

EPISODE 3 · MICROSHORT STORIES

FOUR PHOTOGRAPHS

Inside Auschwitz, a prisoner hides a camera in a bucket of human ash, aims from the hip — he cannot look through the viewfinder or he dies — and takes the only photographs of the gas-chamber killing process ever made by the victims themselves.

QUICK REFERENCE



TIME

45 min core / 90 min with extensions

Recommended: 2 days. Day 1: Watch + Analyze. Day 2: Create + Reflect.



MATERIALS

Device to play video; printed copy of the September 4, 1944 Cyrankiewicz/Kłodziński note (Lesson Foundation).



CONTENT ADVISORY

Heaviest content in the series. Depicts the act of clandestine photography inside Auschwitz.

Killing process shown indirectly (smoke, indistinct shapes). See full Operational Content

Statement in Lesson Foundation before pressing play.

THEMES

Documentation

Resistance through Evidence

Gray Zone

Bearing Witness

Sonderkommando

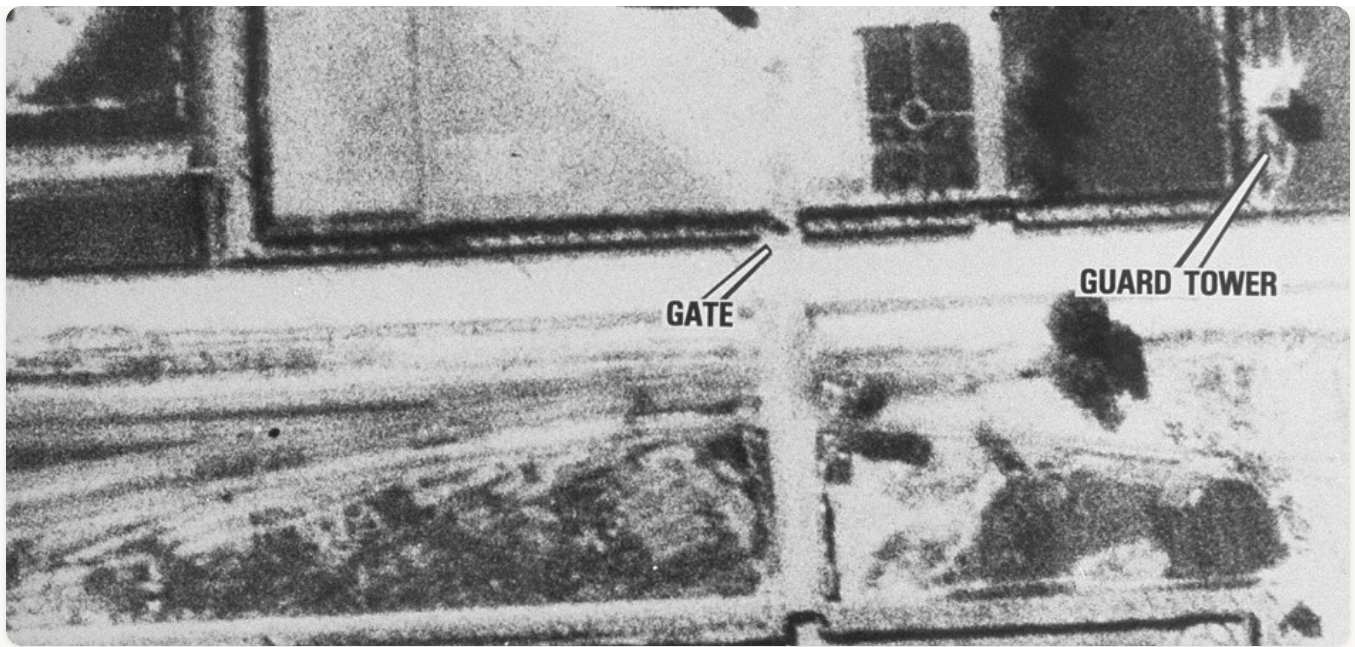
WHERE THIS FITS

Curriculum & Course Alignment

- **10th Grade Global Studies / Global History & Geography II (NY).** Unit on World War II, the Holocaust, and crimes against humanity. The four photographs sit naturally inside the NYS Regents framework on the Holocaust.
- **9–12 World History (most state frameworks).** Causes and consequences of WWII; documentation of atrocity; the relationship between evidence and historical memory.
- **IB History (DP), Paper 3 Topic 11.** Causes and effects of 20th-century wars — the Holocaust and the evidentiary record.
- **AP World History / AP European History.** Period 5/9 content on WWII and the Holocaust; document-based analysis with the September 4, 1944 note and the four photographs as primary sources.
- **NY State Holocaust Education Mandate** — and the equivalents in 25+ states with Holocaust and genocide education requirements (full list: Standards tab, Appendix I).
- **Cross-disciplinary uses.** ELA (rhetorical analysis of the September 4 note); Media Studies (the recursive structure — a film about the making of photographs); Philosophy / Ethics (the Lanzmann vs. Didi-Huberman debate, 11–12 only).

EPISODE SUMMARY

About This Film



Allied aerial reconnaissance photograph of Auschwitz-Birkenau, August 1944 — the same period as the Sonderkommando photographs. The smoke from the open-air burning pits behind Crematorium V is visible from 30,000 feet (South African Air Force, Sortie 60PR/694).

In the summer of 1944, after the mass deportation of more than 430,000 Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz between May and early July, the killing and corpse-disposal system at Birkenau was operating at catastrophic intensity. Crematorium furnaces could not keep pace; bodies were burned in open-air pits. Members of the *Sonderkommando* — Jewish prisoners forced by the SS, under threat of death, to work the gas chambers and crematoria — clandestinely photographed the process.

The photographer was Alberto Errera, a Greek-Jewish military officer known in the camp as “Alex” (prisoner number 182552). Using a camera hidden inside a bucket of human ash — with David Szmulewski, a member of the camp resistance organization, acting as lookout from the crematorium roof, and Alter Fajnzylberg among additional lookouts — Errera took four photographs from hip level at Crematorium V: two from inside a doorway showing corpses burning in open-air pits, one from outside showing women being driven toward the gas chamber, and one accidental exposure of trees and sky (the camera aimed too high, because Errera could not look through the viewfinder without being seen and killed).



The Birkenau crematoria area — the geography of the operation

The film was removed from the camera and, according to survivor testimony, hidden inside a toothpaste tube. Helena Datoń, a Polish civilian worker in the SS canteen, smuggled it out of the camp to the Polish resistance. Political prisoners Jozef Cyrankiewicz and Stanisław Kłodziński attached a note dated September 4, 1944, describing the images and asking for more film.

Errera was killed days later. On August 9, 1944, during a daytime ash-disposal work detail at the Vistula River, he stunned two Schutzpolizei guards with a shovel, threw their rifles into the river, and plunged in. He was caught two to three days later, tortured, and killed; his body was displayed at the Bld camp entrance as a deterrent. He was 31. He never knew whether the photographs reached the outside world. They did. Among the vast photographic record of the Holocaust — perpetrator photographs, aerial reconnaissance, liberation footage — these four are the only known photographs of the killing process taken by the victims themselves.

