Widening the Lens

Here There Are Blueberries Discussion Guide

UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

WILLIAM LEVINE FAMILY INSTITUTE
FOR HOLOCAUST EDUCATION

The Play *Here There Are Blueberries*

Here There Are Blueberries tells the story of an album donated to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum containing never-before-seen photographic evidence of Nazi officers and staff at the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. In the play, Museum archivist Rebecca Erbelding and her colleagues begin to unravel the shocking story behind the images. As the album makes headlines around the world, a businessman in Germany sees the photos online and recognizes his own grandfather. He begins a journey of discovery that will take him into the lives of other Nazi descendants—and into a reckoning with his family's past and his country's history. The events depicted in the play are true, and the dialogue is based on interviews with the people involved as well as additional historical research carried out by artists from the Tectonic Theater Project. *Here There Are Blueberries* compels audiences to consider the nature of humanity, our capacity to commit evil acts, and the point at which complicity begins.

Karl Höcker's Album

In December 2006, a retired US Army lieutenant colonel and former member of the Counter Intelligence Corps wrote to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. While stationed in Allied-occupied Germany in 1946, this officer had found a photograph album in an abandoned apartment in Frankfurt. Now elderly, he was ready to donate the album to the Museum but wanted his donation to remain anonymous.

After receiving the donation, Museum archivist Rebecca Erbelding and the head of the Museum's photo reference collection, Judy Cohen, began to research the images. Who appeared in them? Where were the images taken? What events were depicted? The inscription, "Auschwitz 21.6.1944," on its first page signaled the uniqueness of the album—there are very few wartime photographs of the Auschwitz concentration camp complex, which included Auschwitz-Birkenau, the most infamous Nazi killing center. The Museum staff was able to prove that the album had been created by SS-Obersturmführer Karl Höcker, even though his name does not appear anywhere in the album. Höcker was the adjutant to the last commandant of Auschwitz, Richard Baer. He was stationed at Auschwitz from May 1944 until the evacuation of the camp in January 1945. The album depicts the life in Auschwitz that he most wanted to share and remember.

In September 2007, the *New York Times* published an article on the Museum's acquisition of the photograph album. It quickly became an international story, leading to many more discoveries. Tectonic Theater Project cofounder Moisés Kaufman also read about the album and in November 2010, visited the Museum to meet Rebecca and see the photographs for himself.

Historians continue to research the images in Höcker's album, which can be viewed on the Museum's website.

Continuing the Conversation

Here There Are Blueberries shows the exacting and exciting work of historical research and poses the crucial historical and ethical questions that artifacts can raise. This discussion guide is designed to encourage audiences to continue important conversations while reflecting on the themes of the play.

"The frontier between good and evil can run straight through the middle of us without our being aware of this. The ghastly thing was it was not only gangsters and roughnecks, but decent, intelligent people who did this. Our great and terrible mistake was made up of countless small mistakes."

— Melita Maschmann, former head of the press and propaganda division of the *Bund Deutscher Mädel* (League of German Girls) in *Here There Are Blueberries*

1. Thinking about the Role of Choice

Throughout *Here There Are Blueberries*, audiences are reminded that the perpetrators at Auschwitz (and in the Holocaust more generally) participated in horrific crimes for their own reasons. Karl Höcker was from a poor family and went from being a bank clerk in the 1930s to the assistant of the commandant. Other notorious perpetrators were accountants, candymakers, and teachers in prewar life who personally benefited from their participation in these crimes, both materially by taking valuables that had been confiscated from the prisoners upon arrival and by gaining social and political power. Application essays by members of the *Helferinnen* show the young women's desires to serve their country, to continue their *BDM* (League of German Girls) service, or to honor the sacrifice of loved ones killed fighting for the Fatherland.

