



THE LAST MUSICIAN OF AUSCHWITZ



DISCUSSION GUIDE & RESOURCE PACK

For community screenings, panels, workshops, colleges and schools.

ABOUT THE FILM

Cellist Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, is the last living survivor to have played in one of the six orchestras known to have existed at Auschwitz: The Women's Orchestra. Now aged 99, Anita's extraordinary testimony and powerful recollections, alongside those of fellow musicians told through the words of their descendants, frame this documentary which explores how music became both a lifeline and an instrument of torture in the Nazi's most notorious death camp.

Through Anita's eyes, we witness how the SS systematically weaponised music as a tool for psychological manipulation and control throughout the camp system, for example hearing how the SS demanded prisoner orchestras perform for their entertainment while also playing marches to accompany slave labour groups - a grotesque form of psychological torment. Amidst this horror, for musicians like Anita, their talents offered a fragile protection against death and a means to preserve their humanity.

The film expands beyond Anita's experience to illuminate the stories of three other remarkable musicians from across Europe: singer-songwriter Ilse Weber and classical composers Szymon Laks and Adam Kopyciński. Though they did not survive, their creative works endure as acts of resistance and testimony.

International musicians, including Anita's son Raphael Wallfisch, bring these compositions to life in powerful new performances filmed at emotionally resonant locations in present-day Auschwitz, with each performance creating a bridge between past and present while exploring themes of loss, cultural memory, and resilience.

THE LAST MUSICIAN OF AUSCHWITZ reveals how, amid dehumanising brutality, music offered moments of defiance, resistance, and hope - casting fresh light on artistic expression's power to sustain the human spirit even in the darkest places.



INTRODUCTION

This discussion guide is designed to facilitate meaningful conversations following screenings of *THE LAST MUSICIAN OF AUSCHWITZ*. It offers context, questions, discussion prompts, and activities suitable for various settings including community screenings, panels and workshops within educational, musical, or interfaith organisations or community groups.



HISTORICAL CONTEXT

THE HOLOCAUST

The Holocaust represents one of history's darkest chapters: the systematic persecution and murder of six million Jews during World War II by Nazi Germany and its collaborators, between 1941 and 1945. During that time, the Nazis also murdered several million Soviet and Polish political prisoners, Roma and Sinti people, and other minorities such as LGBTQ people, disabled people and those who were mentally ill.

Nazi ideology believed that the German "race" (also referred to as Aryan race) was superior and needed to fight for dominance over "inferior" races. Nazis singled out Jews as an existential threat to the racial purity of Germany, and believed that the total elimination of Jewish people was the only way to achieve this.

When Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany in 1933, antisemitism quickly became state policy. The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 stripped Jews of citizenship and basic rights. Following Kristallnacht in November 1938, persecution intensified with widespread violence, destruction of Jewish property and the imprisonment of people in concentration camps.

After Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, triggering World War II, Nazi policy toward Jews evolved from forced emigration to ghettoisation to systematic extermination. The 1942 Wannsee Conference formalised plans for the "Final Solution to the Jewish Question"—the complete annihilation of European Jewry.

AUSCHWITZ

Established in 1940 near the Polish town of Oświęcim, Auschwitz became the largest and most lethal complex in the Nazi concentration camp system. Initially created to hold Polish political prisoners, it evolved into three main camps: Auschwitz I (the main camp), Auschwitz II-Birkenau (the extermination centre), and Auschwitz III-Monowitz (a labour camp serving the IG Farben factory). Birkenau, constructed in 1941, became the epicentre of industrialised mass murder.

Four large gas chambers and crematoria could kill and process thousands daily. Between 1942 and 1944, transports arrived from across Europe - Jews from Poland, Hungary, France, the Netherlands, Greece, Slovakia, and beyond. Upon arrival, prisoners underwent "selection", with most (primarily women, children, and the elderly) sent directly to gas chambers. Others deemed capable of work were forced into slave labour, suffered starvation, disease, and were subject to medical experiments.

