beaten and killed; 30,000 [Jews](#) were arrested and sent to concentration camps.

### The Jews Are Confined to Ghettos

Germany invaded [Poland](#) in September [1939](#), beginning [World War II](#). Soon after, in [1940](#), the Nazis began establishing [ghettos](#) for the [Jews of Poland](#). More than 10 percent of the Polish population was Jewish, numbering about three million. [Jews](#) were forcibly deported from their homes to live in crowded ghettos, isolated from the rest of society. This concentration of the Jewish population later aided the Nazis in their deportation of the [Jews](#) to the death camps. The ghettos lacked the necessary food, water, space, and sanitary facilities required by so many people living within their constricted boundaries. Many died of deprivation and starvation.

### The "Final Solution"

In June [1941](#) Germany attacked the Soviet Union and began the "[Final Solution](#)." Four mobile killing groups were formed called [Einsatzgruppen](#) A, B, C and D. Each group contained several commando units. The [Einsatzgruppen](#) gathered [Jews](#) town by town, marched them to huge pits dug earlier, stripped them, lined them up, and shot them with automatic weapons. The dead and dying would fall into the pits to be buried in mass graves. In the infamous [Babi Yar](#) massacre, near [Kiev](#), 30,000-35,000 [Jews](#) were killed in two days. In addition to their operations in the Soviet Union, the [Einsatzgruppen](#) conducted mass murder in eastern Poland, Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia. It is estimated that by the end of [1942](#), the [Einsatzgruppen](#) had murdered more than 1.3 million [Jews](#).

On January 20, [1942](#), several top officials of the German government met to officially coordinate the military and civilian administrative branches of the Nazi system to organize a system of mass murder of the [Jews](#). This meeting, called the [Wannsee Conference](#), "marked the beginning of the full-scale, comprehensive extermination operation [of the [Jews](#)] and laid the foundations for its organization, which started immediately after the conference ended" (Yahil, *The Holocaust*, p. 318).

While the Nazis murdered other national and ethnic groups, such as a number of Soviet prisoners of war, Polish intellectuals, and gypsies, only the [Jews](#) were marked for systematic and total annihilation. [Jews](#) were singled out for "Special Treatment" (*Sonderbehandlung*), which meant that Jewish men, women and children were to be

methodically killed with poisonous gas. In the exacting records kept at the [Auschwitz](#) death camp, the cause of death of [Jews](#) who had been gassed was indicated by "SB," the first letters of the two words that form the German term for "Special Treatment."

By the spring of 1942, the Nazis had established six [killing centers](#) (death camps) in Poland: [Chelmno \(Kulmhof\)](#), [Belzec](#), [Sobibor](#), Treblinka, [Maidanek](#) and [Auschwitz](#). All were located near railway lines so that [Jews](#) could be easily transported daily. A vast system of camps (called *Lagersystem*) supported the death camps. The purpose of these camps varied: some were slave labor camps, some transit camps, others concentration camps and their subcamps, and still others the notorious death camps. Some camps combined all of these functions or a few of them. All the camps were intolerably brutal.

The major concentration camps were Ravensbruck, Neuengamme, Bergen-Belsen, [Sachsenhausen](#), Gross-Rosen, [Buchenwald](#), [Theresienstadt](#), Flossenburg, Natzweiler-Struthof, [Dachau](#), [Mauthausen](#), Stutthof, and [Dora/Nordhausen](#).

In nearly every country overrun by the Nazis, the [Jews](#) were forced to wear badges marking them as [Jews](#), they were rounded up into ghettos or concentration camps and then gradually transported to the killing centers. The death camps were essentially factories for murdering [Jews](#). The Germans shipped thousands of [Jews](#) to them each day. Within a few hours of their arrival, the [Jews](#) had been stripped of their possessions and valuables, gassed to death, and their bodies burned in specially designed crematoriums. Approximately 3.5 million [Jews](#) were murdered in these death camps.

Many healthy, young strong [Jews](#) were not killed immediately. The Germans' war effort and the "[Final Solution](#)" required a great deal of manpower, so the Germans reserved large pools of [Jews](#) for slave labor. These people, imprisoned in concentration and labor camps, were forced to work in German munitions and other factories, such as I.G. Farben and Krupps, and wherever the Nazis needed laborers. They were worked from dawn until dark without adequate food and shelter. Thousands perished, literally worked to death by the Germans and their collaborators.

In the last months of [Hitler's](#) Reich, as the German armies retreated, the Nazis began marching the prisoners still alive in the concentration camps to the territory they still controlled. The Germans forced the starving and sick [Jews](#) to walk hundreds of miles. Most died or were shot along the way. About a quarter of a million [Jews](#) died on the death marches.

### Jewish Resistance

The Germans' overwhelming repression and the presence of many collaborators in the various local populations severely limited the ability of the [Jews](#) to resist. Jewish [resistance](#) did occur, however, in several forms. Staying alive, clean, and observing Jewish religious traditions constituted resistance under the dehumanizing conditions imposed by the Nazis. Other forms of resistance involved escape attempts from the



ghettos and camps. Many who succeeded in escaping the ghettos lived in the forests and mountains in family camps and in fighting partisan units. Once free, though, the [Jews](#) had to contend with local residents and partisan groups who were often openly hostile. [Jews](#) also staged armed revolts in the [ghettos](#) of Vilna, [Bialystok](#), Bedzin-Sosnowiec, Cracow, and [Warsaw](#).

The [Warsaw Ghetto Uprising](#) was the largest ghetto revolt. Massive deportations (or *Aktions*) had been held in the ghetto from July to September 1942, emptying the ghetto of the majority of [Jews](#) imprisoned there. When the Germans entered the ghetto again in January 1943 to remove several thousand more, small unorganized groups of [Jews](#) attacked them. After four days, the Germans withdrew from the ghetto, having deported far fewer people than they had intended. The Nazis reentered the ghetto on April 19, 1943, the eve of [Passover](#), to evacuate the remaining [Jews](#) and close the ghetto. The [Jews](#), using homemade bombs and stolen or bartered weapons, resisted and withstood the Germans for 27 days. They fought from bunkers and sewers and evaded capture until the Germans burned the ghetto building by building. By May 16 the ghetto was in ruins and the uprising crushed.

[Jews](#) also revolted in the death camps of [Sobibor](#), Treblinka and [Auschwitz](#). All of these acts of [resistance](#) were largely unsuccessful in the face of the superior German forces, but they were very important spiritually, giving the [Jews](#) hope that one day the Nazis would be defeated.