DISCUSS

- What pressures and motivations might lead individuals and institutions to collaborate with an oppressive or even murderous regime?
- Based on what you learned while watching the play, what were some of the motivations of the perpetrators at Auschwitz?
- What factors might encourage someone to participate in something they knew or should have known to be wrong? What factors might discourage them?
- Can you identify motives, pressures, and fears that might lead you to compromise your own sense of morality? How can you use that knowledge to resist the slippery slope toward collaboration or complicity in something you know to be wrong?
- When referring to ordinary people who participated in Nazi crimes, Melita Maschmann said that their "great and terrible mistake was made up of countless small mistakes." What does she mean?

"These photographs were taken the day we arrived in Auschwitz. … I have lived with these 193 photographs for so many years. And they tell the story. Now I want the album to be shown. I share this now because time passes on. And we all live in the world."

— Holocaust survivor Lili Jacob in *Here There Are Blueberries*

2. The Other Auschwitz Album

In the play, we learn that Lili Jacob lived in the small town of Bilke (now Bilky, Ukraine) in what was then part of Hungary. She was deported with her family to Auschwitz in late May 1944. On the day they arrived at the concentration camp and killing center, professional SS cameramen photographed prisoners exiting the train and being separated—with one group selected for work and the rest murdered in gas chambers. Karl Höcker arrived at Auschwitz mere days before this transport.

Lili survived Auschwitz, forced labor in Germany, and transfer to the Dora-Mittelbau concentration camp—where the American military liberated her in April 1945. While recovering from typhus, she discovered an album containing these photographs in a bedside table in an abandoned SS barrack. She immediately recognized people she knew and realized that the album's photographs depicted her own transport.

Lili brought the original album with her when she immigrated to the United States. Later published many times, these images went into evidence at the Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial (in which Lili Jacob testified and in which Karl Höcker was a defendant). In 1980, Lili Jacob donated the album of photographs of her transport's arrival in Auschwitz to Yad Vashem.

DISCUSS

- Why is Lili Jacob's testimony important to *Here There Are Blueberries?*
- In the play, Judy Cohen of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum says that photographers make decisions "about what's in the frame and what's outside the frame. We don't see what's left outside the frame." How is this reflected in what Karl Höcker decided to include in his album?
- What does Lili mean by, "And we all live in the world"? Why does she feel these images are important?
- What are the similarities and differences between the two albums?
- In your opinion, why were each of the albums created?

3. Descendants of Perpetrators

In the play, three descendants of Nazi perpetrators reflect on their family legacy.

Tilman Taube, the grandson of SS doctor Heinz Baumkötter, says, "Those who say nothing ... they transfer this trauma to the next generation."

Peter Wirths, the son of Eduard Wirths, the chief physician at Auschwitz, explains that even though his father had a conscience, he still participated in sending newly arrived prisoners to the gas chambers. "So what does it matter? The good things he did?"

Rainer Höss, the grandson of the first commandant of Auschwitz, Rudolf Höss, was violent as a young man. He worried, "What if I have inherited this from my grandfather? … But if I believe that it's in my blood, I am believing what the Nazis believed. So, no! No! Nothing is inside me. I am who I am. And that's when things began to change. … It's my best revenge."

DISCUSS

- Whose story resonated with you? Why?
- What is the nature of the "trauma" that Tilman refers to? Can silence add to trauma?
- Do you sympathize with Tilman, Peter, and Rainer? Why or why not?

"It's these blueberry photos that make the album notorious. Just the fact that there were young women there. And people didn't know that. People didn't understand why they would be there. And I think there is some sort of puritanical shock that women were involved. They're participating in the factory nature of Auschwitz."

— Judy Cohen, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in *Here There Are Blueberries*

4. The *Helferinnen*

The play's title, *Here There Are Blueberries*, comes from Höcker's caption on a series of staged photographs of young women at the Solahütte resort. The women, who worked as *Helferinnen* (literally meaning, "female helpers") or as communications specialists, sit on the wooden rail of the resort, posing for the camera while eating bowls of blueberries. The photos were taken on July 22, 1944, less than 20 miles from the gas chambers at Birkenau.