Though Jews constituted approximately 90% of Auschwitz's victims, the Nazis also targeted other groups deemed enemies or "racially inferior": Roma and Sinti people ("Gypsies"), Polish civilians, Soviet prisoners of war, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, people with disabilities or mental illness, and political opponents. Each group received different coloured triangular badges identifying their classification within the camp's brutal hierarchy.

As Soviet forces approached in January 1945, the SS (camp leaders) attempted to conceal their crimes by destroying evidence and forcing 60,000 prisoners on death marches westward. When the Soviet Army liberated Auschwitz on January 27, 1945, they found approximately 7,000 emaciated survivors and overwhelming evidence of mass murder.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

An estimated 1.1 million people perished at Auschwitz. About one million Jews, 70,000-75,000 Poles, 21,000 Roma, 15,000 Soviet POWs, and others from across Europe. The camp's liberation revealed the full horror of Nazi genocidal policy, but the Holocaust's toll reached far beyond Auschwitz to include death camps like Treblinka and Sobibor, mass shootings in Eastern Europe, and countless deaths in ghettos and other camps.

Today, Auschwitz stands as both memorial and warning—a testament to the consequences of unchecked hatred and the fragility of civilization itself.

THE PRISONER ORCHESTRAS AT AUSCHWITZ

Within Auschwitz's environment of extreme brutality, the Nazis created prisoner orchestras - as had existed also in several of the other concentration camps.

There were at one time six orchestras at Auschwitz, across the different camp divisions.

The Women's Orchestra - of which Anita Lasker-Wallfisch was a part, as a cellist, was active for 19 months until October 1944, just four months before the liberation of the camp. At its height, it counted almost 48 members.

These prisoner orchestras served multiple purposes:

- As entertainment for the SS officers running the camp
- As a "welcome" for new arrivals - a propaganda tactic designed to confuse deportees and mask the true purpose of the camp
- To accompany the daily march of prisoners to and from forced labour activity, or during public punishments and executions.

For the musicians, their musical skills were their means of survival, as being part of an orchestra meant slightly better rations and being spared from punishing labour. This reality was both a psychological torment and paradoxically, a means of survival.



HISTORICAL CONTEXT

MUSIC AS BOTH A WEAPON AND MEANS OF SURVIVAL

Music in Nazi concentration camps existed in a morally complex landscape.

It was:

- A tool of psychological torture, as prisoners were forced to play while witnessing atrocities
- A propaganda tool - for example orchestras were made to play during visits from the Red Cross to create the illusion of humane treatment in the camp
- A survival mechanism for the musicians who received slightly better treatment and larger rations
- A form of resistance and spiritual sustenance for some prisoners
- A means of maintaining one's humanity and cultural identity in dehumanising conditions



THE MUSICIANS FEATURED



Anita Lasker-Wallfisch (b. 1925) - played by Katie Shalka (also appears as herself)

A German-born cellist who survived Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen. Her skill as a cellist secured her a position in the women's orchestra at Auschwitz. After liberation, she co-founded the English Chamber Orchestra and has become a prominent Holocaust educator. At 99 years old (as of 2025), she is the last living member of the Auschwitz orchestra. Anita will celebrate her 100th birthday on 17 July, 2025.



Ilse Weber (1903-1944) - played by Rosalyn Mitchell

A Czech songwriter, children's author, and nurse who composed songs in Theresienstadt concentration camp. She voluntarily accompanied children to Auschwitz when they were deported and was murdered there in October 1944.



Szymon Laks (1901-1983) - played by Dan Blaskey

A Polish composer and violinist who became the conductor of the men's orchestra at Auschwitz-Birkenau from 1942-1944. After the war, he published "Music of Another World," a memoir of his experiences.



Adam Kopyciński (1907-1982) played by Laurence Dobiesz

A Polish composer and musician who secretly documented camp life through his music while imprisoned at Auschwitz. After the war, he became one of the founders and conductors of the Wroclaw Philharmonic Orchestra.