#### Liberation and the End of War

The camps were [liberated](#) gradually, as the Allies advanced on the German army. For example, [Maidanek](#) (near Lublin, Poland) was liberated by Soviet forces in July 1944, [Auschwitz](#) in January 1945 by the Soviets, [Bergen-Belsen](#) (near Hanover, Germany) by the British in April 1945, and [Dachau](#) by the Americans in April 1945.

At the end of the war, between 50,000 and 100,000 Jewish survivors were living in three zones of occupation: American, British and Soviet. Within a year, that figure grew to about 200,000. The American zone of occupation contained more than 90 percent of the Jewish [displaced persons \(DPs\)](#). The Jewish DPs would not and could not return to their homes, which brought back such horrible memories and still held the threat of danger from anti-Semitic neighbors. Thus, they languished in DP camps until emigration could be arranged to Palestine, and later Israel, the United States, South America and other countries. The last DP camp closed in 1957 (David S. Wyman, "The United States," in David S. Wyman, ed., *The World Reacts to the Holocaust*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, pp. 70710).

Below are figures for the number of [Jews](#) murdered in each country that came under German domination. They are estimates, as are all figures relating to [Holocaust](#) victims. The numbers given here for Czechoslovakia, [Hungary](#) and [Romania](#) are based on their territorial borders before the 1938 Munich agreement. The total number of six million

[Jews](#) murdered during the [Holocaust](#), which emerged from the [Nuremberg trials](#), is also an estimate. Numbers have ranged between five and seven million killed.

Source: Holocaust Memorial Center (<http://www.holocaustcenter.org>) 6602 West Maple Road  
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## ***Belzec Camp History/Timeline***

The Belzec death camp was located in the southeastern part of the Lublin District, near Belzec, a small village on the Lublin - Lviv railway line. In early 1940 the Germans set up a number of labor camps in the Belzec district, housing workers building the "Otto-Line", a series of fortifications on the border with the Soviet Union. These Jewish labor camps were disbanded in October 1940. The death camp was not part of, or converted from any other recognized camp facility. It was built in connection with *Aktion Reinhard*, specifically for the murder of Jews.

The site chosen was on a railway siding, at a distance of about 400 m from the Belzec railway station, and only 50 m east of the main Lublin - Lviv railway line. Richard Thomalla of the *SS-Zentralbauleitung Zamosc* supervised the construction works. The on-site supervisor was an unidentified red haired SS officer, known as "the Master" (*der Meister*). Skilled manual Polish workers from Belzec and the surrounding area built the gas chambers and barracks, having been "well paid" They were later replaced by Jews from the nearby villages of Lubycza Krolewska and Mosty Maly. Following the clearing of trees from the northern half of a hill, construction began on 1 November 1941 and was completed by the end of February 1942.

The entire camp occupied a relatively small, almost square area. Three sides measured 275 m; the fourth, south side measured 265 m. An adjoining timber yard was incorporated into the camp, which was itself surrounded by a double fence of chicken wire and barbed wire. The outer fence was camouflaged with tree branches. During the later reorganization of the camp, the space between the two fences was filled with rolls of barbed wire. On the east side, another barrier was erected on a steep slope by the fixing of tree trunks to wooden planks. During the second phase of the camp's existence, a wooden fence was built along the side of the road at the foot of the steep eastern slope. A line of trees was planted between the western outer fence and the Lublin - Lviv railway line.

Four watchtowers were constructed: on the northeast and northwest sides, at the southwest corner and at the most westerly point of the camp. The northeastern tower was constructed on top of a concrete bunker at the highest point of the Belzec terrain, providing an excellent vantage point over the entire camp. A fifth tower in the centre of the camp overlooked the entire length of "the Sluice" (also known as "the Tube"), the camouflaged barbed wire pathway to the gas chambers. The corner watchtowers were manned by *Trawniki*männer (Ukrainian *Volksdeutsche* from the Trawniki Labor Camp), armed with rifles. The central tower was equipped with a heavy machine gun and searchlight. In the camp's second phase, further watchtowers were erected, including

one positioned at the far end of the ramp. The guardhouse, permanently manned by SS men and Ukrainians, was located close to the entrance gate on the west side of the camp. There was a separate compound for the *Trawnikiemänner* to the east of the main gate. The Ukrainian area included three barracks, comprising two large huts and one smaller structure. The first large hut was used as housing for the *Trawnikiemänner*. The second large hut housed the sickbay, a dentist and a barber. The third and smallest of the structures was used as the kitchen and canteen (mess hall).

Belzec was divided into two sections:

Camp I, in the northern and western section, was the reception area and included the railway ramp, which could initially accommodate 10-15 wagons. A disused siding was subsequently added to provide a second ramp for the later phase of exterminations. Together, the two ramps provided unloading facilities for 40 wagons. A 200 m long railway spur led through the gate on the northwest side of the camp. A secondary inner gate was constructed at the point where the two sidings inside the camp diverged, close to the beginning of the second ramp. A "holding pen" (an enclosed yard) at the far end of the second ramp was used for the "overflow" from the huge later transports. In the second killing phase there were two undressing barracks, one for women and children, the other for men.

Camp II, the extermination area, included the gas chambers and large rectangular burial pits. The pits had an average size of 20 m x 30 m x 6 m deep. These mass graves were located at the northeast, east and southerly sections of the camp. Later, two barracks, consisting of living quarters and a kitchen, were erected in Camp II for the Jewish prisoners who worked there (the *Sonderkommando*).