FOR EDUCATORS

Lesson Foundation

Three orienting framings (*Before You Begin*), then the planning anchors plus an Educator Note answering the most common question this episode prompts. Read these before opening the lesson; they shape every decision the four steps make. Grounded in the [USHMM Guidelines for Teaching About the Holocaust](#), Yad Vashem's ISHS principles, the SAMHSA trauma-informed framework, and Touro's film-based-Holocaust pedagogy guide.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

WHY THIS FORMAT

What this lesson offers that other resources do not

The **90-second compression** is an engagement scaffold, not a substitute for depth — it solves the attention-span barrier without sacrificing gravity, and turns the film itself into a hook that demands extension. The **tiered lesson plan** is where the depth lives: structured discussion, primary-source engagement, and grade-band-appropriate analytic moves that no 90-second film alone can deliver. The **one-person, one-act spine** — see below — gives students a named individual to stand inside, instead of macro-historical statistics. Together: a 90-second hook, a curated primary-source set, and a discussion architecture designed to engineer past surface-level engagement, in a format that fits a single class period or splits naturally across two. (*Full articulation: [About the Series — Why This Format.](#)*)

THE PEDAGOGICAL SPINE

One person, one act — active agency, not passive tragedy

The Microshort Stories series teaches Holocaust history through the lens of *one named person, one specific act*. The frame shifts deliberately away from the macro-statistical "six million were murdered" treatment that dominates much of Holocaust pedagogy — toward what individual people *chose* under impossible conditions, and what their choices cost. The aim is a mirror, not a monument: students reflect on their own moral compass and civic responsibility through the specificity of a person they have come to know in 90 seconds.

In this episode, the spine narrows to four named people — Alberto Errera, David Szmulewski, Alter Fajnzylberg, Helena Datoń — whose acts of bearing witness and smuggling reach us only because each of them refused, individually, to let the killing process go unrecorded. (*Full articulation: [About the Series — Pedagogical Spine.](#)*)

What the production technique actually is, and why

Animation is a pedagogical choice, not a shortcut. The Microshort Stories films use restrained, stylized 3D animation to create enough emotional distance for students to engage difficult history without being exposed to graphic archival imagery or perpetrator-framed footage. The goal is not to make the Holocaust feel easier, entertaining, or fictional; it is to make accurate, teacher-guided inquiry possible without sensationalizing suffering.

The films are **not AI-generated**. They are authored through a human 3D animation process: scenes are storyboarded, modeled, staged, lit, animated, reviewed, and revised against historical research and visual-reference materials. That human review is what lets the films show sequence, setting, movement, and moral pressure while deliberately withholding details that would turn victim suffering into spectacle.

In this episode specifically, animation allows the killing process to be depicted as smoke, indistinct shapes in burning pits, and figures at distance among birch trees — recognizable bodies and faces deliberately withheld. The real archival weight lives in the four photographs themselves, presented at the end of the film as the historical artifacts they are. (*Full articulation: [About the Series](#) — [About the Animation Pipeline](#).*)

DRIVING QUESTION

What is the difference between knowing and seeing — and what is owed to people who died to make the difference possible?

Other Holocaust evidence comes from perpetrators (their photographs, their records), Allied reconnaissance (aerial), or post-war liberation. These four photographs are different: they are the only known images of the killing process taken by the people inside it. The question this lesson sits with is what changes when evidence comes from inside the crime — and what we owe the people who died to put it there.

GRADES 9–10 — LESSON OBJECTIVES

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

1. **Analyze** at least three formal choices the film makes (what is shown, what is withheld, how the four photographs are positioned at the end) and explain what each choice does pedagogically.
2. **Distinguish** what the historical archive can verify (the four photographs, the Auschwitz Museum catalogue, Fajnzylberg's 1978 testimony, Szmulewski's 1987 testimony) from what rests on a single survivor's account.
3. **Defend**, in writing (MEAL paragraph, 150–200 words), a position on whether documentation is a form of resistance — using evidence from the film and at least one outside source.

Verbs are drawn from Bloom's Revised Taxonomy. Vague mental-state verbs (*understand, appreciate, become aware of, feel*) are deliberately avoided per the practitioner-guide standard.

FRAMEWORK GROUNDING

This lesson is grounded in the **USHMM Guidelines for Teaching About the Holocaust** (the discipline-specific spine: Jewish specificity preserved, victims named and individuated before harm, no role-play of victim or perpetrator identity, dignity of the victim treated as a discipline). Within that spine: **Understanding by Design** (Wiggins & McTighe) for backward-planning from the closing reflection, **constructivist scaffolding** for pre-screening framing, the **Five-Dimension Film Evaluation Framework** for analyzing the microshort itself, and **SAMHSA's six trauma-informed principles** for the affective check-in / opt-out / response-branching architecture (Facilitation tab). The Touro practitioner guide is the synthesis spine.

AUDIENCE POSITIONALITY

Build for a room that contains, even if you don't know it, at least one student with familial proximity to this history — family deported to Auschwitz, family from the Hungarian transports of summer 1944, family from the Greek-Sephardic deportation, or family lost anywhere in the extermination process. *This is the heaviest content in the series.* The opt-out language and check-in protocols (Facilitation tab) are designed to support that student without singling them out, and to give every student in the room a way through material that demands more than the four steps alone can carry.

OPERATIONAL CONTENT STATEMENT

What is depicted: A 90-second stylized animated reconstruction of the four photographs taken inside Auschwitz-Birkenau in the summer of 1944 by Sonderkommando prisoner Alberto Errera ("Alex"), with David Szmulewski as lookout and Alter Fajnzylberg among additional lookouts. The film also shows the smuggling chain (Helena Datoń, the Polish resistance) and Errera's subsequent escape attempt at the Vistula River.

How: Stylized 3D animation throughout. The killing process is depicted as: smoke, indistinct shapes in burning pits viewed through the doorway of Crematorium V, and figures at distance among birch trees. *No recognizable human bodies, no faces of victims, no explicit nudity.* The escape attempt is shown suggestively: a shovel attack, rifles thrown into water, a swim — the camera holds on the bank as Errera disappears. *No torture, no execution, no body shown.* The four actual photographs (catalogued 280, 281, 282, 283 by the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum) appear as the closing payoff, rising out of one second of pure black.

Most-intense moments & runtime placement: 0:35–0:45 (doorway POV through smoke); 0:50–0:58 (escape attempt at the Vistula); the closing second of darkness before the photographs emerge. The conceptual heaviness — that Sonderkommando were forced to participate in the killing process — runs throughout.

Opt-out language (read aloud at start of class): "The bathroom pass is by the door. The hallway is fine to walk. If you need to step out at any point, you can do that without explanation. None of this affects your grade."

Why didn't I learn about the Sonderkommando in school?



Construction of Crematorium IV at Birkenau, 1943 (built by Topf & Söhne to SS specifications). Each crematorium contained gas chambers, undressing rooms, and incineration furnaces — the apparatus the Sonderkommando were forced to operate. Most were murdered by the SS to remove witnesses.

This question reaches us regularly from educators, parents, and former students — many of whom received serious Holocaust education and still do not remember encountering this aspect of the history. The honest answer is that the field genuinely did not have the materials, the framework, or the comfort to teach this well until very recently. Five reasons, roughly in the order each barrier eased:

1. **The “gray zone” problem.** Primo Levi named it in *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986) — Jewish prisoners forced under threat of death to participate in the killing apparatus. This breaks the simple victim/perpetrator/bystander schema that prevailed in classrooms for decades. Educators didn't have a clean category for the Sonderkommando, so they were skipped rather than misframed. Levi's rehabilitation of these men as victims (not collaborators) came late and slowly.
2. **The source materials were not available to teachers in English until very recently.** The Sonderkommando-buried manuscripts (the “Scrolls of Auschwitz” — Gradowski, Langfus, Nadjari, Lewental) were not fully translated and published in English until the 1990s–2000s. Gideon Greif's *We Wept Without Tears* (the foundational testimonies of the surviving Sonderkommando) — Hebrew 1999, English 2005. Shlomo Venezia's

Inside the Gas Chambers — 2007 (English 2009). The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum was behind the Iron Curtain until 1989; Szmulewski's testimony (1987) and the cataloging of the four photographs as 280–283 only became globally accessible after that.

