Introduction

Dr. Christopher Browning will deliver two lectures on March 26, 2009 as part of Palm Beach Community College’s annual Holocaust Remembrance. Dr. Browning, a prominent scholar of the Holocaust, will talk about the role of memory in constructing the history of the Starachowice Labor camps in Poland during the Holocaust. He will focus especially on the use of the 173 existing interviews of Jews who survived the Starachowice camps and the deportation in summer 1944 to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Related to the issues he will address in the Starachowice lecture, Dr. Browning will discuss his role as an expert witness in trials of Holocaust deniers. Both lectures address the problems associated with the nature and reliability of evidence.

As preparation for Dr. Browning’s lectures, this study guide will briefly introduce students to the history of the Holocaust in Poland, emphasizing the history of Nazi forced labor generally, and the Starachowice camps specifically.

The Study Guide

The Holocaust in Poland (4-page summary)
http://www.mchekc.org/ArchiveCurriculum/Appendices/AppendixCPoland.pdf

US Holocaust Memorial Museum: Overview of Nazi Forced Labor

US Holocaust Memorial Museum: In-Depth Article on Nazi Forced Labor

Definitions of Forced and Slave Labor
http://www.dpcamps.org/slaveCampsIntro.html

US Holocaust Memorial Museum: Map of Nazi Concentration Camps in Poland
Starachowice may be found on this map southwest of Warsaw

Starachowice Labor Camp from Yad VaSehm Resources
Time Line of the Construction and Evacuation of the Starachowice Labor Camps

1939  
Jewish population in Wierzbni near Starachowice, Poland was 3000

09/1939  
Starachowice steel and munitions factories occupied by German forces and renamed Herman Göring Works

Fall 1939 to Spring 1941  
German occupiers persecute Jews in Wierzbni near Starachowice

Spring 1941  
creation of a non-walled ghetto and formation of Jewish Council (Judenrat)

1940-1941  
Jewish population of Wierzbni doubles as Jews expelled from western Poland, esp. Lodz and Plock arrive

1942  
Jews from Radom district flock to Starachowice after regional ghettos are closed and Jews deported to Treblinka

Fall 1942  
Wierzbni is made up of three different groups of Jews
  a. those who grew up in Wierzbni
  b. those who came from western Poland
  c. those who came from nearby towns

10/27/1942  
Wierzbni Ghetto closed, 70% of inhabitants sent to Treblinka death camp, 30% or 1200 women and men marched to 3 work camps:
  a. Strelnica—housing Jews working in munitions factories
  b. Majowka—housing Jews working in steel factory
  c. Tartak—housing Jews working in lumberyard and sawmill

10/1942-05/1943  
Willi Althoff is Commandant of the Starachowice Camps

Late summer 1943  
Strelnica closed and prisoners transferred to Majowka

10/43-12/43  
Walter Kolditz is Commandant of Starachowice Camps

12/43-7/28/44  
Kurt Otto Baumgarten is Commandant of Starachowice Camps

July 28, 1944  
Majowka and Tartak labor camps are closed and prisoners deported to Birkenau.

Early January 1945  
Auschwitz-Birkenau evacuated

January 27, 1945  
Soviet Army liberates prisoners remaining at Auschwitz-Birkenau

May 8, 1945  
End of World War II/European Theater
Terms/Definitions (Students should research these terms and share definitions in class)

- Concentration Camp
- Labor Camp
- Death Camp
- Forced/Slave Labor
- Victim
- Perpetrator
- Deportation
- Selection
- Auschwitz-Birkenau
- Treblinka
- Majdanek
- Plasow
- Lodz Ghetto
- Lublin Ghetto

Using Survivor Accounts and Perpetrator Sources as Evidence in Writing the History of Starachowice

It is difficult to write the history of the Starachowice labor camps because:
- there are few, if any documents, especially from the perspective of the victims of the Nazis’ abusive labor system.
- of the thousands of prisoners who passed through the camps only 173 survivor accounts exist.
- the survivor accounts flawed by problems related to memory:
  - vary in detail, conflict with and contradict each other
  - include clearly mistaken memories
- problems related to length of time between events and interviews
  - smallest group of interviews taken in summer 1945
  - 116 collected in 1960s by Germany’s Central Agency for Investigating Nazi War Crimes
  - Audio taped interviews 1960s-1980s now housed at Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York, Fortnouff Archive at Yale University and the US Holocaust Memorial Museum
  - Videotaped interviews by the Shoah Visual History Foundation during 1980s-1990s.
- Interview methods differed widely and were shaped by different purposes
- Problems related to changing status of interest in the Holocaust and Holocaust Survivors
  - Holocaust deniers challenge reliability of Survivor testimony
  - Survivor stories are viewed uncritically and emotionally by people empathetic with the survivors’ suffering
- Problems with German/perpetrator Sources
  - existing documents reflect only perpetrator perspective
  - perpetrators’ interviews flawed by forgetfulness
  - perpetrators’ interviews flawed by deliberate attempts to reconstruct events to avoid prosecution
  - perpetrators’ interviews flawed by denial of wrong-doing