Auschwitz Album
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Hungarian Jews on the Judenrampe (Jewish ramp) after disembarking from the Holocaust trains. Photo from the Auschwitz Album (May 1944)

The Auschwitz Album is a unique photographic record of the Holocaust of the Second World War. A collection of photographs taken inside a Nazi German death camp, it is the only surviving pictorial evidence (with the exception of four surreptitious photographs taken by Sonderkommandos) of the extermination process from inside the Auschwitz-Birkenau Nazi concentration camp.

The identity of the photographer has never been determined. They may have been taken by either Ernst Hoffmann or Bernhard Walter, two SS men responsible for fingerprinting and taking photo IDs of those prisoners who were not selected for extermination.

The album has 56 pages and 193 photographs. Originally, it had more photos, but before being donated to Yad Vashem (the Holocaust museum in Israel), some of them were given to survivors who recognized relatives and friends.

The images follow the processing of newly arrived Hungarian Jews from Carpatho-Ruthenia in
the early summer of 1944. They document the disembarkation of the Jewish prisoners from the train boxcars, followed by the selection process, performed by doctors of the SS and wardens of the camp, which separated those who were considered fit for work from those who were to be sent to the gas chambers. The photographer followed groups of those selected for work, and those selected for death to a birch grove just outside the crematoria where they were made to wait before being killed. The photographer also documented the workings of an area called Canada, where the looted belongings of the prisoners were sorted before transport to Germany. The album's survival is remarkable, given the strenuous efforts made by the Nazis to keep the "Final Solution" a secret. Also remarkable is the story of its discovery. Lili Jacob (later Lili Jacob-Zelmanovic Meier) was selected for work at Auschwitz-Birkenau while the other members of her family were sent to the gas chambers. The Auschwitz camp was evacuated by the Nazis as the Soviet army approached. Jacob passed through various camps, finally arriving at the Dora concentration camp, where she was eventually liberated. Recovering from illness in a vacated barracks of the SS, Jacob found the album in a cupboard beside her bed. Inside, she found pictures of herself, her relatives, and others from her community. The coincidence was astounding, given that the Nordhausen-Dora camp was over 640 km (400 mi) away, and that over 1,100,000 people were killed at Auschwitz.

The album's existence had been known publicly since at least the 1960s, when it was used as evidence at the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials. Nazi-hunter Serge Klarsfeld visited Lili in 1980 and convinced her to donate the album to Yad Vashem. The album's contents were first published that year in the book The Auschwitz Album, edited by Klarsfeld.

Legacies – the catalogue of the Collections of the Auschwitz Memorial
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For the first time in its history the Auschwitz Memorial has published the catalogue of its Collections. The album presents in a very comprehensive manner the authentic items related to the history of the German Nazi concentration and extermination camp. These are both thousands of personal objects which belonged to the victims of Auschwitz as well as documents and things left behind by the SS men from the camp garrison.

The Auschwitz Legacies by the director of the Museum Dr. Piotr M.A. Cywiński and Magdalena Emilewicz-Pióro presents the objects and documents which are selected from a far larger whole. The aim is above all to reflect a cross section of the whole of the resources preserved to this day, as well as to show the complexity of the history of this largest of the German camps. In the introduction the authors wrote: “Each of them, even among those objects that appear on a mass scale, is the document of a highly individual, personal drama. Some of the items are signed; almost all bear marks of use. Each item taken along on the last journey seemed so valuable and essential in the everyday life of its owner that there was room for it even in the scant permitted baggage.

Among the collected items, however, the greatest numbers are everyday things that reached the camp in the suitcases and baskets of the Jewish transports—crockery, cutlery, brushes or combs, shoes, clothing, tallitot—and also glasses and human prostheses for the disabled. Aside from thousands of similar objects, unique items are also extant, like the only surviving tefillin, single instruments from the camp orchestra, or a doll made for a child in Birkenau. Similarly, the archives include vast fonds of documents, but also individual secret messages, or a few photographs taken illegally by prisoners from the Sonderkommando in 1944.

“Today, the movable vestiges of KL Auschwitz play several mutually complementary roles. They facilitate learning about the History of Auschwitz, they are the object of specialist research, they help to uphold memory, including at times the memory of very specific victims, and they also play an important, inestimable educational role. They fill in the emptiness of the post-camp space and architecture. They are a very important vector of our awareness today of the history of the Nazi German concentration and extermination camp, Auschwitz. As inanimate objects they keep silence, but as mute witnesses to the dead and the murdered, they scream the history of their mystery” – we read in the introduction.

Except for the objects related to the victims of the camp, in the catalogue one can see also objects the perpetrators left behind, such as helmets or guard boots. Among them are also instruments used by the SS garrison to torment prisoners and inflict punishment. Many objects demonstrate how punctiliously the camp bureaucracy was planned and organized. Many furnishings of the blocks and barracks where the prisoners lived have survived, such as bunks, wardrobes, tables, stools, and also striped uniforms, wooden shoes, and bowls. A large portion of these movable objects is visible within the framework of the main exhibition. Some of them, however, like the intact SS archives, are under protection and shown in the original to specialists and researchers only exceptionally. The same is true of objects that—above all in view of the accepted narrative or the conservation condition—have not found their place within the bounds of the existing exhibition.

“Thus arose the idea of the present publication. In its very intent it combines two levels. First, it is a particular kind of album supplementing the space of the Memorial, which is to say that its task is to join in the creation of memory itself. Second, it constitutes a certain “catalog” review of what can be found in the collections and archives of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.” – says the introduction

Publication is available in English in our online bookstore.

We dedicate this album to the memory of all the innocent people who perished in KL Auschwitz—Jews, Poles, Roma, prisoners of war from the Red Army, and other victims. We dedicate it as well to all the survivors who, overcoming their own pain and trauma, have provided our generations with a great warning about the nature of humankind.

We dedicate it also to the Righteous among the Nations of the World, the People of Good Will, and the persons who dedicated themselves as soon as the war was over to the memory of the victims of the Nazi German concentration and extermination camp, Auschwitz.