FACILITATOR GUIDELINES

Facilitating discussions around **THE LAST MUSICIAN OF AUSCHWITZ** requires careful consideration of the film's emotional weight and historical significance. Here are some recommendations:

BEFORE THE SCREENING:

- Identify a moderator to lead the discussion and introduce panelists, if applicable.
- Consider distributing note cards or a shared digital space where audience members can write down reflections or questions during the film.
- Acknowledge the emotional impact of the content and set expectations for a safe and open conversation.
- Provide a brief historical overview for audiences who may be less familiar with the Holocaust and Auschwitz.

If possible, create a quiet reflection space for those who may need time to process their emotions privately before engaging in discussion.



FACILITATOR GUIDELINES

AFTER THE SCREENING:

- Establish ground rules for respectful discussion, including active listening and avoiding interruptions.
- Be prepared for diverse reactions, including emotional responses, silence, or strong opinions.
- Allow space for silence and reflection, recognising that some attendees may need time before speaking.
- Begin with open-ended questions to ease participants into the discussion and allow them to process their emotions.
- Encourage a range of perspectives by inviting contributions from different audience members and ensuring balanced participation (e.g., avoid a single speaker dominating the discussion).
- Use structured activities (outlined in the next section) to help guide reflection and encourage deeper engagement.
- If relevant, connect historical events to contemporary issues of antisemitism, hate crimes, or cultural resistance, while ensuring historical accuracy and avoiding oversimplification.
- Provide options for continued engagement, such as recommended reading, further screenings, or opportunities for community action.
- Conclude with forward-looking prompts about what actions participants might take to honour the memory of Holocaust survivors and victims and to combat discrimination today.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

THE HOLOCAUST AND WIDER HISTORICAL CONTEXT

GROUP ACTIVITY:

- How do you feel the Holocaust is remembered today? How do you think future generations will remember it?
 - *Break out into small groups to discuss together, ideally with people of different ages and generations, then share your learnings and thoughts with the wider group.*
- Auschwitz served multiple functions within the Nazi camp system. What do you understand about its different roles?
- Beyond Jews, what other groups were targeted by the Nazis, and how might their experiences have differed?

- How familiar are you with Holocaust survivor testimony? Have you ever met a Holocaust survivor? Or a survivor of another historic or contemporary trauma?

Why do you think first hand accounts like Anita Lasker-Wallfisch's are particularly significant - especially in this case, as we commemorate the 80th anniversary of liberation?

MUSIC, MEMORY, AND SURVIVAL

- How did musical ability function as both a blessing and a curse for prisoners like Anita?
- How does the film change your understanding of music's potential uses and meanings?
- What role did cultural activities like music play in preserving a sense of humanity for prisoners? How might creating or experiencing art have served as a form of resistance?

How did the musicians in the film maintain their cultural identity through music, even as the Nazis sought to erase their humanity?



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

HISTORICAL TESTIMONY AND CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

- Anita Lasker-Wallfisch is described as "the last living survivor to have played in one of the camp orchestras." How does this position her testimony as uniquely valuable? What responsibility comes with being among the final witnesses?
- The film marks the 80th anniversary of Auschwitz's liberation. How does the passage of time affect how we remember and memorialise the Holocaust? What happens when direct testimony is no longer possible?
- What parallels, if any, do you see between the antisemitism that fueled the Holocaust and forms of antisemitism or other hatreds today?

- In the film we hear from the children or grandchildren and other relatives of the musicians in Auschwitz. How do you think their parent's trauma and experience has affected their life? How are they choosing to celebrate and commemorate their parents' or relatives' memory?

GROUP ACTIVITY:

- The film demonstrates how art can emerge from unimaginable suffering. What other examples can you think of where art (music, film, painting, books, etc) has been created in response to historical trauma?
 - As a group share and discuss these works and how they affected you, or why you feel they are memorable or important.

You may want to collect these together at the end of the group discussion as a list that can be shared so everyone can refer to it and discover new works.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

FILM TECHNIQUES AND STORYTELLING

- The film uses contemporary musical performances filmed at Auschwitz. How did this approach affect your emotional connection to the historical events?
- How does Anita's interview frame and contextualise the other musicians' stories?
- What aspects of the visual storytelling stood out to you, and how did they contribute to the film's impact?
- How does the film balance documenting historical horror with celebrating resistance and survival?
- What role do Raphael Wallfisch's (Anita's son) performances play in connecting past and present? How does this intergenerational aspect add meaning to the film?