Camps I and II were separated by a camouflaged fence with two gates, one east of the SS garage, and the other close to the far end of the ramp. From this point a path led up a hill and through the forest to an execution pit. A narrow passageway called "*die Schleuse*", ("the Sluice"), was constructed, 2 m wide and a 100 m long, enclosed on both sides by camouflaged barbed wire fences. This passageway connected the undressing barracks in Camp I to the gas chambers in Camp II. A camouflage net was stretched over the roof of the building housing the gas chambers in order to prevent aerial observation. Stanislaw Kozak, a Pole who participated in the building of the first gassing shed in Belzec, described its construction, as well as that of two other barracks: "We built barracks close to the side-track of the railway. One barrack, which was close to the railway, was 50 m long and 12.5 m wide. The second barrack, 25 m long and 12.5 m wide, was for the Jews destined for "the baths". Not far from this barrack we built a third barrack, 12 m long and 8 m wide. This barrack was divided into three chambers

by a wooden wall, so that each chamber was 4 m wide and 8 m long. It was 2 m high. The inside walls of this barrack were of double boards with a vacant space between them filled with sand. The walls were covered with pasteboard. In addition, the floor and walls (to a height of 1.10 m) were covered with sheets of zinc. From the second to the third barrack led a closed passageway, 2 m wide, 2 m high, and 10 m long. This passageway led to a corridor in the third barrack where the doors to the three chambers were located. Each chamber of this barrack had on its northern side a double door 1.80 m high and 1.10 m wide. These doors, like those in the corridor, were sealed with rubber gaskets round the edges. All the doors in this barrack could only be opened from the outside. These doors were built with strong planks 7.5 centimeters thick, and were secured from the outside with a wooden locking bar held by two iron hooks on either side. In each of the three chambers of this barrack a water pipe was installed 0.10 m above the floor. In addition, in the corner of the western wall of each chamber, was a water pipe 1 m above the ground with an open joint, turned toward the centre of the room. These pipes with the joint were connected through the wall to a pipe that ran under the floor. In each of the three chambers of this barrack a stove weighing 250 kg was installed. It was expected that the pipe joint would later be connected to the stove. The stove was 1.10 m high, 0.55 m wide and 0.55 m long."

The stoves described were used to heat the shed's rooms, thus allowing the bottled gas and *Zyklon B* used in the early stage of the camp's killing activities to work more efficiently in cold weather. It was in this manner that the camp operated in the early weeks, but not without some "difficulties": The gas chambers were in fact, nothing more than a wooden barrack adapted and constructed to give the impression of a bathing facility. To enhance this deception, the false showerheads that an SS man involved in the camp's construction, Erich Fuchs, had been unable to fit earlier, were now installed and signs indicating a bathhouse displayed. Despite all of their efforts, the construction team was unable to make the building airtight. According to Werner Dubois, at each gassing operation in the wooden barrack, sand had to be piled against the outer door to rectify this problem. After the gassing, the sand had to be removed to allow access to the corpses. It became apparent that major alterations were necessary, particularly since the gas chambers were proving inadequate in size.

Christian Wirth, commander of the camp and its most dominant figure, ruled Belzec by fear and terror. He was known by his fellow SS members as "Savage Christian". The Ukrainians nicknamed him "*Stuka*". Gottfried Schwarz acted as deputy commander, with Johann Niemann in charge of Camp II. Niemann was soon transferred to Sobibor, where he was killed during the uprising there. Josef Oberhauser, Wirth's right hand man, deputized in Wirth's absence. Together, they selected *Trawniki* men for service in Belzec.

Lorenz Hackenholt was in charge of the gassing engines, with two Ukrainians subordinated to him. Schwarz and Niemann supervised the gas chambers during the first phase, and Dubois or Karl Schluch in the second phase. Heinrich Unverhau oversaw the sorting depot in the old locomotive building from July 1942. In phase I, the same role had been performed by Rudolf Kamm. Possessions were sorted and sent onward to Odilo Globocnik's warehouses in Lublin. The sorting depot was located outside the camp in the locomotive area, close to the Belzec station.

Shortly before Christmas 1941, Wirth, an *SS-Obersturmführer* of the *Stuttgarter Kriminalpolizei*, arrived in Belzec along with a number of SS men. On arrival they were met by Oberhauser and Schwarz, who had been involved in the construction of the camp from an early period. Throughout the latter part of February and early March 1942, Wirth and Dr Helmuth Kallmayer, a chemist who worked for the euthanasia program T4 in Berlin, carried out several tests on the toxicity of the exhaust gas produced by a Russian tank engine. In addition, during this period another series of experiments were carried out in Belzec, supervised by Wirth and Hackenholt, assisted by Siegfried Graetschus. They jointly converted a Post Office delivery van into a mobile gas chamber.

Franz Suchomel, who served in Treblinka, described Belzec as a laboratory, and that would appear to have been the case. It was here that the system of mass murder was conceived and refined. Wirth carried out experiments to determine the most efficient method of handling the transports of Jews, from the time of their arrival until the time of their murder and burial. He developed basic concepts for the process of extermination and for the camp structure. The aim was to give the victims the impression that they had arrived at a transit camp from where they would be sent onward to a labor camp. The deportees were to believe this until they were enclosed within the gas chambers. In addition, everything was to be carried out with the utmost speed. The victims had to run, having no time to look around, to reflect on or to comprehend what was happening to them.

According to Wirth's annihilation scheme, the Jews themselves would carry out all physical work involved in the liquidation of each transport. In the first phase the Jewish work brigade consisted of 100-150 men.

In the second phase, a total of 500 prisoners in Camps I and II were utilized. It was the task of these work brigades to remove the corpses from the gas chambers and bury them. They also collected and sorted clothing, suitcases and other goods left behind by the victims. During the first phase, Jewish workers were executed after a few days,

although after July 1942, Wirth organized permanent work brigades in which each member knew his function. This was initiated in order to ensure that the entire process could function without disruption.

The SS garrison was located in two stone houses across from Belzec station, on Tomaszowska Street. In the house nearest the camp, Wirth had his living quarters, and the Commandant's office, the *Kommandantur*. The second house was used solely as housing for the SS, with a small 10-12 x 6 m stable at the rear. The complex was surrounded by a wooden fence and barbed wire, with the exception of the roadside area, which was manned around the clock by sentries. Adjacent to Wirth's quarters there was a one-storey wooden cottage named "The Pavillion", used for the camp's general administration. It also served as accommodation for Gottlieb Hering and Erwin Fichtner.

A barrack was constructed to the left of the *Kommandantur* and at right angles to the main road to accommodate the additional T4 personnel who arrived in July 1942. All of the SS men were given assignments in the camp administration and were in charge of specific activities, some having several duties. From time to time there were changes in these assignments. Close to the expected time of arrival of a transport, the SS men were allocated their respective duties in the handling of the liquidation of the deportees, from disembarkation to extermination. These duties included the shooting those unable to be taken to the gas chambers.

