

Auschwitz – Stories Conveyed by Official and Unofficial Documents

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Society is reaching a critical point in regards to teaching and learning about the Holocaust, including Auschwitz. Within our lifetime students will not have the experience of personally meeting a Holocaust survivor and hearing their story. It will seem as if both World War II (WWII) and the genocide are disconnected from today, and because of this, it is crucial that society remembers and teaches about the survivors' individual experiences. The life of prisoners within Auschwitz can be experienced in a variety of ways, one of which is through the documents, both official and unofficial, that they left behind. This paper will first define what official and unofficial documents are in this context. Next, it will explore three specific examples. For official documents this essay will investigate the letters exchanged between Marian Serejski and his wife, Janina Serejski, and the type of information he was communicating. For unofficial documents this paper will examine the sketchbook discovered in Auschwitz and the fairytales from Auschwitz. The second part of this paper will introduce the concept of "the danger of a single story" (Adichie, 2009) and examine why it is important to include individual stories into teaching about Auschwitz.

The word "document" is an overarching term that can come in a variety of forms. Within the scope of documents, there are both written sources and art¹. Official documents are considered objects that the prisoners produced with the knowledge of the S.S. guards and can include sources such as authorized artwork and letters. For example, some of the artwork created in Auschwitz was commissioned for members of the S.S. As a case in point, the infamous S.S.

¹ Art is a document in addition to having other purposes. The importance of art comes in its universality – it is able to transcend language, time, and personal history barriers (Adajian, 2012). In other words everybody has the ability to understand art. This is different from other type of documents, such as written documents, because there are limits to who can study them. Any official document created in the camp including medical records, roll call lists, and letters, to name a few, had to be written in German meaning that a researcher is restricted by their language. Moreover, while art has the ability to say 1000 words, other documents were limited to both word count or may be written in code. The letters between Mr. Serejski and his family can only truly be understood through his daughter's explanations.

doctor, Dr. Mengele, had Dinah Gottliebova-Babbitt paint pictures of the Roma and Sinti population suffering from Noma² in the camp. An additional example of official documents includes the letters sent out from the Auschwitz post office. As well, it is important to note that although official documents were created with the knowledge of the S.S., the prisoners could still convey information that would be considered prohibited.

Unofficial documents are those that were produced in secrecy and similar to official documents, they can include a variety of sources created for various reasons. One example of an unofficial document is the photographs which were taken by the sonderkommando that captured the extermination process in the gas chambers of Auschwitz-Birkenau.³ In addition to these photographs, both the sketchbook from Auschwitz and the Auschwitz fairytales are forms of unofficial documentation regarding life in the camp. It is important to analyze each of these individual accounts as to what the prisoner was attempting to communicate and include those findings into the education curriculum about Auschwitz. Moreover, it is important that we explore what the prisoner was attempting to communicate and include that in educating about their experience in Auschwitz and the Holocaust today.

Within Auschwitz, some prisoners were allowed to send and receive letters through the Auschwitz postal system. By analyzing the literary source, *I am Healthy and I Feel Fine*,⁴ which chronicles the letters sent between Mr. Serejski and his family, it is evidenced what the prisoners were allowed to communicate with the outside world and what they were not allowed to mention according to S.S. camp officials. As well, the letters and anecdotes by his daughter illustrate to

² Noma was a form of water cancer that affected the Roma and Sinti population in the camp

³ The sonderkommando were prisoners working in the gas chambers. This refers to the photographs taken in 1944 showing the burning of the bodies in pits outside of the gas chambers

⁴ Olszer, K. (Ed.). (2010). *"I am Healthy and I Feel Fine."* *The Auschwitz Letters of Marian Henryk Serejski*. Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.

the reader what Mr. Serejski wanted to communicate to his family. These letters demonstrate what Mr. Serejski was allowed to express and what was forbidden because he tells his wife the rules in the first letter and an information sheet stating the rules was also attached (Olszer, 2010). The S.S. guards instructed that the letters be written in German and that no information regarding the camp was included (Olszer, 2010). This demonstrates that the prisoners were not allowed to mention why they were imprisoned, information about their personal health, or what their life was like in the camp (Olszer, 2010). Further to these restrictions, a censor edited all letters and he had the ability to blackout anything that he believed disclosed too much information (Olszer, 2010). In Mr. Serejski's letters he is attempting to convey to his wife this forbidden information without being caught doing so. Mr. Serejski attempts to tell his wife the reasons for his arrest in order for her to gather the information she needs to have him released from Auschwitz (Olszer, 2010). Mr. Serejski and his wife are able to pass this information along by creating the character Henryk. Through their narrations of Henryk they are able to discuss Mr. Serejski's health, work, and the reasons for his imprisonment (Olszer, 2010).