Over the course of the play, the Museum staff realize that the women, who applied to work for the Nazi SS, were aware of the mass murder being carried out there. While the participation of young women in perpetrating a genocide may seem surprising, it's crucial to remember that the Holocaust needed the direct and indirect participation of millions of seemingly ordinary people throughout Europe, including young women.

DISCUSS

- Did the photographs of the young women surprise you?
- What motives did the women give for wanting to work at a place like Auschwitz?
- In your opinion, are the *Helferinnen* complicit in the crimes of the Holocaust?
- Why do many people seem hesitant to think of women as perpetrators?

"Who can after all these years recall all these dates? I have never hurt anyone. I have never wanted to … or done it."

— Karl Höcker in *Here There Are Blueberries*

5. Postwar Trials

After World War II, international, domestic, and military courts tried tens of thousands of people for crimes committed during the Nazi era. Many members of the Auschwitz leadership depicted in Höcker's photograph album were put on trial. Some were executed for their crimes. Others, including Dr. Josef Mengele, escaped and were never captured.

After the war, Karl Höcker was not immediately identified as a war criminal. He returned to his hometown in Germany, lived quietly with his wife and children, and resumed his work in a local bank. In the early 1960s, he was arrested and put on trial for his crimes at Auschwitz. Ultimately, he was convicted and served five years of a seven-year sentence. In the 1980s, he was tried again and convicted of crimes at the Lublin/Majdanek concentration camp and served two years in prison. In that trial, he claimed that he had never hurt anyone. Karl Höcker died at age 89 in 2000.

DISCUSS

- In your opinion, how can victims and survivors obtain justice after a genocide?
- Höcker argued that he was a bureaucrat, not a killer. Do you believe there were levels of complicity during the Holocaust? Where would you place Höcker?
- Do the photographs in Höcker's album contradict or confirm his testimony?
- Do you think it is still important to prosecute Holocaust-era war criminals? Why or why not?

"People send us things. … And it is our responsibility to receive these artifacts and make them available to scholars, to artists, to anthropologists, to all of those people whose job it is to translate experience into knowledge. Because if there's a nugget in any of those stories that someone can use, I don't want that nugget to be lost on our watch."

— Rebecca Erbelding, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in *Here There Are Blueberries*

6. An Unparalleled Collection of Artifacts from the Holocaust

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum was established by an act of Congress that mandated the creation of a "permanent living memorial to the victims of the Holocaust." It is the items that belonged to those victims and survivors—as well as other materials that relate to their stories, experiences, and histories—that form the basis of the Museum's collection. The Museum's comprehensive collection contains millions of documents, artifacts, photos, films, books, and testimonies.

The Museum collects, preserves, and makes available artifacts, photographs, film, books, and documents that help us learn about the Holocaust. Some of the material in the Museum's collection was created by perpetrators and specifically designed to be antisemitic and racist. It is essential that the Museum collect this material to tell the truth about Nazism and to combat Holocaust denial, distortion, and minimization.

DISCUSS

- *Here There Are Blueberries* includes a scene where Museum staff debate the importance of the Höcker album. What arguments do they make? Do you agree or disagree with those arguments?
- Why does the Museum staff feel the Höcker album is important to study?
- How does the Museum's collection combat Holocaust denial and distortion?
- Can artifacts related to Nazi perpetrators also memorialize the victims of the Holocaust? How?

"Sometimes when people look at Auschwitz, they focus on the killing and forget that the killing is the result of a long process. No genocide starts with the killing. Every genocide starts with words."

— Paweł Sawicki, Communications Director, Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in *Here There Are Blueberries*

7. Where Can Hatred Lead?

The Holocaust was not a single event. It did not happen all at once. Rather, the Holocaust was an evolving process that took place throughout Europe between 1933 and 1945. It was the result of circumstances and events, as well as individual decisions, played out over years. Nazi leaders crossed political, moral, and psychological lines as they set in motion the unimaginable—a concrete, systematic plan to annihilate all of Europe's Jews. They relied upon millions of individuals—among them Karl Höcker, the *Helferinnen*, and the others depicted in the album—to carry out this genocide. Understanding the Holocaust as a process and one that encompassed millions of people and decisions is essential for understanding what makes genocide and mass atrocities possible.