The *Trawniki* men were under the overall command of Schwarz for their orders and for disciplinary purposes. In the initial phase there were about 60-70 of these auxiliaries. This number was later increased to 120 men in two companies organized into four platoons, three on duty and one off duty (standby). The training instructors for these men were Kurt Franz, Dubois, Reinhold Feix and Fritz Jirmann. The platoon and squad commanders were mainly Ukrainian *Volksdeutsche* and, like the other members of this unit, had formerly been soldiers in the Soviet army. They had the titles *Hauptzugwachmann* (Senior Platoon Leader) and *Zugwachmann* (Platoon Member). The Ukrainians manned the guard positions in the camp: at the entrance, in the watchtowers, and on certain patrols. Some of them assisted in operating the gas chambers. Before the arrival of a transport, the Ukrainians took up guard positions around the railway ramp, the undressing barracks and along the "Tube". During the experimental killings and the initial transports, they were also given the task of removing the bodies from the gassing shed and burying them.

Towards the middle of March 1942, Belzec death camp was ready to receive the first transports (Phase I). On the evening of 16 March 1942, mass round-ups of Jews in the



Lublin Ghetto commenced. The commanding officer for the first resettlement transport to Belzec was Hermann Worthoff.

SS and *Trawniki*männer seized 1,400 Jews from the ghetto. They were kept overnight in one of the large synagogues therein. The following morning they were marched to the Lublin slaughter yard, near to the railway station on the outskirts of the city, and about 3 km from the ghetto, where they were loaded onto 19 wagons. On the morning of the 17 March 1942, the transport left for Belzec. There were no survivors. By the end of March 1942, over 20,000 Jews from the Lublin Ghetto had been interred in the pits at Belzec. A further 10,000 Jews from Lublin were transported to the death camp in April 1942. Transports to Belzec arrived in two directions: from the Lublin District and from eastern Galicia, with deportations from the Lviv Ghetto in the period March to August 1942. The first transport of Jews from Zolkiew (Lviv district), a town 50 km southeast of Belzec, arrived on 25 or 26 March 1942. Within a period of three weeks after the arrival of this transport, almost 30,000 Jews had been deported to Belzec from Galicia. Among them were 15,000 Jews from the city of Lviv, deported during the so-called "March Action", 5,000 from Stanislawow, 5,000 from the Kolomyja Ghetto, and others from Drogobych and Rawa Ruska.

Transports arriving at Belzec station marshalling yard were held on spur lines in strict order of entry. In rotation, the wagons were uncoupled in blocks of 20 and shunted into the camp. Deportations arriving late in the evening were held overnight. The driver of the train shunting wagons into the camp was Rudolf Göckel (the German stationmaster of Belzec), who was described by Polish Railway workers as being both cruel and sadistic.

The first contact the deported Jews had with the SS occurred after they were offloaded at the reception yard. Bemused and frightened, anyone showing anguish or defiance was removed by the guards to the execution pit in Camp II, where the Jews were shot in the back of the neck with a small caliber pistol. The SS attempted to lull the deportees with calming words, Wirth or Jirmann welcomed incoming transports through a loud-speaker, saying: "This is Belzec. Your stay is temporary - you will move onto work camps where your skills are needed. There is work for everyone. Even you housewives are needed to feed your families and to keep the houses clean. First I must have your co-operation so that we can get you on your way quickly". There was often a ripple of applause and shouts of "Thank you Mr. Commander". Then Wirth mentioned the crucial part of the deception: "We must have order and cleanliness. Before we feed you, you must all have a bath and have your clothes disinfected. It is necessary for women to have their hair cut". Wirth then passed on the gassing process to the duty NCO's. Men were requested to remove their shoes and tie them together with pieces of string handed out by Jewish workers. The men, now separated, were marched off towards the

"Sluice" in blocks of 750, five abreast. Supervised by the SS, at various points they handed over clothing, personal property and money, until they stood completely naked at the entrance to the "Tube". In a well-rehearsed operation, the Ukrainians, armed with whips and bayonets, prodded and forced the men into the chambers and closed the doors. With a signal from the escorting *Scharführer* the gassing engine was started. After approximately 20 minutes, inspection through the peephole in the chamber door confirmed that the engine could be turned off. The SS had completed their part of the operation. Now the Jewish *Sonderkommando*, led by *Zugführer* Moniek, took over and removed the bodies at the rear of the gas chambers. The doors were opened and the corpses were thrown out. Straps were fastened to the bodies in order to drag them to the trolleys in which they were to be ferried to the mass graves. Each corpse was searched for valuables and any gold teeth removed before the bodies were lowered into the pits. Another commando cleaned the gas chambers, whilst still others raked the sandy pathways to the building.

The women, having had their hair cut, together with the children, all awaiting their "bath", feared the worst. By now in they were in the "Sluice" and their fate was sealed. If weeping and cursing took place, the Ukrainians stepped in to brutally chase the victims into the gas chambers. Once the Jews had been off-loaded from the wagons and were on their way to Camp II, those found dead on arrival at the camp from incoming transports were piled to one side. Sick, elderly, infirm or "troublesome" Jews were taken to the execution pit in Camp II and shot. All of these ghastly scenes were accompanied by the camp orchestra. Favorite songs of the SS were *Drei Lilien*, and a song to the melody of "Highlander Do You Have No regrets".

Chaim Hirszman remembered: "A transport of children up to three years of age arrived. The workers were told to dig a big hole into which the children were thrown and buried alive. I cannot forget how the earth rose, until the children suffocated."

In April 1942 Franz Stangl visited Belzec for a briefing by Wirth concerning Stangl's duties as commandant at the soon to be opened Sobibor death camp. Wirth was not in his quarters, but at the mass graves. Stangl was horrified by the sight of the enormous pits, filled with thousands of bodies, recalling: "I can't describe to you what it was like. I went there by car. As one arrived, one first reached Belzec railway station, on the left side of the road. The camp was on the same side, but up a hill. The *Kommandatur* was 200 meters away, on the other side of the road. It was a one-story building. The smell...oh God, the smell... It was everywhere. Wirth wasn't in his office. I remember they took me to him... He was standing on a hill, next to the pits...the pits...full...they were full. I can't tell you; not hundreds, thousands, thousands of corpses...oh God. That's where Wirth told me - he said that was what Sobibor was for. And that he was

putting me officially in charge... ..Wirth wasn't in his office; they said he was up in the camp. I asked whether I should go up there and they said, 'I wouldn't if I was you - he's mad with fury. It isn't healthy to go near him.' I asked what the matter was. The man I was talking to said that one of the pits had overflowed. They had put too many corpses in it and putrefaction has progressed too fast, so that the liquid underneath had pushed the bodies on top up and over and the corpses had rolled down the hill. I saw some of them - oh God, it was awful. A bit later Wirth came down. And that's when he told me..." (Source: Sereny, Gitta. *Into That Darkness - From Mercy Killing to Mass Murder*, Pimlico, London, 1995.)

