**Auschwitz Shifts From Memorializing to Teaching**

Directions:

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading. **Mark up the text with questions and comments.**
3. Write a **one-page reflection** on your own sheet of paper.

New York Times – Michael Kimmelman

For nearly 60 years, Auschwitz has told its own story, shaped in the aftermath of the Second World War. It now unfolds, unadorned and mostly unexplained, in displays of hair, shoes and other remains of the dead. Past the notorious, mocking gateway, into the brick ranks of the former barracks of the Polish army camp that the Nazis seized and converted into prisons and death chambers, visitors bear witness via this exhibition.

Now those in charge of passing along the legacy of this camp insist that Auschwitz needs an update. Its story needs to be retold, in a different way for a different age.

…A proposed new exhibition at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum here, occupying some of the same barracks or blocks, will retain the piled hair and other remains, which by now have become icons, as inextricable from Auschwitz as the crematoria and railway tracks. But the display will start with an explanatory section on how the camp worked, as a German Nazi bureaucratic institution, a topic now largely absent from the present exhibition, which was devised by survivors during the 1950s.

Back then they wished to erase the memory of their tormentors, as the Nazis had tried to erase them, so they said as little as possible in their exhibition about the Germans who had conceived and run the camp. They focused on mass victimhood but didn’t highlight individual stories or testimonials of the sort that have become commonplace at memorial museums as devices to translate incomprehensible numbers of dead into real people, giving visitors personal stories and characters they can relate to. Those piles, including prostheses and suitcases, also stressed the sheer scale of killing at a time when the world still didn’t comprehend, and much of it refused to admit to, what really happened here.

Efforts are underway to update the exhibitions at Auschwitz. Above, Piotr Cywinski, the director of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.

…The new exhibition would go on to describe the process of extermination, leading visitors step by step through what victims experienced, and end with a section on camp life, meaning the “daily dehumanization and attempts to keep one’s humanity,” said Piotr Cywinski, the bearish, red-bearded 39-year-old Polish director of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.

“If we succeed we will show for the first time the whole array of human choices that people faced at Auschwitz,” he explained. “Our role is to show the human acts and decisions that took place in extreme situations here — the diversity of thinking and reasoning behind those decisions and their consequences. So, we may pose the question, should a mother give a child to the grandmother and go to selection alone, or take the child with her? This was a real choice, without a good solution, but at Auschwitz you had to make the choice.”

…The gradual passing of survivors has also meant that Auschwitz faces a historical turning point.

“Teenagers now have grandparents born after the war,” Mr. Cywinski noted. “This is a very big deal. Your grandparents are your era but your great-grandparents are history.

“The exhibition at Auschwitz no longer fulfills its role, as it used to,” he continued. “More or less eight to 10 million people go to such exhibitions around the world today, they cry, they ask why people didn’t react more at the time, why there were so few righteous, then they go home, see genocide on television and don’t move a finger. They don’t ask why they are not righteous themselves.

“To me the whole educational system regarding the Holocaust, which really got under way during the 1990s, served its purpose in terms of supplying facts and information. But there is another level of education, a level of awareness about the meaning of those facts. It’s not enough to cry. Empathy is noble, but it’s not enough.”

This is the theme to which officials here return often. Auschwitz, they say, must find ways to engage young people (some 850,000 students came last year), so they leave feeling what the director called “responsibility to the present.”

**Reflection Prompt:**

*The Book Thief* tells the story of the Holocaust in a very different way than the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, but both seek to engage and educate young people. How do you think the story of the Holocaust should be told to people your age? How should it *not* be told? Why?

What do you think Piotr Cywinski, the director of the museum, means when he says, “But there is another level of education, a level of awareness about the meaning of those facts. It’s not enough to cry. Empathy is noble, but it’s not enough.”