3. **Lanzmann's anti-representational position was field-dominant.** Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985) and his later writings argued strongly against depicting the killing process. He publicly objected to Georges Didi-Huberman's *Images in Spite of All* (2003). For two decades after *Shoah*, much of Holocaust pedagogy followed Lanzmann's prohibition by default — and the four photographs sat at the absolute heart of what he said should not be shown.
4. **The “triumph of the human spirit” frame had no place for them.** American Holocaust education in the 1980s–90s leaned hard on resilience, rescue, and survival. The Sonderkommando didn't fit any of those: most were murdered by the Nazis specifically because they were witnesses; they didn't resist in the sense traditional curricula taught (until the October 7, 1944 revolt); they're not survivors in the usual sense. So they were edited out of the standard arc.
5. **Teaching them puts the gas chamber at the center of the lesson.** Most curricula avoided this in favor of arrest, deportation, hiding, rescue, or liberation. The Sonderkommando are unavoidable evidence of the killing process itself. That is pedagogically heavier, and the trauma-informed scaffolding to handle it well only matured in the last 10–15 years (SAMHSA 2014, NCTSN, Carello & Butler).

This is part of why the lesson exists. The unfamiliarity is not your students' failing or yours; it is a story Holocaust pedagogy is finally able to teach. Naming this, briefly, with your students — “*you may not have learned this before; here is why*” — turns the unfamiliarity into a learning moment rather than a barrier.

September 4, 1944

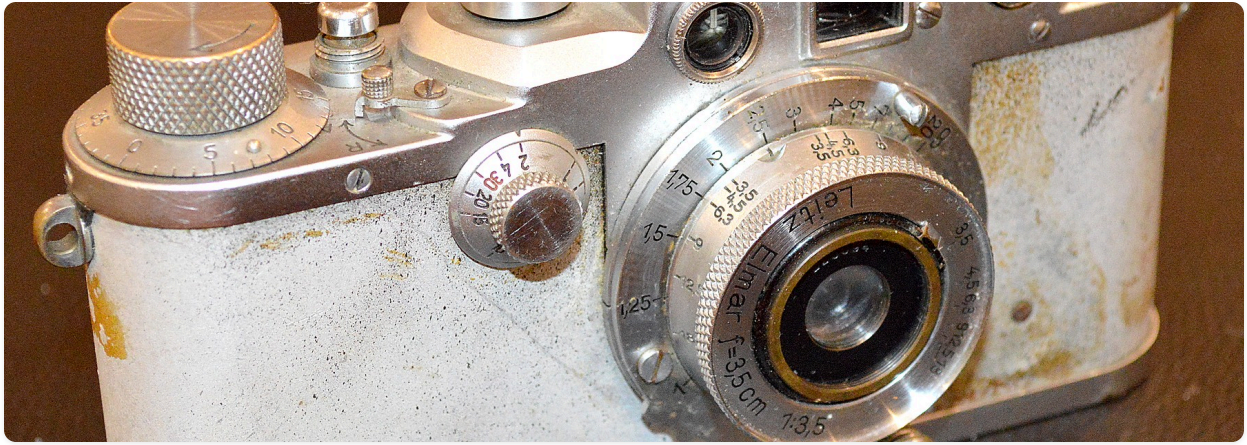
“Urgent. Send two metal rolls of film for 6×9 [camera] as fast as possible. Have possibility of taking photos. Sending you photos from Birkenau — from the gas chambers. The following shows one of the places where they burn bodies in the open air, when the crematoria can’t manage... The photo shows corpses being placed in the pits.”

— Jozef Cyrankiewicz and Stanisław Kłodziński, Polish political prisoners at Auschwitz, in the note attached to the smuggled photographs.

This is the only contemporaneous written description of the four photographs by people inside the camp. Treat it as the central primary source for this lesson; the microshort dramatizes the act, the note is the act’s own voice. (Cyrankiewicz survived the war and later became Prime Minister of Poland.)



A Chlorodont toothpaste tube — the everyday 1940s European object inside which the film was rolled and smuggled past camp checkpoints.



*Leica IIIc 35mm rangefinder — per Fajnzylberg's 1978 testimony, the camera "looked like a German Leica."
Hidden inside a bucket of human ash; fired blind from the hip.*

FOR EDUCATORS

About This Lesson Plan

This lesson plan is designed around a single 90-second microshort film — a format that combines the emotional power of documentary storytelling with the time constraints of a real classroom. It follows a four-step structure: **Watch** (pre-viewing context and the film itself), **Analyze** (discussion and close reading), **Create** (structured creative response), and **Reflect** (personal connection and exit thinking). Each step is differentiated across two grade bands (9–10 and 11–12) so the same film can serve an entire upper-grade department. *Note: For this episode, given its subject matter, no 7–8 adaptation is publicly distributed.*

This is the heaviest content in the Microshort Stories series so far, and the lesson plan reflects that — with explicit pre-screening inoculation, scripted affective check-ins, branching protocols, and the Educator Note above explaining why this aspect of the Holocaust may be unfamiliar even to students with substantial prior Holocaust education. None of these are decoration. They are what makes the lesson teachable.

Watch

Use the pre-viewing activities below — differentiated by grade band — to build context, activate prior knowledge, and frame student thinking before the film begins. Then read the Pre-Screening Inoculation aloud, and show the 90-second microshort.

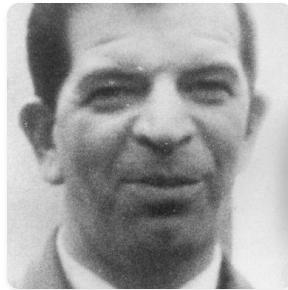
BEFORE WE BEGIN

Four people, named

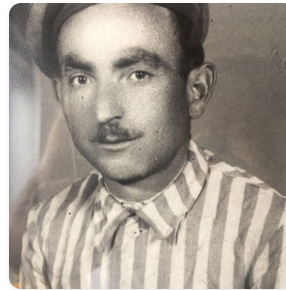
Before any image of the camp, four names. The lesson is built on these four people; each had pre-camp life and history; each took one specific irreplaceable risk.



Alberto Errera
Photographer
Prewar portrait, Jewish
Museum of Greece



David Szmulewski
Lookout, organizer



Alter Fajnzylberg
Lookout, surviving witness



Helena Datoń
Smuggler

- **Alberto Errera** (1913–1944), known in the camp as “Alex.” Greek-Jewish military officer from Thessaloniki, deported to Auschwitz in spring 1944, forced into the Sonderkommando at Crematorium V. Took the photographs.
- **David Szmulewski** (1912–1990). Polish-Jewish prisoner, member of the camp resistance organization (Kampfgruppe Auschwitz). Climbed to the crematorium roof to serve as lookout; organized the operation.
- **Alter Fajnzylberg** (also known as Stanisław Jankowski). Polish-Jewish Sonderkommando prisoner, additional lookout. One of fewer than 20 Sonderkommando members to survive. His 1978 written testimony is the primary source for identifying Errera and reconstructing the operation.
- **Helena Datoń** (born 1922). Polish Catholic civilian worker in the SS canteen at “Haus 7” near Auschwitz I, hired for her German-language skills. Walked the film, hidden in a toothpaste tube, past camp security to the Polish resistance.

BEFORE VIEWING

Based on the four people you have just read about, write down one or two questions you want answered. What do you want to know about this story? Hold onto your questions as you watch.

KEY INSTITUTIONAL TERMS — FOR THIS EPISODE

Institutions you will encounter in this lesson

Students may not have prior knowledge of these institutions. Brief definitions are provided here so that students can engage with the primary sources, secondary references, and credits in the rest of the lesson without unexplained acronyms. Spell out acronyms once aloud the first time they appear in discussion.