In about mid-April 1942, Wirth temporarily closed the camp and left for Berlin, taking with him his deputy Schwarz, and his gassing expert Hackenholt. Before leaving Belzec, the entire Jewish workforce was shot. Wirth visited Berlin in order to receive orders for the expansion of the camp and for the construction of larger gas chambers for intended future transports. When he returned to Belzec the reconstruction of the death camp took on a new sense of urgency. Phase II began to take shape.

In the last week of May 1942 three small transports arrived at Belzec; on 22 May 1,000 Jews from Tyszowce, on 23 May 1,000 Jews from Komarow and on 27 May 500 Jews from Laszczow. In June 1942 new transports from the Krakow District arrived at the camp. Three trains with 5,000 Jews from the Krakow Ghetto arrived between 3 and 6 June. From 11 to 19 June 1942 an additional 1,600 Jews were transported from the Krakow District.

Because of the increasing number of transports, the three existing wooden gas chambers were totally inadequate to deal with the number of potential victims. New chambers with larger capacities were necessary. The old wooden gassing hut was dismantled, and in a central location a larger, more solid structure was erected. The second gas chambers were located behind a copse of trees. Due to Belzec's high elevation, this copse shielded the gas chamber building from observers outside the camp area. The "Sluice" ran through this copse. A 2 m wide open air corridor enclosed within 3 m high camouflaged fences; it led from the undressing barracks to the door of the second gassing building. The new building was 24 m long and 10 m wide. It had six gas chambers, each of them 4 x 8 m (although some sources state 4 x 5 m). Toward the middle of July 1942 the new chambers were operational. According to Rudolf Reder, one of the few Jewish inmates to survive the camp, the new building was low, long and wide. It was constructed from grey concrete, and had a flat roof covered with pap (tar-paper). A net, covered with green branches, was strung above it. Three steps 1 m wide and without railings led into the building. In front of the building was a large flowerpot filled with colorful flowers (geraniums). There was also a clearly written sign reading:

*Bade- und Inhalationsräume* (Bath and Inhalation Rooms), as well as a sign that read "*Stiftung Hackenholt*" ("Hackenholt Foundation") named after the SS-NCO who designed the gas chamber. The steps led to a dark, long and empty corridor, 1.5 m wide. On the right and left of the corridor were the 1 m wide wooden doors to the gas chambers. The corridor and the chambers were lower than ordinary rooms, no higher than 2 m. The wall opposite to the entry door of each chamber included another 2 m wide removable door, through which the gassed bodies were removed. The chambers were 1.5 m above ground level, with false showerheads in the ceiling. A metal "Magen David" (Star of David) was placed over the entrance door. Outside the building was a shed measuring 2 x 2 m, where the gassing engine was installed. During the second phase, the chambers were so full that it was found necessary to throw water over the bodies to facilitate their disentanglement.

Wirth was appointed Inspector of the *Aktion Reinhard* death camps at the end of August 1942. He was replaced as camp commander of Belzec by Hering, who was an old acquaintance of Wirth, and had served with him in the Stuttgart Criminal Police. Hering was thought by the Jews to be more "humane" than Wirth.

The peak period of "resettlement" was from July-October 1942. Three to four transports per day arrived at Belzec, where conditions were gruesome. Piles of flea-bitten, evil smelling, putrefying bodies were simply dumped on the ramps, awaiting removal by the Jewish work brigade. The next batch of deportees, which inevitably contained some who were dead on arrival merely added to the mass of corpses on the ramps. Robert Jühns was ordered by Hering to take those too sick or too weak to be gassed to Camp II "for a pill" (a euphemism for a shot to the back of the neck).

Despite the German attempt to maintain secrecy, two reports from the Polish underground organization concerning Belzec indicate that a good deal was known about the nature of the camp's activities. One report describes an act of resistance in the camp, when members of the *Sonderkommando* attacked the Ukrainian guards in June 1942. One other incident worthy of note took place in March 1943: Heinrich Gley killed a fellow SS man. At a bunker in a copse near the barracks, two Ukrainians had been imprisoned for stealing valuables. In the darkness and confusion Gley had shot Jirmann, mistaking him for one of the Ukrainians. Wirth, Hering and Oberhauser conducted a thorough investigation. Jirmann was buried in the German Military cemetery at Tomaszow Lubelski.

According to Reder, Heinrich Himmler visited Belzec in October 1942, accompanied by Fritz Katzmann, the *HSSPF* of Galicia.

It was during the time of the Kolomyja transport that Kurt Gerstein and Wilhelm

Pfannenstiel arrived in Belzec. Both from the SS Technical Disinfecting Services, they were ordered to test the efficacy of *Zyklon B* for the delousing of lice infected clothing. Possible improvements in the efficiency of the gas chambers were also under consideration. Gerstein committed suicide in a French prison, but provided a very detailed description of what he witnessed on his visit to Belzec:

"The Death Brigade's main task was digging graves, working in shifts to open the ground. So organized was the brigade that they always worked with one grave in hand - just for emergencies. The Death Brigade of some 500 Jews worked non-stop to clear the corpses. When an exceptionally large transport of 51 wagons arrived from Kolomyja in September 1942, 2,000 bodies were found dead on arrival. 100 additional naked Jews were taken off the next incoming transport to assist. Once this work was completed and the emergency over, the *Volksdeutsche* Heinz Schmidt marched the 100 Jews to an open grave and shot them. When he ran out of ammunition, he killed the remainder with a pickaxe handle. Schmidt was one of the most sadistic of the camp's guards, as the above demonstrates."

The Germans realized that they were losing the war, and Himmler ordered that all traces of mass killings must be obliterated throughout the occupied areas. He directed Paul Blobel to form a special command for this, named "*Sonderkommando 1005*". The final resettlement transports to Belzec arrived on 11 December 1942. This triggered the acceleration of corpse burning, which was carried out by the Jewish workers and staff rather than by *Sonderkommando 1005*, who were denied access to the *Aktion Reinhard* camps.