DISCUSS

- Antisemitism is on the rise worldwide. What steps can you take to stand up to this hatred?
- Did *Here There Are Blueberries* give you more insight into how and why the Holocaust happened?
- Based on what you saw in the play and what you know, what factors led to the Holocaust?
- What themes from the play are relevant to the world today?
- What can you do to help people targeted for persecution and violence?

Left to right: Judy Cohen, Sara J. Bloomfield, and Rebecca Erbelding

Hear from the Real Judy, Rebecca, and Sara

What can we learn from the Höcker album?

"Whenever I give lectures about photography, I always remind the audience that the photographer has made decisions. This became a line the character of Judy says in the play. Every photograph is the result of a double crop. A crop in time, and a crop in space. We don't know what happened the second before or the second after the photograph was taken, nor do we know what is happening just outside of the frame of the image. This is particularly important to remember with the Höcker album, because the photographs are deliberately deceptive. Höcker didn't include any evidence of deportation or prisoners or the killing facilities, and this was a deliberate decision. The album provides a lens as to what he wanted to remember, but it is an important example of how unaltered photographs can still mislead in the absence of historical context."

—Judy Cohen, retired head of the Museum's photographic reference collection

Why was it so important for the Museum to do so much research about the album?

"The research that my colleagues and I did was key to understanding the album—if we didn't know the locations and dates of the photographs, or the names of the people depicted, this is just a photo album of smiling Nazis, and there's not much we can learn from it. Knowing more about the images also allowed us to place the photographs into the wide historical context of Auschwitz. As depicted in the play, we really debated how to make these photographs available to the public. After all, there are no prisoners in the album, and the photographs could have easily been used to promote Holocaust denial. I'm proud of the care we took to remind our audiences of the true reality of Auschwitz, a reality that is largely absent from the photographs themselves."

—Dr. Rebecca Erbelding, Museum archivist and historian

Why is the Höcker album so important?

"Germany's Weimar Republic was an advanced, educated nation with a democratic constitution, free speech, and a rule of law. And yet, Nazi Germany and its collaborators across Europe would systematically murder six million Jewish men, women, and children in the effort to completely eliminate European Jewry. The question of why this happened in 20th-century, 'civilized' Europe remains an enduring one and leads to many others: Why did so many Germans—even those who were not Nazis—become Nazified over time? What motivated people to collaborate or acquiesce? Who sends children into gas chambers or turns away as others do? How did they rationalize their actions? It would certainly be reassuring to think of them as 'crazy monsters' unlike us, but to distance ourselves from the perpetrators would be dangerous. We think of the killers and their many helpers at a place like Auschwitz as inhuman, but the Höcker album reminds us of their 'humanity.' These photos give us some insight into their world and provoke more questions than answers. Ever more reason to contemplate them over and over again."

—Sara J. Bloomfield, director of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Left to right: Moisés Kaufman and Amanda Gronich

Meet the Playwrights

Why did you want to write a play about these photographs?

"My father is a Holocaust survivor, and I grew up in Caracas, Venezuela, and I went to a yeshiva all my life. The Holocaust was always present—it was taught to us, it was part of our history. But the Holocaust is also the event in human history that has been most written about, so I thought, what else is there to say? How can theater talk about something like that? But then I saw the *New York Times*, and there on the front page was a photo of the *Helferrinen* eating blueberries, and as soon as I saw that photograph, I thought, there might be a play here. Let me see if I can talk to someone at the Museum, and I met with Rebecca, and what happened was, instead of walking me through the facts, she walked me through how she got to the facts: how she identified people, the level of research that went into it. And all of a sudden I realized this was a detective story. And by the time I was on the train back to New York, I knew I wanted to write the play."