There are many possible reasons why Mr. Serejski wanted to disclose this information to his wife. Providing this information may have given Mr. Serejski the ability to execute control over his own life⁵. Through Mr. Serejski's letters he is able to influence the actions of his wife, which is a direct display of his agency. By creating the character Henryk he is able to tell his wife that the S.S. guards did not discover his Jewish heritage, but instead he was arrested for "the not entirely reputable company he had kept recently" (Olszer, 2010, p. 39). This meant that the S.S. had suspicions that Mr. Serejski was connected to the underground movement, however they had no conclusive evidence. As well, Mr. Serejski was able to take control of his life by

⁵ According to McAdams and McLean agency is the idea that a person is able to affect change in his or her own life (McAdams & McLean, 2013)

instructing his wife as to what documentation was needed in order to have him released from Auschwitz (Olszer, 2010). Through using his agency Mr. Serejski became one of the few prisoners to be released from Auschwitz. Additionally, being able to express his agency may have improved his psychological state inside of Auschwitz. Studies have shown that personal agency has been linked with improved psychological conditions in negative circumstances (McAdams & McLean, 2013). In other words, by taking control of his life and being able to talk about his freedom with his wife it may have permitted Mr. Serejski to escape the realities of the camp and imagine a future where he was free. If this was the case, it would have improved his emotional state and allowed him to survive in the camp.

Mr. Serejski directed these letters to his family, however through analyzing the messages he sent, they also convey his personal experiences inside of Auschwitz. By examining what Mr. Serejski was forbidden to say the reader can gain some insight into life inside the camp. The amount of censorship suggests that the S.S. soldiers wanted to keep the conditions inside the camp a secret. As well, through the letters, readers also learn that Mr. Serejski experienced inhumane treatments where he was operated on without anesthetic and suffered from severe hunger. He was able to communicate this brutality to his family by stating that he was not hungry and by telling them that he missed strawberries and wanted them to save some for him (Olszer, 2010). These letters also give insight into the changing situations inside of the camp, which is evidenced by the rule changes. When he first started writing, he was only allowed to receive money, but in 1942 S.S. guards changed the postal restrictions so he could receive warm clothing for the winter (Olszer, 2010).

In addition to learning about Mr. Serejski experiences inside of Auschwitz the letters also allow the reader to learn about Mr. Serejski as a person. The letters demonstrate his concern for

his family. He is constantly asking for updates regarding his children's studies and on his children's everyday life. For instance, he asks how his daughter liked her new glasses (Olszer, 2010). This may be because in addition to Mr. Serejski caring and genuinely wanting to know about his family, writing the letters may have given him something else to concern himself with during his time in Auschwitz. These letters show the reader that life continued. Mr. Serejski still had a family and he was able to concern himself with their everyday life while he was experiencing awful conditions inside of the camp. Through these letters readers get a glimpse what it was like in the camp and a part of Mr. Serejski's personal story, both about his life outside of the camp as well as his experience in the camp.

The first example of an unofficial document is the sketchbook from Auschwitz. The sketchbook from Auschwitz is an important document, and more specifically, is a series of artwork that was created by an unknown prisoner believed to be in 1943 (*The Sketchbook from Auschwitz*, 2011). The series of sketches is important for many reasons, including the fact that it gives one of the few depictions of the extermination process of Jews, sick and weak prisoners, as well as the Alte Judenrampe – the first ramp for transports coming to Auschwitz (*The Sketchbook from Auschwitz*, 2011). In addition to these depictions, the author also sketched pictures of the life and functions of prisoners, and the death blocks inside Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The information from Mr. Serejski's letters confirms that the depictions that were included in the sketchbook would have been forbidden as they illustrate information about life in Auschwitz and if they were found, the prisoner would have been severely punished. It is widely speculated as to why the artist risked his life to sketch these pictures. One possible explanation may be seen in the artist's attention to detail. The artist added details such as the prisoner number to armbands and the labels on the suitcases (*The Sketchbook from Auschwitz*, 2011). This

attention to detail may suggest that the artist was attempting to create a piece of evidence of the S.S. crimes which could be used as a credible source in the future (*The Sketchbook from Auschwitz*, 2011). In addition, the artist or someone else took the time to properly conceal the sketchbook presumably to ensure the S.S. would not discover it. The Sketchbook was found in 1975 inside a bottle in the foundations of a building within the concentration camp (*The Sketchbook from Auschwitz*, 2011). This could indicate that the artist or whoever hid it knew the danger of creating the sketchbook as they secreted it so well, however, this also indicates that the person who concealed the sketchbook wanted it to be found eventually. The person took the time to hide it and put in a protective casing rather than just destroying it, meaning they knew that it could be important for the future.