Yad Vashem

Israel's national Holocaust memorial and research institution (Jerusalem, established 1953). The field's primary repository of survivor testimony and the institutional voice cited throughout this lesson. yadvashem.org

USHMM (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum)

The U.S. national memorial and educational institution in Washington, D.C. (opened 1993). Maintains the Holocaust Encyclopedia and the Holocaust Survivors and Victims Database referenced in the Extensions and Materials sections. ushmm.org

Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum

Polish state museum and memorial on the site of the former camp (Oświęcim, Poland; established 1947). The official institutional holder of the four Sonderkommando photographs (catalogue numbers 280, 281, 282, 283) at the center of this lesson. auschwitz.org

USC Shoah Foundation

Survivor-testimony archive based at the University of Southern California (founded by Steven Spielberg in 1994 after *Schindler's List*). Houses the recorded testimonies of the surviving Sonderkommando members, including Alter Fajnzylberg. The **IWitness** platform is the foundation's classroom-facing teaching tool, with a "Teaching with Testimony" scaffold. sfi.usc.edu · iwitness.usc.edu

Touro practitioner guide

The curriculum-grade guide on teaching the Holocaust through film, published by the Holocaust Education Center at Touro College. The Five-Dimension Film Evaluation Framework, the audience-positionality protocols, and the trauma-informed scaffolding in this lesson plan are drawn from it.

SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration)

U.S. federal agency. The source of the six-principle trauma-informed framework (2014) cited in this lesson's affective check-in, opt-out, and Plan A / Plan B response-branching protocols.

Jewish Museum of Greece

Athens-based museum and archive of the Greek-Jewish (Sephardic) community. Holds the prewar portrait of Alberto Errera reproduced in this lesson.

*Full canonical glossary across the series, with all institutions referenced in any Microshort Stories episode:
[About the Series — Glossary of Institutions.](#)*

Historical Context

The *Sonderkommando* were Jewish prisoners selected by the SS to perform the most brutal forced labor in the camp system: they guided victims into the gas chambers, removed bodies afterward, extracted gold teeth, and transported remains to the furnaces or open-air pits. They were witnesses to the entire killing process — and precisely because they were witnesses, the SS killed them periodically and replaced them, so no one who knew too much would survive. The *Sonderkommando* lived with the knowledge that their own deaths were inevitable.

By the summer of 1944, the killing apparatus at Birkenau was overwhelmed by the Hungarian transports — over 430,000 Jews deported in fewer than eight weeks, the fastest mass murder in the history of the Holocaust. The crematoria could not keep pace; bodies burned in open pits. It was in this context — surrounded by ash, under constant guard, with no expectation of surviving — that members of the *Sonderkommando* decided to photograph what they were forced to witness.



Aerial reconnaissance photograph of Birkenau, December 1944. The geometry of the killing apparatus is visible from above.

Primo Levi, in *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986), called the position of the Sonderkommando the "gray zone" — not because their morality was gray, but because the conventional categories (victim / perpetrator / bystander) cannot describe people forced under threat of death to participate in their own community's extermination. The four photographs are evidence taken from inside that zone.

PREDICTION PROMPT

The episode is called *Four Photographs*. Why would prisoners risk their lives to take photographs from inside the camp? What did they hope would happen to those images? Write your prediction in 2–3 sentences before we watch.

The last 60 seconds before pressing play



POV through Errera's camera lens, as depicted in Four Photographs.

This is what your students are about to see — not the actual gas-chamber footage, but a stylized animation of the act of seeing. The killing process appears as smoke and indistinct shapes; recognizable bodies and faces are deliberately withheld. The room you're about to read the inoculation script to is the room that will sit with this image and the four real photographs that follow it.

Read the operational content statement (Lesson Foundation) and the opt-out language. Then say:

"Before I press play, I want to tell you what's in the next 90 seconds. The film is a stylized animated reconstruction of the four photographs taken inside Auschwitz-Birkenau by Sonderkommando prisoner Alberto Errera in the summer of 1944. The killing process is shown as smoke, indistinct shapes in burning pits, and figures at distance among trees. There are no recognizable bodies, no faces of victims, no explicit nudity. Errera's escape attempt at the river is shown as a shovel attack and a swim — the camera holds on the bank as he disappears. There's no torture, no execution, no body shown. The four actual photographs appear at the very end, rising out of one second of pure black. If at any point you need to step outside, you can do that without asking. You don't need to explain. You can come back when you're ready. There is no penalty. Before I press play — questions?"

Pause. Genuinely take questions if any. *Then begin. (Path B [7–8 only]: substitute this with structured reading and discussion of the September 4, 1944 note in Lesson Foundation; skip directly to Step 2.)*

Analyze

These discussion and analysis activities develop close reading and historical thinking skills. Use small groups or whole-class discussion formats as appropriate. Begin with the Affective Check-In; *do not* open analysis until the room has named the affective response.

AFFECTIVE CHECK-IN (30 SECONDS — BEFORE ANY ANALYSIS)

“Take a moment. One word for what you felt. We’re not analyzing yet; we’re noticing.”

Take 4–6 words from around the room. Do not commentate. Acknowledge each. Then move into the descriptive and analytic questions below. This is the move that lets the room land before it thinks (per Dominick LaCapra’s distinction between *acting out* and *working through*).

DISCUSSION STRUCTURE

Silent writing → paired share → full-class discussion

Before opening the grade-band questions to verbal discussion, scaffold individual thought first. The room will produce better discussion if every student has already committed something to the page.

1. **5 minutes — silent individual writing.** Students respond to the grade-band questions on their own, in writing. No talking, no looking at neighbors. Quieter students need this floor; louder students need this brake.
2. **5 minutes — paired share.** Students compare answers with one neighbor. Listen for divergence; the partner whose answer differs from yours is the more useful partner.
3. **Remaining time — full-class discussion.** Open the floor. Begin by inviting *differing* answers from around the room rather than the first hand up. Hold the divergence; do not race to consensus.

This is the universal scaffold for the Analyze step. Specific collaboration formats — Think-Pair-Share, Jigsaw, Socratic Seminar — are detailed in the Facilitation tab and in [About the Series — Discussion & Collaboration Patterns](#).



Alberto Errera taking photographs in the birch grove near Crematorium V, as depicted in Four Photographs.

Two of the four photographs were taken from inside the doorway of Crematorium V, looking outward through the smoke. Two were taken outside, among the birch trees on the path victims were forced to walk before being driven into the gas chamber. The doorway frames in photos 280 and 281 (the dark vignettes you can see in the uncropped versions) are the literal architecture of the gas chamber building — the proof that the photographer was inside.

Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, catalogue numbers 280, 281, 282, 283

These are the four images. Below: the uncropped versions with the dark doorway frames intact — the historically complete record. The doorway frames prove the photographer was inside the gas-chamber building. After the war they were cropped out by Stanisław Mucha; the uncropped versions only became standard in scholarship in the 1990s.



Photo 280 — the burning pits, viewed from the western doorway of Crematorium V. The dark frame is the doorway itself.

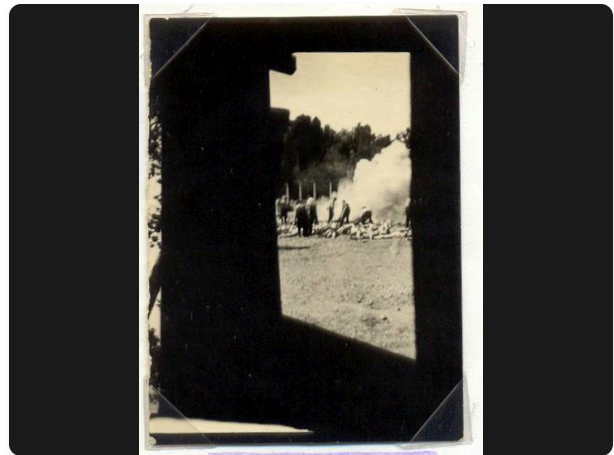


Photo 281 — second doorway exposure, slightly different angle. Same compositional vignette — the camera at hip level, blind.