—Moisés Kaufman, playwright

"I've devoted my whole career to making documentary plays and television, but as a Jewish scriptwriter, I'd never worked on anything about the Holocaust. It felt impossibly daunting. And yet I found myself immediately drawn to this material. First, the album offers a view of Auschwitz the world had never seen before. Second, the play poses a unique challenge: How do you transform a collection of photographs into a dramatic event? How do you invite audiences to experience the images in a powerful, direct way, by eliminating all comfortable distance between the viewer and the stage projections? To do this, the pictures must function like living characters—they must become literal scene partners for the actors. And the images must also take the audience on a live theatrical journey as they try to decipher the album's significance. There are so many mysteries to uncover in its pages. From a playwriting standpoint, it was an endlessly fascinating task—how to let the photographs lead the action and bring the audience right up against the album's most pressing questions—to explore what happens when we enter its story."

—Amanda Gronich, playwright

Why do you think the play resonates with audiences?

"I hope the play resonates with audiences because it changes the conversation. It urges people to leave the theater having an entirely different discussion than they had coming in. I hope people will ask: What have we learned about our collective humanity? There's a moment near the end of the play that talks about us being at the end of the Holocaust survivor generation. We're at that point in history. Of course, we must never stop telling survivor stories. But this may be a time to broaden the lens. In fact, it may be vital to do this if we ever want to prevent history from repeating itself. To be clear: We are not exonerating, we are not excusing, we are not forgiving. We are saying, 'These acts were committed by human beings.'

So how do we begin looking at perpetrator stories, actions, and choices to see what they reveal? Today's carriers of the Nazi legacy are its living descendants. Interviewing them about this material was very powerful. But the play forces all of us to ask: What if we had been born under those same circumstances? One of the play's dramatic arcs deals with how much these descendants are willing to share their family history with the world. In the end, each of us must wrestle with this. We must ask ourselves how much we conceal or reveal about our own direct involvement in history. We must examine our own stories, actions, and choices within these urgent questions of responsibility. After we're gone, what will our albums look like?"

—Amanda Gronich, playwright

“I think that one of the big questions that the play asks is what is the difference between being culpable, being complicit, and being an onlooker? Because we all fall in that category, right? We’re all either onlookers, we are complicit, or we’re culpable. And to me, what’s interesting, one of the things that we’re trying to point to in the play, is that if you think about it, the people who did this, some of them were complicit, some of them were culpable, but a lot of them were onlookers.

There were 70 million people living in Germany at the time. The entire Nazi infrastructure and government and the army and the SS, that was around a million people. So it took a million people to create the Holocaust, but it took 69 million people to look the other way. And the truth is that those people were not looking the other way. Many of those people believed that this was a correct way to proceed. They may not have participated, but they didn’t oppose it. So I guess one of the things the play is trying to say is that in order to create an ethical society, we all have to be aware that we’re one of those three things, and that as such, we have responsibilities. And that feels very relevant today.”

—Moisés Kaufman, playwright

Learn More

- About *Here There Are Blueberries*: hereтherareblueberries.com
- Find teaching resources about the Höcker album and *Here There Are Blueberries*: ushmm.org/blueberries
- About the Höcker album: encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/auschwitz-through-the-lens-of-the-ss-the-album
- View Karl Höcker's album: collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn518658
- View Lili Jacob's album: yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/album_auschwitz/index.asp
- About Holocaust history: encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/introduction-to-the-holocaust
- About the history of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp and killing center:
  encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/auschwitz
  auschwitz.org/en/
- About the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: ushmm.org
- About the Tectonic Theater Project: tectonictheaterproject.org

For questions or more information, please contact learnmore@ushmm.org.

PHOTOS: All photographs unless otherwise noted *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*; cover: Historical image inside the camera lens shows SS-Obersturmführer Karl Höcker eating blueberries with the *SS Helferinnen* (young SS women who worked as communications specialists) on July 22, 1944. *US Holocaust Memorial Museum*; page 1: *DJ Corey Photography*; page 4: *DJ Corey Photography*; page 7: *Yad Vashem*; page 13: *Yad Vashem*; page 17: *DJ Corey Photography*; page 19: *Cameron Whittman*; page 21: *Jenny Anderson*

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