Hering delegated Gley and Friedrich Tauscher to begin this work, assisted by Hackenholt, who had at his disposal a mechanical digging machine for excavating the corpses. Jewish workers of the "Death Brigade" assembled pyres, burned the bodies and re-buried the remains in the pits. The grates (pyres) were built by arranging standard gauge railway line sections on top of large concrete plinths. Narrow gauge line sections were then placed crossways on top of the structure to form a close meshed solid grate. Three to four pyres (Belzec villagers state there were 5) were constructed from early November 1942 onwards and were in continual use until March 1943. The corpses were loaded onto the grates and soaked in heavy oil, then set alight. Between 434,000 and 500,000 corpses were cremated in this fashion at Belzec. For months the whole area lay under a heavy pall of black oily smoke. The local inhabitants scraped human fat from their windows. Attempts to destroy all evidence were assisted by the use of a bone-crushing machine (from the Janowska Labour Camp), operated by a certain "Szpilke".

The decommissioning of Belzec commenced in Spring 1943. The elaborate system of fences and barriers, the barracks and gas chambers were all dismantled and items of use were taken to the KZ Majdanek. The entire area was then landscaped with firs and wild lupines. Wirth's house and the neighbouring SS building, which had been the property of the Polish Railway before the war, were not demolished.

The camp leadership decided to transport the remaining 300 *Sonderkommando* Jews to Sobibor. Hering told the Jewish Kapos, that they were being taken to Lublin. Dining tables and bread for three days, together with canned food and vodka were placed in the wagons. Leon Feldhendler, a Jewish prisoner at Sobibor, recorded: "On 30 June 1943 a transport of the last Jews from Belzec arrived under the supervision of *SS-Unterscharführer* Paul Groth, to be liquidated. Whilst being unloaded, the Jewish prisoners began to run in all directions. They were shot at random throughout the camp."

With the exhumations and burning activities nearly completed, Hering left the camp, placing Tauscher in charge of the final liquidation. When that was completed, the Belzec SS garrison was dispersed to other camps. The local population descended on the camp, looking for gold and other valuables. Whilst doing this they unearthed parts of decomposed bodies.

The scavenging of the death camp site was discovered by Dubois, who had been sent back from Sobibor by Wirth a few days after the SS had left. Dubois reported his findings to Wirth, who discussed the matter with Globocnik. They decided to plant trees and construct a farm for a permanent occupation by a Ukrainian family in order to guard the area from scavengers.

In summer 1943, two small commands of SS men and Ukrainians arrived to implement this work. One command came from Treblinka, the other from Sobibor. The Treblinka group was led by Karl Schiffner, the Sobibor contingent by Unverhau. A large Jewish house from the other end of Belzec village was demolished and then reconstructed as a farm for the Ukrainian custodian to inhabit.

In summer 1944 the Belzec region was occupied by the Red Army. After the liberation, local villagers demolished the farm.

About 50 Jews escaped from Belzec. Of those who did escape, 7 remained alive at the war's end. An unknown number of deportees were also able to escape from the death trains by jumping out of cattle wagons. Only Rudolf Reder, who escaped from Belzec in November 1942, was able to provide eyewitness testimony concerning the camp's

activities. The most recent research indicates a total of 434,508 victims for Belzec, although it is unclear whether this figure includes those killed during round-ups and in transit. Earlier estimates had placed the number of victims at a minimum of between 500-600,000. As with other extermination camps, it is unlikely that a precise figure for the number of victims will ever be known.

Sources:

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Available at <http://www.deathcamps.org/belzec/belzec.html> and accessed 30 December 2009.

## ***Belzec Timeline***

A comprehensive timeline of the events surrounding the Belzec camp system is available from Google and is comprised of results from multiple search engines, listed in chronological order.

Available at

[http://www.google.com/search?q=Belzec+timeline&hl=en&rls=com.microsoft:\\*:IE-SearchBox&tbs=tl:1&tbo=u&ei=rCM-S\\_LjEMGinQfrpuTFBQ&sa=X&oi=timeline\\_result&ct=title&resnum=11&ved=0CCMQ5wlwCg](http://www.google.com/search?q=Belzec+timeline&hl=en&rls=com.microsoft:*:IE-SearchBox&tbs=tl:1&tbo=u&ei=rCM-S_LjEMGinQfrpuTFBQ&sa=X&oi=timeline_result&ct=title&resnum=11&ved=0CCMQ5wlwCg) and accessed 1 January 2010.

# **Suggested Activities**

## **Viewing the film Belzec**

### **Pre-Viewing Activities:**

There are two constant visual themes in the film – views of the perimeter of the camp area as it looks in the present are often used as segues between scenes, with various vantage points of that land and opinions from people who lived around it in the war years. The other visual theme is footage of trains, running throughout the day along the line that comes through the village of Belzec.

[NSS-WH.5-12.8](#) ERA 8: A HALF-CENTURY OF CRISIS AND ACHIEVEMENT, 1900-1945

[NSS-WH.5-12.9](#) ERA 9: THE 20TH CENTURY SINCE 1945: PROMISES AND PARADOXES

1. To consider: Around the perimeter of the concentration camp at Auschwitz I there are major roads with businesses, restaurants, and even hotels. Around the perimeter of the killing center/concentration camp at Auschwitz II-Birkenau (which is much more rural) there are 2-lane roads. What would go through your mind each day as you made your way to your various personal destinations (work, family, the grocery store) if this was part of your commute? Is it possible that we become desensitized to historical events, no matter how heinous the crimes might have been?
2. In the early parts of the film, a group of four teenagers are interviewed within the perimeter of the former camp site. They have been riding their bikes over the sand dunes and along the roads in the camp site. When asked why they come there to ride, they reply that they like it because it is quiet. Have you ever ridden your bike through a cemetery? If so, did you feel strange about doing so – was it “creepy”? Given that these boys have been born and raised in the village of Belzec, what do you suppose they might think about where they ride?
3. It can probably be safely assumed that most people live somewhere near a railroad track. Think about this: How many people know about a train? That is, for that train to start at one point, travel, and end at another point, how many people are involved *in any way* with that train?

### **Viewing Activities:**

[NSS-C.9-12.5](#) ROLES OF THE CITIZEN



**NSS-WH.5-12.8 ERA 8: A HALF-CENTURY OF CRISIS AND ACHIEVEMENT, 1900-1945**

1. Early in the film, the first interview conducted is with a man who says he was on a Polish work gang that built the camp. After some questioning, he moves over to the side of the road near the filming, and touches a stick to the road shoulder and draws a diagram of the 2-building killing operation. The interview ends shortly after... when it's clear that the conversation is over, the man discreetly scratches out his drawing. Why do you think he did that?