Photo 282 — outdoors, in the birch grove. Off-center, horizon tilted — the signature of shooting from the hip without a viewfinder.



Photo 283 — trees and sky only. The camera was aimed too high; Errera could not see what he was shooting. The accident is part of the evidence.

Source: *Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, photographs 280–283*. Reproduced here for educational analysis. The microshort dramatizes the act of taking these images; this section presents the artifacts themselves.

Text-Dependent Analysis

1. The narrator says Errera “couldn’t raise the camera to his eye — if a guard caught him, he’d be killed on the spot.” How does this physical constraint — shooting blind from the hip — become a metaphor for the entire project of bearing witness under impossible conditions?
2. How does the film build tension around the act of photography itself? Identify specific filmmaking choices — narration, pacing, sound, visual style — that contribute to this tension.
3. The episode is 90 seconds. How does the compressed format shape what can and cannot be said about this history? What does it gain, and what does it sacrifice?
4. Two months after these photographs were taken, the Sonderkommando staged a desperate revolt (October 7, 1944) and were nearly all killed. The film does not mention it. What is the effect of leaving out the revolt? Is the omission a problem — or is it the right choice for a 90-second film?

Historical Sourcing

5. These are the only photographs taken by victims inside the killing process. What makes them historically different from perpetrator photographs, aerial reconnaissance images, or photographs taken after liberation?
6. The note attached to the film asks for *more rolls of film* — suggesting the photographers intended to continue. What does this tell us about their purpose and their understanding of their situation?
7. What questions does this film leave unanswered that you would want to investigate further? Where would you go to investigate them? (Suggest at least one specific source from Materials & Sources, Facilitation tab.)

Hook Analysis — the opening line as author's choice

8. Identify the opening line of the film — the very first words spoken before any image of Errera, the camera, or the camp. The writer made a deliberate choice about *what to say first*. What does the opening line tell you about how the writer wants you to enter this story?

9. Compare the film's opening to a conventional Holocaust-history opening (e.g., "*During the Holocaust, six million Jews were murdered...*"). What does the film's choice accomplish that the conventional opening would not? What does it risk?

Investigate Further — what the film does not answer

A question the film deliberately leaves open. Take it home; come back with what you found.
(See [About the Series — Anti-Surface Engineering](#).)

10. What happened to **David Szmulewski** after the war? The film tells you he climbed to the crematorium roof to act as lookout while the photographs were taken. It does not tell you what came after. Using [Yad Vashem](#), the [USHMM Holocaust Encyclopedia](#), the [Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum](#), or the published 1987 Szmulewski testimony, find out. Bring back one specific verifiable detail. Then write 3–5 sentences on whether what you find changes how you read his role in this story, or your sense of what bearing witness costs the person who does it.

Create

Students respond to the film through structured creative or argumentative writing. Allow 20–25 minutes for the core activity, or assign as homework for a longer response.



The camera, pulled from a bucket of human ash — as depicted in Four Photographs.

The tool of evidence buried in the evidence of the crime. Errera concealed the camera in a bucket of cremation ash because no SS guard would willingly sift through human remains. The image makes literal what the lesson asks students to argue about: documentation under impossible conditions, evidence created by victims who knew they would not survive to deliver it.

GRADES 9–10

Argumentative Paragraph (MEAL Format)

The Sonderkommando who took these photographs were not soldiers, journalists, or trained documentarians. They were Jewish prisoners forced under threat of death to work the gas chambers. They had no reason to expect that anyone outside the camp would survive to receive their evidence — the SS had standing orders to kill them, and they knew it. They took the photographs anyway. Write one well-developed argumentative paragraph using the MEAL structure (Main claim, Evidence, Analysis, Link back to claim) that answers the following question:

PROMPT

Is the act of documentation — of *making* evidence — itself a form of resistance, even when the documentor knows they will not survive? Use evidence from the film, from the September 4, 1944 note, and from at least one outside source to support your position. Anticipate a counterargument.

Your paragraph should be 150–200 words. Underline your main claim sentence. Circle your strongest piece of evidence.

Reflect

These closing activities help students consolidate their thinking, make personal connections, and carry the lesson's meaning beyond the classroom. Allow 8–12 minutes. Begin with the Affective Consolidation; *do not* proceed to the grade-band reflection prompt until the room has named what it is carrying.

AFFECTIVE CONSOLIDATION (1 MINUTE — BEFORE THE REFLECTION PROMPT)

"Thirty seconds. One word out loud — not analyzed, just named — for what you're carrying right now."

Receive 4–6 words. No commentary; just acknowledge each. This separates the affective response from the cognitive close that follows. *Only after* this move should the grade-band reflection prompt begin.

GRADES 9–10

Sentence Frame Reflection

Complete the following sentence frame as a written reflection. You may write as many sentences as you need to complete each thought — the frame is a starting point, not a limit. Be specific.

"Before watching this film, I thought evidence of the Holocaust came mostly from _____. Now I understand that it can also come from _____. The hardest part of this story for me is _____, because _____. The question it leaves me with is _____."

Share your reflection with a partner. Where do your reflections overlap? Where do they diverge? What might explain the difference?

CLOSING CONSOLIDATION (3–5 MINUTES — AFTER PAIRED SHARE)

Teacher elicitation: “Where did you and your partner diverge? Not where you disagreed about facts — where you disagreed about what the hardest part is, or what question this leaves you with. What might explain the difference?”

Receive 2–3 divergences from around the room. Name what is shared (the historical material lands the same way for most students); name what is different (the hardest part varies; the question left over varies). *Do not resolve*. Hold the divergence; close on it.

Sample close: *“You’re leaving the room with different questions. The fact that you have different questions is the work.”* (See [About the Series — Closing Consolidation pattern.](#))



Helena Datoń walking out of Auschwitz with the film hidden in a toothpaste tube, as depicted in Four Photographs.

The evidence enters the world. Errera was killed days later and never knew the photographs reached the outside. They did. What students carry out of the room with them — in addition to whatever they wrote in the reflection — is the fact that this object, this everyday metal tube, made the rest possible.

“Sending you photos from Birkenau — from the gas chambers...”

— Cyrankiewicz & Kłodziński, September 4, 1944

Extension Activities

These activities are designed for students who want to go further — in research, in creative production, or in interdisciplinary analysis. They are suitable for homework, independent projects, or honors-level coursework. Each requires at least two credible sources beyond the film, properly cited.



The ruins of Crematorium V at Birkenau today — the building from which the four photographs were taken; the ground around it where Sonderkommando prisoners buried written manuscripts (the Scrolls of Auschwitz) and where, on October 7, 1944, the Sonderkommando revolt began. Each of the extension activities below leads back to this place.
(Source: auschwitz.org)

GRADES 9–10

1. **The Sonderkommando revolt.** Two months after the photographs were taken, the Sonderkommando staged a desperate revolt at Auschwitz on October 7, 1944. Research what happened. Write a 400–500 word piece arguing whether the photographs and the revolt should be taught as one connected story of resistance or as two separate events.
2. **The cropping debate.** The photographs were originally cropped by Stanisław Mucha, removing the dark doorway frames. The uncropped versions were not widely seen until the 1990s. Research the difference. Write a 400–500 word essay arguing what is at stake in showing the cropped vs. the uncropped versions today.
3. **The Scrolls of Auschwitz.** Other Sonderkommando prisoners (Zalman Gradowski, Leib Langfus, Marcel Nadjari) buried written manuscripts in the ground around the crematoria. Many were found after the war. Research one of these manuscripts. What do they tell us that the four photographs cannot? What do the photographs tell us that words cannot?

CREATIVE PRODUCTION · CROSS-BAND

Make Your Own Microstory

A short original work, modeled on the craft principles of the microshort series — in *any* medium. The constraints are the lesson; the medium is the student's choice. The activity invites students into the same authorial position the makers of *Four Photographs* occupied: one person, one act, hard compression, anchored to a real artifact.