PERSONAL REFLECTION

- What piece of music or musical moment from the film had the strongest impact on you? Why?
- How has this film changed your understanding of the Holocaust or of music's power?
- What responsibility do we have, as viewers of this testimony, to share these stories with others?
- The film suggests that music offered "a note of defiance and hope" amid suffering. What other examples can you think of where art has provided similar resistance?

How will you carry this story forward? What actions might you take as a result of seeing this film?



ACTIVITIES AND EXTENSIONS

FOR CLASSROOMS, WORKSHOPS, OR OTHER EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

GROUP ACTIVITY: People's History Research

In four groups, pick one of the musicians from the film. Using online research tools, create a short history of their life before they were sent to Auschwitz. In a second moment, build a picture of where their family, children or grandchildren are now - if any?

Part One:

- Where were they born and where did they live?
- What did they study?
- What was their family like? Did they have brothers and sisters? What did their parents do?
- What are some key moments in their life?

Part Two:

Track on a map where this person was born, and grew up, and how far their journey to Auschwitz was.

Part Three:

Find out if this person had relatives who survived. Who are they? Where do they live now and what do they do?

You might want to create a poster about this person as a group to hand in your classroom.



ACTIVITIES AND EXTENSIONS

HISTORICAL TIMELINE ACTIVITY

Create an annotated timeline that places the musicians' experiences within the broader context of the Holocaust and World War II. Include when the various musicians were imprisoned, when they created specific works, and how their experiences aligned with major historical events that took place during the war.

MUSICAL ANALYSIS

Listen to some recordings of music created in concentration camps. Discuss what musical elements convey emotion, resistance, or hope. Compare these with music performed in the film.

You can find recordings of music composed by prisoners at Auschwitz or music that was played in the camps via the following libraries:

- [The Wiener Holocaust Library](#)
- [Music From Auschwitz // Performed by Musicians from the U-M School of Music, Theatre & Dance](#)
- [Music and The Holocaust](#)

WRITING EXERCISE: THE POWER OF ART

Write a reflective essay exploring how artistic expression can function as resistance in situations of oppression or trauma. Students might compare the musicians of Auschwitz with other examples throughout history.



ACTIVITIES AND EXTENSIONS

FOR COMMUNITY AND FAITH GROUPS

TESTIMONY CIRCLE

In small groups, discuss a time when music or art helped group members through a difficult period. How does bearing witness to others' stories create community and understanding?

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Explore how different religious traditions use music as expression, memory, and healing. Consider organising a panel with representatives from different faith traditions discussing music's role in their communities.

LOCAL CONNECTION RESEARCH

Research Holocaust survivors or World War II veterans in your local community. Consider creating an oral history project to preserve their stories, or explore how your community commemorates the Holocaust.



ACTIVITIES AND EXTENSIONS

FOR MUSIC GROUPS AND INSTITUTIONS

COMMEMORATIVE PERFORMANCE

Organise a performance featuring music created in concentration camps or music written in response to the Holocaust. Consider including readings from survivors' accounts between pieces.

COMPOSITION PROJECT

Invite participants to create original music in response to the film or specific testimonies from Holocaust survivors. Discuss how music can express experiences that might be difficult to articulate in words.

MUSIC AS MEMORY RESEARCH

Explore how music has been used to memorialise historical trauma across different cultures and time periods. Create a presentation comparing these different traditions and approaches.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

FILMS & DOCUMENTARIES

[The Commandant's Shadow](#) (2024)

Also features Anita Lasker-Wallfisch. This feature-length documentary follows Hans Jürgen Höss, son of Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Höss, as he confronts his father's role in the Holocaust and meets with camp survivor Anita Lasker-Wallfisch eight decades later. Together with their children, they explore their contrasting inherited trauma, weaving together Hans' memories of his childhood at the family's Auschwitz villa with Rudolf's autobiographical writings and Anita's survivor perspective.