**NSS-C.9-12.5 ROLES OF THE CITIZEN**

**NSS-WH.5-12.8 ERA 8: A HALF-CENTURY OF CRISIS AND ACHIEVEMENT, 1900-1945**

2. A comment is made that local mills, normally used for processing grain, were used to sift through human remains. The goal was to find among the ashes gold or other valuables. It's stated that the victims often hid their valuables wherever they could, because they thought they would live. Can you, in one sentence, encapsulate this concept of greed, evil, demonic devotion to duty, and desecration of the dead?

**NSS-C.9-12.5 ROLES OF THE CITIZEN**

**NSS-WH.5-12.8 ERA 8: A HALF-CENTURY OF CRISIS AND ACHIEVEMENT, 1900-1945**

**NSS-WH.5-12.9 ERA 9: THE 20TH CENTURY SINCE 1945: PROMISES AND PARADOXES**

3. In Chapter Four, there is an interview with an elderly couple and the couple's grandson. The woman makes two interesting comments:
  - a. She says that it wasn't only Germans killing Poles, it was Poles killing Poles as well. But she makes no specific reference to Jews. Do you think she meant "Jews" when she said "Poles", or was she somehow diminishing or even denying the Jewish catastrophe at Belzec?
  - b. She concludes by questioning the building of a memorial at the Belzec camp site. She asks what the point is, since the Nazis had laid it bare all those years ago. From this comment and the previous one, do you feel that this woman is antisemitic, or perhaps just somehow wishes that period in the village's history to go away?

**NSS-C.9-12.5 ROLES OF THE CITIZEN**

**NSS-WH.5-12.8 ERA 8: A HALF-CENTURY OF CRISIS AND ACHIEVEMENT, 1900-1945**

4. At the end of Chapter Four/beginning of Chapter Five, an elderly couple is interviewed about what they saw occurring in the camp. They said they used to

scale a hill to a vantage point where they could see within the camp walls and witness the burning of the bodies. Earlier in Chapter Four, a grandfather states that he used to go to the station each day to watch the transports roll in. The wife states in Chapter Five that there really was no choice in all of this – what were they to do, move the entire village of Belzec away from the killing center?

- a. Discuss – There’s an old adage that “if you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem”. Does that apply here?
- b. From these people’s mannerisms and tones of voice, how do you perceive their attitudes toward their circumstances back in the war and how they react to it today?

**NSS-WH.5-12.8 ERA 8: A HALF-CENTURY OF CRISIS AND ACHIEVEMENT, 1900-1945**

5. In Chapters Five and Eight, there is written testimony from the only two men who survived the Belzec killing center, Rudolf Reder and Chaim Hirszman. Both men were sonderkommando, working in the gas chambers and dealing with the dead either in the mass graves or later pyres. Compare and contrast their reports.
  - a. Concerning the issues that are not reported the same, what do you think of that?
  - b. Is it possible that two men could have seen these events differently? Is it possible that their experiences could have been different altogether? Or, is this a problem for historians in reconciling this as history?

**NSS-WH.5-12.8 ERA 8: A HALF-CENTURY OF CRISIS AND ACHIEVEMENT, 1900-1945**

6. Braha Rauffmann is introduced in Chapter 6 and her story serves to weave together other anecdotes through Chapter 10. Record key events as she relates her experience as a hidden child. Is she a survivor of Belzec?
  - a. Can you illustrate what you think her experiences looked like?
  - b. Can you write a poem from Braha’s perspective describing some aspect of her confinement?
  - c. If Braha had been able to write a letter to Julia, what do you think she would have said/asked/requested?

**NSS-C.9-12.5 ROLES OF THE CITIZEN**

7. In Chapter 8 a man who as a youth worked for the Belzec stationmaster, Forsztand Goekel, tells what a wonderful man Goekel was. What are the reasons given for his seeming adoration?
  - a. What types of jobs did Goekel perform at the station?

- b. Do you think most people would agree with the initial assessment of Goekel's personality/manner?

**NSS-C.9-12.5 ROLES OF THE CITIZEN**

**NSS-WH.5-12.8 ERA 8: A HALF-CENTURY OF CRISIS AND ACHIEVEMENT, 1900-1945**

8. In Chapter 10, a man details a story of his father. The father worked on the railroad near Belzec and was involved with the killing center through his job. After the war, the father taught himself to paint so that he could record what he'd seen. Do his paintings dovetail with the crude illustration scratched in the dirt on the side of a road, as seen in Chapter One?
  - a. As you've approached the end of the film, how do you feel about all of the local people who had knowledge of the goings-on at the killing center?
  - b. Do you feel it was right for them to have kept their knowledge to themselves all of these years?
  - c. Why do you suppose Belzec has often been called "the forgotten camp"?

**NSS-WH.5-12.8 ERA 8: A HALF-CENTURY OF CRISIS AND ACHIEVEMENT, 1900-1945**

**NSS-WH.5-12.9 ERA 9: THE 20TH CENTURY SINCE 1945: PROMISES AND PARADOXES**

9. After viewing and taking notes on the discussion that begins in Chapter Ten and concludes in Chapter Eleven between the architect, the contractor, and the Orthodox rabbi, research Jewish burial customs and mourning practices (a worthwhile resource is available at <http://www.jewish-funerals.org/mourning.htm> and was accessed 1 January 2010). It is apparent that the rabbi is very distraught over the situation that faces him. What are some of the concerns you researched that are just no longer possible within the site of the Belzec killing center?

**NSS-WH.5-12.8 ERA 8: A HALF-CENTURY OF CRISIS AND ACHIEVEMENT, 1900-1945**

**NSS-WH.5-12.9 ERA 9: THE 20TH CENTURY SINCE 1945: PROMISES AND PARADOXES**

10. There are conflicting reports throughout the film concerning the number of victims of the killing center. How do you feel about that, why do you think there are these conflicts, and do you think it will ever be resolved? Explain your feelings on this important issue.

## **Post-Viewing Activities:**

From the study guide author, Doug Wadley –

I had the opportunity to go to Poland for a week in October 2008 and attend a teacher training institute in Warsaw. While in attendance with ten teachers each from the United States, Poland, and Israel, I was struck by a statement made by the Poles many times during our time together: Poland was occupied, and the Poles were victims, too. Now I can't say that I ever discounted that fact, but I suppose it was never thrust to the forefront of my thoughts about the Holocaust until I heard it from people whose relatives had lived through it.