SUBJECT ANCHOR — FOR THIS EPISODE

Bearing witness when no one is supposed to see

For an episode about evidence created at the cost of a life, the natural subject is any person — historical or contemporary — who created a record of something they were not supposed to see, knowing the cost. Suggested fields:

- Another Holocaust witness whose documentation reached the world (Emanuel Ringelblum and the Oneg Shabbat archive; the Scrolls of Auschwitz writers — Gradowski, Langfus, Nadjari, Lewental; Mary Berg; Helga Weiss; Petr Ginz; Anne Frank).
- A 20th- or 21st-century witness who created evidence against state denial (Soviet samizdat writers; journalists in armed conflicts; whistleblowers; community archivists in displaced or persecuted communities).
- A person from the student's own family or community who recorded what others wanted forgotten.

The teacher approves the subject before students begin, to ensure the historical claims are defensible.

THE CONSTRAINTS — APPLY TO EVERY MEDIUM

1. **One named person at the center.** Not “the Holocaust,” not “refugees,” not “war.” *One specific person*, named, whose story you can stand inside. Build outward from them.
2. **Hook-first.** Your first sentence (or first shot, or first line, or first panel) must commit. No throat-clearing, no “In this piece I will explore...,” no historical preamble before the human enters.
3. **Hard compression.** Pick your medium; live inside its cap (see options below). The cap is not a target — it is a wall. Cutting is part of the work.
4. **One primary-source anchor.** Your work must reference, describe, depict, or quote *one specific verifiable historical artifact* — a photograph, a document, a recorded testimony, a physical object — and credit its source (institution, accession number where known).
5. **No invented dialogue from the dead.** If a historical figure’s words are not documented, you do not put words in their mouth. You may describe what they did; you may not author what they said.

PICK A MEDIUM

Any of the following count. Pick the one that fits your strengths and the story.

- **Short film or video** — up to **90 seconds**.
- **Flash fiction or micro-essay** — up to **250 words**.
- **Poem** — any form, up to **20 lines**.
- **Spoken-word or audio piece** — up to **90 seconds**.
- **Podcast cut** — up to **2 minutes**; one voice, no edits to dialogue.
- **Comic or illustrated sequence** — up to **6 panels** on a single page.
- **Photo essay** — up to **5 images** drawn from existing public archives (Yad Vashem, USHMM, Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, etc.), ethically captioned.
- **Song lyric** — one verse and chorus; melody optional but credited if used.
- **Graphic memoir page** — one page.

GRADES 9–10 — WHAT TO SUBMIT ON TOP OF THE WORK

Along with your microstory, submit a **200–300 word craft defense** that explains:

1. Why you chose this medium (and not another).
2. What your hook does — the first sentence or shot — and what choice it commits to.
3. Which primary source you anchored to, why it specifically, and how it appears in your work.
4. What you cut, and why.

A NOTE FOR THE TEACHER

This is an authentic assessment, not a craft exercise. The goal is not to produce polished work — the goal is for students to occupy, even briefly, the position the makers of *Four Photographs* occupied: choosing what to show, what to withhold, what to compress, what to credit. Imperfect work in the right register is more valuable than polished work in the wrong one. Grade for fidelity to the constraints, the specificity of the named subject, and the seriousness of the craft defense / artist's statement — not for technical polish in the chosen medium.

Facilitation Notes



The ruins of Crematorium V at Birkenau today — the building from which the four photographs were taken. The work the protocols below support is the work of teaching what happened here.

Real classrooms run faster or slower than the plan predicts. Real students respond at unpredictable intensities — *especially* material this heavy. The branches and protocols below are the contingency moves that keep the lesson coherent under either condition, and that let a colleague pick up this plan cold without improvising under pressure.

PLAN A — ONE STUDENT VISIBLY AFFECTED

Continue the lesson; let the student set their own pace. Make a quiet pass-by during the next student-led activity (paired share, individual writing). After class, brief individual check-in: *"How are you doing? You don't have to talk about the material. Just tell me you're okay. If you need someone, here's [counselor name]."*

PLAN B — MULTIPLE STUDENTS AFFECTED

Substitute the next paired-share or group discussion with silent journaling. Same prompt, different mode. Bring the room back together for the affective consolidation. If the room has not landed by the end of the period, save the cognitive close for the next session; never force closure on a room that hasn't landed. *For 7–8:* this is also when to consider switching to Path B for any subsequent lesson in the series.

TIME BRANCHES

If discussion is moving fast and you have ten extra minutes: extend with a paired second-pass on the “why didn’t I learn this in school” question (Lesson Foundation, Educator Note). Have students read the five reasons aloud, then discuss which one most explains the absence of this story from their own prior education.

If discussion is stalling and you are ten minutes behind: cut the comparative position paper (11–12) or shorten the museum caption (7–8) / MEAL paragraph (9–10) to a single paragraph; the affective consolidation and the contemporary continuity bridge survive translation.

HOLOCAUST-FATIGUE NOTE

Even students with substantial Holocaust education frequently arrive having *never heard* of the Sonderkommando. This is structural, not personal — see the Educator Note in Lesson Foundation on why this material has been historically under-taught. Lean into the unfamiliarity: it is the entry the lesson trades on.

SUGGESTED COLLABORATION FORMATS — FOR THIS EPISODE

Where each collaboration format fits in this lesson

The universal three-step Discussion Structure (silent writing → paired share → full-class) lives at the top of the Analyze tab. Below: specific structured formats and where each one earns its place in *this* episode. Full pedagogical treatment of each pattern lives in [About the Series — Discussion & Collaboration Patterns](#).

Think-Pair-Share

Use during Analyze. 2–3 minutes per pair on a single question. The most-useful prompt for this episode at 9–10 is the historical-sourcing question on what the archive can verify vs. what rests on a single survivor's account; at 11–12, the recursive-structure question (a film about the making of photographs).

Jigsaw (*cross-episode — once 2+ episodes have been taught*)

Most powerful pairing for *Four Photographs*: **Ep. 3 (Four Photographs) × Ep. 2 (The Boxer)**. Different student groups become “experts” in one episode; groups present to each other on the question of *what each act of bearing-witness cost the person who performed it*. Errera and Arouch were both forced into impossible positions; both left a record; both did so under different forms of coercion. The Jigsaw makes the comparison structural rather than incidental. Alternative pairing: Ep. 3 × Ep. 1 (*The Forger*) on the question of *what documentation does that other forms of resistance cannot*.

Socratic Seminar (*11–12 only*)

Use for the Lanzmann / Didi-Huberman debate in the 11–12 Analyze tab. Students prepare positions in writing first (per the Discussion Structure scaffold). One inner-circle of 6–8 students discusses; outer circle observes and writes. Switch halfway. The teacher does not adjudicate; the structure does. Pairs naturally with the Closing Consolidation in Reflect, which refuses the synthesis the seminar might be tempted to force.

Gallery Walk

Use for the Create-tab outputs — the 9–10 MEAL paragraphs or the 11–12 comparative position papers. Post student work around the room; students circulate silently with sticky notes, leaving one substantive question per peer. Particularly powerful for *Four Photographs* because it forces

students to encounter classmates' positions on the Lanzmann / Didi-Huberman question without verbal performance pressure.

ANTI-SURFACE ENGINEERING

How this lesson engineers past surface engagement

Short-form media risks shallow consumption: students who are accustomed to 90-second content may extract the surface and exit. This lesson plan engineers against that risk through three deliberate moves, all already built into the structure:

1. **Individual written response before any verbal discussion.** See the Discussion Structure card at the top of the Analyze tab. Quiet students need the floor; loud students need the brake. Both come from silent writing.
2. **The Investigate Further question at the end of Analyze.** Each grade band has a question the film deliberately does not answer — for this episode, Szmulewski's post-war life (9–10) and the publication-context question on the photographs (11–12). Students leave the room with a research debt to themselves; the depth happens after class.
3. **Closing Consolidation on divergence.** See the Reflect tab. The room ends not on agreement but on what could not be resolved. The discipline of staying with the unresolved is itself the anti-surface move.