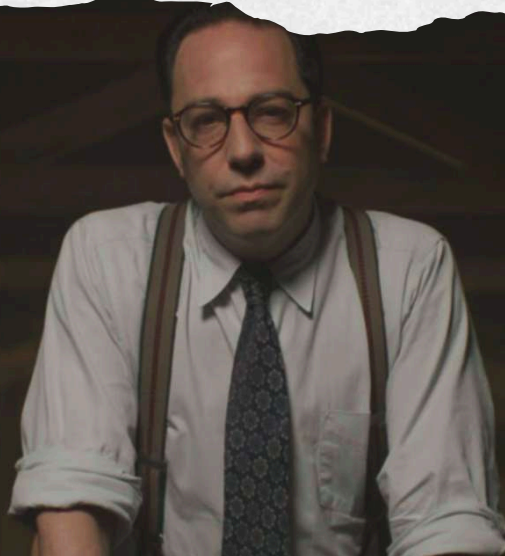
[The Zone of Interest](#) (2023)

Relevant not only for the subject matter, but because of the particular use of sound and music in the film. *The Zone of Interest*, directed by Jonathan Glazer, portrays the seemingly ordinary domestic life of Nazi commandant Rudolf Höss and his family in a house adjacent to Auschwitz concentration camp.

The film's power lies in its disturbing juxtaposition of mundane family routines against the unseen but ever-present horror of the Holocaust, using sound design rather than explicit imagery to evoke the atrocities occurring just beyond the family garden wall

[Playing for Time](#) (1980)

The true story of Fania Fénelon, a Jewish singer imprisoned at Auschwitz who survives by performing in the women's orchestra under the direction of Alma Rosé. The film powerfully depicts how music became both salvation and torment for these women, forced to provide entertainment for Nazi officers and accompany fellow prisoners to their deaths while struggling with their own survival, guilt, and the moral complexities of their situation.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

BOOKS

- Music in the Holocaust: Confronting Life in the Nazi Ghettos and Camps by Shirli Gilbert
- Violins of Hope by James A. Grymes
- Music of Another World by Szymon Laks
- Inherit the Truth by Anita Lasker-Wallfisch
- The Kingdom of Auschwitz by Otto Friedrich

ORGANISATIONS AND ARCHIVES

- Holocaust Educational Trust - www.het.org.uk
- The Wiener Holocaust Library - www.wienerlibrary.co.uk
- Jewish Music Institute - www.jmi.org.uk
- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum - www.ushmm.org
- Yad Vashem - www.yadvashem.org



GLOSSARY OF TERMS

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Concentration Camp - Facilities used to confine political prisoners and members of national or minority groups for reasons such as ethnicity, political affiliation, or religion. In Nazi Germany, these evolved from detention centres to sites of systematic murder.

Extermination Camp - Nazi camps built primarily or exclusively for the systematic murder of people in large numbers. Auschwitz-Birkenau combined functions of both concentration and extermination camp.

Holocaust - The systematic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million European Jews by the Nazi regime and its allies between 1933 and 1945.

Kapo - A prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp assigned by the SS guards to supervise forced labour or carry out administrative tasks.

SS - The Schutzstaffel (commonly abbreviated as SS) was a major paramilitary organisation in Nazi Germany. Initially established as Hitler's personal bodyguard unit, it became one of the most powerful and feared organisations in Nazi Germany, responsible for security, intelligence, and implementing Nazi racial policies, including the Holocaust.

Liberation - The freeing of Nazi concentration camps by Allied forces, beginning in July 1944 and continuing until the end of World War II in Europe in May 1945. Auschwitz was liberated by Soviet forces on January 27, 1945.

Testimony - First-person accounts from survivors of historical events, providing both historical record and personal witness.

Cultural Resistance - Acts that preserve cultural identity and human dignity in the face of oppression, including the creation of art, music, literature, and theatre.





Young Anita Lasker-Wallfish

This discussion guide was created to accompany the 2025 UK theatrical and community release of THE LAST MUSICIAN OF AUSCHWITZ. It may be freely used and adapted for educational and community purposes.