There was one other issue that came up that really gave me insight to the Polish perspective on World War II and the Holocaust: From 1945-~1990, Poland was part of the Soviet bloc and neither the war nor the Holocaust could be discussed. Then from ~1990-2001, Polish scholarship on the Holocaust blossomed and Poles were studied as victims and rescuers of Jews. In 2001, however, Jan Gross' book Neighbors was released and set Polish perception of these events on its collective ear. Gross detailed Polish collaboration with the Germans in the village of Jedwabne. On one day in 1941, roughly 1600 Poles had risen up and slain the approximately 1600 Jews of Jedwabne whom they'd lived alongside for centuries. From the release of Gross' book forward, Poles now had to consider themselves in a different light. At one point during the week we were with a Polish teacher who lives less than ten miles from Jedwabne. When asked if he takes his students there, he replied, "Oh, no, no. It's much too early to go to Jedwabne." This new knowledge of instances of collaboration has not been easy to take.

That being said, I want to emphasize two specific lines from the film *Belzec* for your consideration:

In Chapter Five, there is a scene filmed in a barber shop/beauty parlor where a woman talks about hatred and states that if the war happened again it would be today just like it was back then. A man in the barber chair states, when prompted to tell what he knows about life in Belzec during the war years, that his uncle was a survivor of the camp, but as someone who lived near it, not as a deportee.

In Chapter Seven, there is a story from a woman whose mother ran a bakery in a cellar adjacent to the camp. The bakery turned out 1000 loaves of bread per day. The woman said a neighbor drove a horse pulling a cart loaded with the baked goods, accompanied by the woman or her sister, to the camp – a soldier came out and took the horse and cart inside, then returned with it and signed an invoice with the date and the

number of loaves shipped. The woman said she never went into the camp. “You couldn’t complain – it was the Occupation!” “Orders were orders.” The Germans always paid for the bread. The woman stated that she was afraid of the Germans, but more afraid of the Russians (she didn’t elaborate further).

**NSS-WH.5-12.9 ERA 9: THE 20TH CENTURY SINCE 1945: PROMISES AND PARADOXES**

After having watched this film or portions of it, can you state what you think the point of the film is? Is it an apologetic effort toward Poles? Or, is it presented in such a way as to be damning of Polish involvement with or apathy toward their German occupiers? What in your mind was the filmmakers’ intent?

After this discussion, work with others in your class to discuss the following assignment:

**NSS-C.9-12.5 ROLES OF THE CITIZEN**

**NSS-WH.5-12.8 ERA 8: A HALF-CENTURY OF CRISIS AND ACHIEVEMENT, 1900-1945**

**NSS-WH.5-12.9 ERA 9: THE 20TH CENTURY SINCE 1945: PROMISES AND PARADOXES**

**ASSESSING AND DEFINING RESPONSIBILITY**

If you were a judge, how would you assess the “responsibility” of the people in the following case studies for what happened in the world between 1933 and 1945? Indicate one of the following:

- |                          |    |                                       |
|--------------------------|----|---------------------------------------|
| 1. Not responsible       |    | 1. Exonerated of all charges          |
| 2. Minimally responsible | OR | 2. Probation or fine                  |
| 3. Responsible           |    | 3. 5-10 year prison sentence          |
| 4. Very responsible      |    | 4. Lengthy- to life, or death penalty |
- 
1. One of Hitler’s direct subordinates, such as Heinrich Himmler or Joseph Goebbels
  2. A German who voluntarily joined Hitler’s special elite, the SS
  3. A German industrialist who financially supported Hitler’s rise to power and continued to support him verbally

4. A judge who carried out Hitler's decrees for sterilization of the "mentally incompetent" and internment of "traitors"
5. A doctor who participated in sterilization of Jews
6. A worker in a plant making Zyklon B gas
7. The Pope, who made no public statement against Nazi policy
8. An industrialist who made enormous profits by producing Zyklon B gas
9. A manufacturer who used concentration camp inmates as slave labor in his plants
10. An American industrialist who helped arm Hitler in the 1930s
11. A person who voluntarily joined the Nazis in the 1930s
12. A person who agreed to publicly take the Civil Servant Loyalty Oath (swearing eternal allegiance to Adolf Hitler in 1934)
13. A person who complied with the law excluding Jews from economic and social life
14. A person who regularly, enthusiastically attended Hitler rallies
15. A person who always respectfully gave the "*Heil Hitler*" salute
16. A person who served as a concentration camp guard
17. A person who turned the lever to allow the gas into the chambers
18. A driver of the trains that went to the concentration camps
19. A diplomat for the Nazi government
20. The American Government, which limited emigration of Jews to the U.S. in the 1930s
21. The "little guy" who claimed "he doesn't get involved in politics" and thus went about his business as quietly as he could in the Hitler regime
22. The soldier who carried out orders to roust Jews from their homes for "evacuation and resettlement"
23. The German couple who took up residence in a home evacuated by Jews

24. The non-Jews who took over a store just abandoned by Jews
25. The German who refused all pleas to participate in hiding and smuggling of Jews
26. The policeman who helped round up escaping Jews
27. A teacher who taught Nazi propaganda
28. Children who joined the Hitler Youth
29. Parents who sent or allowed their children to attend Hitler Youth meetings
30. The Protestant clergyman who gave to the Nazis lists of members of his congregation who were “non-Aryan.”

Adapted from Flaim, Richard F., and Edwin W. Reynolds Jr., eds., *The Holocaust and Genocide* (New York: Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, 1983).

Available at <http://www.ushmm.org/education/foreducators/workshop/pdf/assessing.pdf> and accessed 31 December 2009.

For additional study based on people who lived through the events of the Holocaust, it is recommended that interested parties read The Holocaust by Bullets by Father Patrick Desbois. Father Desbois details the villages in the Ukraine where the Einsatzgruppen carried out mass murders in the early years after the invasion of the Soviet Union. The Holocaust by Bullets reads very similarly to the presentation of the film *Belzec* – eyewitnesses are interviewed and allowed to tell their own stories of those fateful days in the early 1940's.

Father Desbois' research has been considered groundbreaking, as like *Belzec*, it details an aspect of the Holocaust formerly little known.