Full pattern in [About the Series — Anti-Surface Engineering](#).

FOR EDUCATORS

Materials & Primary Sources

Every primary material below is locatable in under ten minutes via the link or reference provided. Sources draw from at least two of the field's trusted institutions per the Touro practitioner-guide standard. The actual four photographs are held by the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum and reproduced in Yad Vashem's online resource set; institutions, not classroom decorations, govern their reproduction.

- **Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum — the four photographs (280, 281, 282, 283).** [auschwitz.org](https://www.auschwitz.org)

The official institutional holder of the photographs and their archival catalogue numbers. The uncropped versions (with the doorway-frame edges visible) are the historically complete images.

- **Yad Vashem — “Inside the Epicenter of the Horror: Photographs of the Sonderkommando”.** yadvashem.org/sonderkommando-photographs

Field-standard institutional framing of the four photographs, the operation, and Errera’s identification.

- **USHMM Holocaust Encyclopedia — entries on the Sonderkommando, Auschwitz-Birkenau, and the deportation of Hungarian Jewry.** encyclopedia.ushmm.org

Reference for the historical context: who the Sonderkommando were, the Hungarian deportation period (May–July 1944), and the operation of Crematorium V.

- **USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive.** sfi.usc.edu · iwatch.usc.edu

Recorded testimony of Sonderkommando survivors, including those who knew Errera. The IWitness platform’s Teaching with Testimony scaffolding is the most curriculum-grade guidance for working with this material.

- **Gideon Greif, *We Wept Without Tears: Testimonies of the Jewish Sonderkommando from Auschwitz* (Yale, 2005; Hebrew 1999).** —

The foundational collection of testimonies from surviving Sonderkommando — the source that, more than any other, made it possible to teach this material responsibly.

- **Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 2008; French 2003).** —

The contemporary philosophical defense of engaging seriously with the four photographs. Required reading for the 11–12 Lanzmann/Didi-Huberman debate.

- **Christophe Cognet, *From Where They Stood* (documentary film, 2022).** —

Follows the surviving photographic record from inside the camps and the topographical reconstruction of where the four photographs were taken.

- **Project Witness microshort — *Four Photographs*.** —

The 90-second film at the center of this lesson.

Contemporary Continuity

These four photographs are now load-bearing in the field's response to Holocaust denial — they are the only known images of the killing process taken by the victims themselves. The Sonderkommando knew their evidence might one day need to fight that fight. It does. Algorithmic Holocaust denial is the contemporary form of the silencing they died to refute. To teach these images today is to refuse that silencing on the ground the Sonderkommando paid for.

Full Standards Alignment

Common Core ELA Standards

Grades 7–8

CODE	STANDARD DESCRIPTION
RI.7.1	Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
RI.7.2	Determine two or more central ideas in a text and analyze their development.
RI.7.6	Determine an author’s point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how the author distinguishes his or her position.
W.7.2	Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic.
SL.7.1	Engage effectively in collaborative discussions.

Grades 9–10

CODE	STANDARD DESCRIPTION
RI.9-10.1	Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis.
RI.9-10.4	Determine the meaning of words and phrases, including connotative and technical meanings (Sonderkommando, gray zone, bearing witness).
RI.9-10.6	Determine an author’s point of view and analyze how rhetoric advances it.
W.9-10.1	Write arguments using valid reasoning and evidence.
SL.9-10.1	Initiate and participate effectively in collaborative discussions.

Grades 11–12

CODE	STANDARD DESCRIPTION
RI.11-12.1	Cite strong and thorough textual evidence, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.
RI.11-12.5	Analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the author's structure (the recursive structure: a film about the making of photographs).
RI.11-12.6	Determine author's point of view where rhetoric is particularly effective.
W.11-12.1	Write arguments using valid reasoning and evidence (Lanzmann/Didi-Huberman position paper).
W.11-12.2	Write informative/explanatory texts on complex ideas (Five-Dimension Framework essay).
SL.11-12.1	Participate effectively in seminar-style discussions.

APPENDIX B

NYS Next Generation Learning Standards (ELA)

In 2017, New York State adopted the *Next Generation Learning Standards*, replacing its prior adoption of the Common Core State Standards. NY classrooms (including the 10th-grade Global Studies sections that fold this lesson into their existing curriculum) cite NGLS, not CCSS, in their pacing documents. The codes below are the NGLS equivalents most directly engaged by this lesson. *No 7–8 NGLS table is provided for this episode; per the subject-matter advisory in Lesson Foundation, the 7–8 band is not publicly distributed.*

Grades 9–10

CODE	STANDARD DESCRIPTION
9-10R1	Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly, as well as inferences drawn from the text.
9-10R3	Analyze how an author unfolds an analysis or argument, including the sequence, the introduction and development of ideas, and the connections that exist. <i>(Engaged by the film's recursive structure — a film about the making of photographs.)</i>
9-10R5	Analyze in detail how an author's intent influences particular sentences, paragraphs, or sections of a text. <i>(Engaged by Hook Analysis, Analyze tab.)</i>
9-10R6	Determine an author's point of view or purpose and analyze how rhetoric advances that point of view. <i>(Engaged by the September 4, 1944 Cyrankiewicz/Kłodziński note as primary</i>

CODE	STANDARD DESCRIPTION
	<i>source.)</i>
9-10R7	Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person's life story in print, multimedia, photograph), determining which details are emphasized.
9-10W1	Write arguments to support claims using valid reasoning and relevant, sufficient evidence (MEAL paragraph, Create tab).
9-10W4	Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
9-10SL1	Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners on grade-level topics.

Grades 11–12

CODE	STANDARD DESCRIPTION
11-12R1	Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain. <i>(Engaged by the historiographic questions on Errera's exact military branch and the disputed timing of the photographs.)</i>
11-12R3	In literary texts, analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a text. In informational texts, analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events. <i>(Engaged by the recursive film-about-photographs structure.)</i>
11-12R5	Analyze and evaluate the effectiveness of the structure an author uses in their exposition or argument, including whether the structure makes points clear, convincing, and engaging.
11-12R6	Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, persuasiveness, or beauty of the text. <i>(Engaged by Hook Analysis as rhetorical exordium, Analyze tab.)</i>
11-12R7	Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats in order to address a question or solve a problem. <i>(Engaged by the comparative paper synthesizing the microshort, the September 4 note, Didi-Huberman, and Lanzmann.)</i>
11-12W1	Write arguments to support claims using valid reasoning and relevant, sufficient evidence (Lanzmann/Didi-Huberman position paper, Create tab).
11-12W2	Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately (Five-Dimension Framework essay, Extensions tab).

CODE	STANDARD DESCRIPTION
11-12SL1	Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions, including seminar-style discussions, on grade-level topics.

Source: New York State Education Department, *Next Generation English Language Arts Learning Standards* (2017; implementation 2020–21).