The author of the sketchbook is unknown. The only detail about his identity is the initials “M.M.” meaning we do not know who the intended audience was or why he created it. This lack of information of to whom the sketchbook was for suggests that he may have been writing it for society today⁶. Perhaps he created this sketchbook to inform society about life inside of Auschwitz and the brutality that was occurring. As well, maybe like the letters, creating this sketchbook was the artist taking back some of his agency that was lost in the camp. If the artist did intend to leave the sketchbook to inform society of the crimes taking place inside Auschwitz then creating the artwork may have given a sense of purpose, a reason to live through another day. Another possibility is that the prisoner was creating this narrative to make sense of what he was experiencing. Stories are very important for constructing human identity and understating who we are as people (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Researchers have found that adults engage with a negative experience first and they attempt to have a positive outcome stem from it by analyzing it (McAdams & McLean, 2013). The artist of the sketchbook almost certainly faced

⁶ This idea was from Professor Karwowska

death in the camp so perhaps he was creating the sketches to engage with the negative situations he was experiencing and he left them behind so people could learn and ensure that the perpetrators faced justice for their crimes. It should be noted that this is all speculation because society cannot and will never know his true intentions or if it was the same artist that drew the pictures who concealed the sketchbook in the foundation. However, we do know that he risked his life to create these pictures and as a result, society can learn more about Auschwitz because of them.

A second example of unofficial documents are the fairytales from Auschwitz. Similar to the sketchbook from Auschwitz, the fairytales were created within the confines of the camp. The fairytales are unique because they include both the aspects of artistic documentation and a written source. Prisoners working in the construction department created the fairytales for the children in their lives outside of the camp (Kulasza, 2010). They decided to create the fairytales after encountering a similar fairytale book near the Canada warehouses. The prisoners used those stories to influence the ones they created (Kulasza, 2010). Unlike the sketchbook, the prisoners did not hide the fairytales, instead they were able to smuggle them out and have them delivered to the children in their lives (Kulasza, 2010). As well, they were able to create and copy these stories because they had the supplies of the construction office at their disposal, such as paper, pens, copy machines, and most importantly, they were not under rigorous supervision from the S.S. guards (Kulasza, 2010). The creation of these fairytales had to be completed in secret. This is evidenced by the fact that one author tried to send a fairytale story out through the normal mail system, but the S.S. guards blocked it, which indicates that if the S.S. discovered the full-scale operation the prisoners would have been punished.

The information that the prisoners were trying to relay to the children and their families

can be seen in both the pictures and in the letters they sent along with the books. For example one of the authors, Stanisław Beć, was able to inform his sister that he was planning to escape the camp in the letter that he sent along with the fairytale book for his nephew (Kulasza, 2010). As well as conveying important information regarding the individuals' situation inside of Auschwitz, the prisoners also used the fairytales as an opportunity to let the children in their lives know who they were. For instance, the fairytale and the accompanying letter are the only information that Felicjan Świerczyna has from his father. His father was arrested before he was born and was murdered inside Auschwitz making the fairytale sent to him something special from his father. (Kulasza, 2010). The letters attached to the fairytales gives society insight today as to whom these prisoners were and what they wanted to tell their families.

The fairytales themselves were based on other stories, but they also seemed to include information that the fathers wanted the children to know. One example is the story of the "Hare, Fox and the Rooster." In this story, the hare and the fox are engaged in a conflict and the fox takes away the hare's possessions, including his house (Kulasza, 2010). In the end, the rooster uses his intelligence to outwit the fox and as a result the fox is forced to leave the town (Kulasza, 2010). This story may have been used to tell the children about the war and to explain that there are consequences for every action. The story is conveyed both through drawings and words. The artwork is important because it reinforces the moral lessons of the story as well as communicates the story to young children who could not read at the time. During the war the S.S. soldiers were taking the property of other minority populations and so perhaps this story was to tell the children that this is an immoral action and so the perpetrators should be punished. Similar to the letters and the sketchbook, the fairytales may have returned to the authors some of their agency. By including these moral messages and the personal letters, they may have been attempting to

influence future generations. In other words, they were taking back some control in their lives and attempting to make a difference in the future.

There are a number of reasons why these prisoners risked their lives to get these stories to the children and society has the opportunity to understand the true reasoning behind the stories, as a few of the authors survived Auschwitz. One survivor, Franciszek Jaźwiecki, said that writing the fairytales was an escape from the realities in the camp (Kulasza, 2010). Furthermore, this suggests that creating the fairytales may have improved the authors' psychological state during their time in Auschwitz and helped them remember who they were outside of Auschwitz. The fairytales are another example of the importance of unofficial documents both during the prisoners' time at Auschwitz and today.

Each of these documents gives society important information regarding different aspects of Auschwitz. The Serejski letters, the sketchbook and the fairytales are only a few examples of the important stories and this essay argues that having multiple individual stories is important for teaching about the Holocaust, especially when all the survivors have passed away and people feel disconnected from the atrocities that occurred.

The concept of "The Danger of a Single Story" by Chimamanda Adichie gives insight into why having multiple accounts is important. In her Ted Talk she is arguing that if society only has one story then only one perspective is created (Adichie, 2009). Single stories do not allow for complexities and creates a default position that people accept as the only truth (Adichie, 2009). Having one story gives people the opportunity to disconnect themselves from the experience because the story is believed to be the only account, allowing the person to accept the story without question. This means that by having access to a multitude of stories, individuals have a greater opportunity to make connections and therefore gain a better understanding as to

what happened. As well, having multiple stories creates complexity (Parker, 2014). This multitude of stories and the creation of complexity is important for teaching about the Holocaust because if students are not given individual stories, such as the ones in this essay, they will not question what they have learned and understand how much more there is to know. In addition, students will gain a more comprehensive understanding about how much society does not know about Auschwitz. Moreover, if students only learn about general themes, names, and dates, they may not feel a connection and this disinterest could potentially lead to future generations forgetting the scale of the atrocities that occurred during WWII.

A second importance of showing the complexity to students is so they can comprehend the incompleteness of a story. For example, if students only study the official documents they would lose the importance of the unofficial documents. As well, including art into the scope of documents allows students to look at the individual aspect of who created the artwork, why they did, and investigate the story behind the artwork in addition to analyzing the art itself. Also, even though the unofficial documents give the reader an uncensored version of events, the official documents will provide important insight into the censorship and secrecy within Auschwitz. Without examples from both types of documents students are left with an incomplete account. An example can be seen in this essay. Both the fairytales and the letters indicate that the prisoners have family outside of the camp and that they were in a position to contact them. There were many prisoners, such as Jews, whose entire families were sent to Auschwitz and a large number of prisoners were not allowed to send letters. If students only have one version of the events they would not understand how complex prisoners' lives were inside of Auschwitz. In Parker's article, she found that this incompleteness resonated with her students (Parker, 2014). She discovered that once students were aware of the danger of a single story they became more

critical thinkers, as well it “turned students into active participants rather than passive members of a classroom” (Parker, 2014, p. 7).

This suggestion of adding in individual narratives to the educational curriculum is something that the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and State Museum currently has underway, however it should also be included in classrooms around the world. The general critique against adding individual accounts is that it goes against the traditional, rational, and categorical system that many history students learn (Grant & Laetitia, 2012). As well, that learning about stories is too individualistic and cannot provide any concrete facts (Grant & Laetitia, 2012). Grant’s counterargument is that culture comes through people and their stories (Grant & Laetitia, 2012). Providing multiple stories about the life in Auschwitz will illustrate how complicated life and the holocaust was and provides students with a better understanding and a stronger desire to continue their learning. In the case of Auschwitz and the Holocaust each document and individual memory can communicate something different about the experience inside Auschwitz, as well as the person who created it, they are all important. Learning about stories such as the ones presented in this essay demonstrate to the student how difficult it is to make generalizations about Auschwitz.

There were hundreds of thousands of prisoners in Auschwitz. This essay first examined some of the individual stories through the documents the prisoners left behind. These documents include both official documents known to the S.S. guards, and unofficial documents which were created in secrecy. The specific examples that this essay examined included letters sent by Marian Serejski, *the Sketchbook from Auschwitz* and the Auschwitz fairytales. This essay looked at what the prisoner may have been trying to communicate and why they were creating these. The second part of this paper brought in the concept of “the danger of a single story” to illustrate

why it is important to care about documents such as those presented in this essay and the many other stories of life in Auschwitz. By incorporating these stories into the classroom it can better assist the students in connecting and engaging in the history but it also shows the complexity of Auschwitz. In addition to having a better understanding of Auschwitz, students will also learn how to be critical thinkers. This essay emphasized the importance of individual stories in learning about the Holocaust and these stories are only going to become more valuable as more time passes from when the atrocities occurred.

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