APPENDIX C

NYS Social Studies Framework

The NYS Social Studies Framework is the official framework governing 10th-grade Global History & Geography II in New York State. The Key Ideas below are the Framework's curriculum-organizing units; the Conceptual Understandings (sub-codes) drill down to specific content; the Social Studies Practices are the universal skills students develop across the Framework. This lesson engages the codes below directly. *(Reviewer gift: Jessica Como, 10th-Grade Global History & Geography, cited 10.5 and 10.10 as the natural anchors. The full per-Key-Idea breakdown below extends her starting point to the Conceptual Understandings each Key Idea contains and the Social Studies Practices the lesson exercises.)*

Key Ideas & Conceptual Understandings

CODE	STANDARD DESCRIPTION & HOW THIS LESSON ENGAGES IT
10.5	Unresolved Global Conflict (1914–1945) — World War II. Key Idea. The primary anchor for this lesson; the Sonderkommando photographs document the killing process at Auschwitz-Birkenau in the summer of 1944, the very period the Key Idea covers.
10.5c	The Holocaust. The systematic murder of European Jewry — including the death-camp infrastructure of Auschwitz-Birkenau and the operation of the Sonderkommando — is the central content of this episode. The four photographs are the only known photographic record of the killing process taken by the victims themselves.
10.5d	Post-war reorganization. The historiographic reception of the four photographs — their post-war emergence, cropping by Stanisław Mucha, recovery of the uncropped versions in the 1990s, the Lanzmann / Didi-Huberman debate — sits squarely within the post-war reorganization of historical memory the Framework addresses. <i>(Engaged most directly in 11–12 Historiographic Questions and the Lanzmann/Didi-Huberman comparative position paper.)</i>
10.10	Human Rights Violations (Post-1945 to Present). Key Idea. The legacy anchor for this lesson; the Holocaust is the originating case for the post-war human-rights infrastructure (Nuremberg, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Genocide Convention).

CODE	STANDARD DESCRIPTION & HOW THIS LESSON ENGAGES IT
10.10a	Crimes against humanity. The Sonderkommando photographs — and the September 4, 1944 Cyrankiewicz / Kłodziński note describing them as “evidence to be transmitted” — are themselves part of the documentary record that underwrites the post-Nuremberg category of crimes against humanity. Students engage this as primary evidence, not abstraction.
10.10b	Genocide as continuing concern. The Contemporary Continuity bridge in Facilitation explicitly connects the four photographs to algorithmic Holocaust denial today — the contemporary form of the silencing the Sonderkommando died to refute. The photographs are load-bearing against denial precisely because they were taken by the victims themselves.
10.10c	International response and prevention. The work of institutional memory — Yad Vashem, USHMM, the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum — engaged throughout the lesson is the field's ongoing response to the photographs and what they document. Students encounter these institutions as the present-day enactment of a prevention obligation.

Social Studies Practices

PRACTICE	DESCRIPTION & HOW THIS LESSON ENGAGES IT
A	Gathering, Interpreting, and Using Evidence. The four photographs (Analyze tab) and the September 4, 1944 note (Lesson Foundation, Primary Source) are the primary evidence at the center of the lesson. Students interpret the documents themselves, including what is uncertain or contested.
B	Chronological Reasoning and Causation. Engaged by tracing the chain: Hungarian deportations (May–July 1944) → crematorium overload → open-air burning pits → photographic operation (summer 1944) → smuggling chain (Datoń, Polish resistance) → Errera's death (August 1944) → the Sonderkommando revolt (October 7, 1944). The lesson asks students to hold each link.
C	Comparison and Contextualization. Centrally engaged. Students compare the Sonderkommando photographs to other archive types — perpetrator photographs, Allied aerial reconnaissance, post-liberation footage — on the question of who created the record and what it can carry. 11–12 extends this to the Lanzmann / Didi-Huberman debate on representational limits.
F	Civic Participation. Engaged by the Contemporary Continuity bridge (Facilitation) — the four photographs as load-bearing against contemporary Holocaust denial — and by the Stinger Question in 11–12 Analyze, which asks students to defend appropriate-vs-inappropriate publication contexts for the photographs today.

Source: New York State Education Department, *K–12 Social Studies Framework — Global History & Geography II* (Grade 10). Per the Framework, the Key Ideas and Conceptual Understandings are the content spine and the Social Studies Practices are the universal skills students develop across them.

APPENDIX D

C3 Framework for Social Studies

CODE	STANDARD DESCRIPTION
D2.His.1	Analyze connections among events and developments in broader historical contexts (Hungarian deportations, Crematorium V operations, the Sonderkommando revolt of October 7, 1944, Allied aerial reconnaissance).
D2.His.3	Use questions about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time. The Educator Note (Lesson Foundation) and Historiographic Questions (Analyze) both engage how the field’s framing of the Sonderkommando has changed.
D2.His.14	Explain multiple causes and effects of past events. The lesson traces from the Hungarian transports to crematorium overload to open-air pits to the photographic operation.
D2.His.16	Integrate evidence from multiple historical sources into a reasoned argument.
D4.1	Construct arguments using claims and evidence from multiple sources.
D4.6	Use interdisciplinary lenses to understand local, regional, and global problems. The Contemporary Continuity bridge connects the photographs to current algorithmic Holocaust denial.

APPENDIX E

Florida B.E.S.T. Standards

CODE	STANDARD DESCRIPTION
ELA.x.R.2.1	Explain how individual text sections and/or features convey meaning (where x = grade band: 9–10 or 11–12).
ELA.x.R.3.2	Analyze an author’s choices in text structure, narration, and point of view (the recursive structure, the one second of black, the closing photographs).

CODE	STANDARD DESCRIPTION
ELA.x.C.1.3	Write and support a claim using logical reasoning, relevant evidence, elaboration, and a concluding statement.
SS.912.W.7.6	Describe the causes, events, and effects of the Holocaust (1933–1945).

APPENDIX F

Texas TEKS

CODE	STANDARD DESCRIPTION
ELAR x.6(A)	Analyze how authors use language, point of view, and literary devices.
ELAR x.8(A)	Analyze the author's purpose and response to conflicting evidence (disputed timing of the photographs, Errera's exact military branch).
ELAR x.10(A)	Write informational essays that synthesize multiple sources.
WH.15(A–D)	Analyze causes and events of World War II, including the Holocaust.

APPENDIX G

California HSS Framework

CODE	STANDARD DESCRIPTION
10.8.1–10.8.6	Causes and consequences of WWII, persecution of minorities, Allied response. Covers Hungarian deportations, the killing process at Auschwitz-Birkenau, the Sonderkommando, and the chain of resistance.
11.7	America's participation in World War II. Extension activities (aerial reconnaissance over Auschwitz) connect to the broader Allied context.

APPENDIX H

CASEL SEL Competencies

This lesson builds **self-awareness** through the affective check-in and consolidation, which name the affective response before analysis begins. It develops **social awareness** through engagement with the “gray zone” framework — the recognition that conventional moral categories cannot describe people forced into impossible positions. **Responsible decision-making** is exercised through the explicit ethical debates the lesson raises: should these images be reproduced? what is owed to the people who took them? **Self-management** is built into the trauma-informed protocols and the explicit opt-out language. **Relationship skills** develop through the structured paired-share and full-class discussions that follow the affective check-in.

DASA — Dignity for All Students Act (New York State)

This lesson plan supports New York State’s Dignity for All Students Act by engaging students in anti-bias education through the study of the most extreme historical injustice and the resistance to it. Students examine how dehumanization operated systemically, and how the act of documentation by the dehumanized themselves carries irreducible ethical weight. The lesson is structured to support students of all backgrounds, with special care for students with familial proximity to this history.

APPENDIX I

State Holocaust Education Mandates

This lesson plan satisfies Holocaust education mandates in 25+ states including New York, Florida, California, Illinois, New Jersey, Connecticut, Michigan, Oregon, Colorado, Rhode Island, Kentucky, and Maine. The lesson meets the instructional intent of these mandates: that students learn not only the historical facts of the Holocaust, but also the ethical questions it poses about evidence, representation, memory, and the responsibility of those who come after.

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Project Witness is a nonprofit Holocaust education initiative dedicated to preserving memory through short-form documentary storytelling.

Microshort Stories lesson plans are developed in consultation with Holocaust educators and aligned to national and state curriculum standards.

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