

## The Grey Zone 2001/Certificate 15

### Synopsis

The film is based on real events in Auschwitz-Birkenau. It tells the story of the 12<sup>th</sup> *Sonderkommando*, penultimate group of special squads who were forced to assist in the murder of prisoners in exchange for material privileges and prolonged life.

When the squad is due to be murdered and replaced, an uprising is planned. As the revolt is about to start, a 14 year old girl is found barely alive after she has miraculously survived the gas chambers. The men face the dilemma of choosing to save her life even though it may threaten an uprising which could save thousands more.

### HMDT Review

The film gives an interesting insight into life in the camps and what roles people assumed. We see roll calls and interrogations, as well as debates and bartering. There is an incongruous scene where men and women are brought off a train and walked straight into the changing rooms where the camp musicians are playing very jolly music. This all helps to build the picture of life inside the Nazi's largest killing camp.

There are two narratives within the film, one with the men, the *Sonderkommandos*, and another where women are gathering gunpowder and passing it along in the clothes of the dead bodies to the *Sonderkommandos*. There are also scenes with the camp's doctor, who is worried for his wife and daughter, and the Oberscharfuhrer who uses knowledge of their whereabouts to keep control the Jewish doctor.

Oberscharfuhrer Muhsfeldt finds out about the plot when they discover gunpowder in the female camp. He tells their doctor to convince the men to halt the uprising, otherwise a massacre will take place.

The little girl who survives the gas seems to represent survival to the men who feel increasingly guilty about their roles as *Sonderkommandos*. The Abramowics character raises some questions about whether one life is worth saving – if the girl is found she will jeopardise the whole operation. His character isn't concerned so much with the destruction of the crematoria, as he is with escaping – he is worried about his own survival. This, along with the fact that the men have accepted a longer life with benefits in Auschwitz-Birkenau by being *Sonderkommandos* raises interesting questions about guilt and survival. Most of the men are concerned with

breaking down the crematoria to save thousands more after them – and they also know that were they to try and escape, the fact that they have seen the extermination tools will mean the Nazis will do anything to prevent their escape.

### Issues to be aware of

There are some particularly harrowing scenes, in particular a mass shooting in the women's camp, and in the undressing room where a Jewish man accuses the *Sonderkommando* of being just like the Nazis and sending them to their deaths. In the intensity of these scenes where the morality becomes skewed beyond normal understandings of good and evil we see the absolute horror of Auschwitz.

### Reflection points

1. given the extremity of the *Sonderkommandos* position, is it still possible to apply moral judgement to their actions?
2. why do the leaders of the uprising react so strongly to the girl's survival of the gas chambers?
3. the film presents a variety of ways in which prisoners dealt with their plight. What do you think governed these different reactions to the horrors of Auschwitz-Birkenau?
4. how far can films like this go in educating about the Holocaust? Are there better media platforms to make people aware of genocide?

Use HMDT resources to find out more about life in the camps

<http://www.hmd.org.uk/genocides/the-holocaust/life-in-the-camps> and liberators, resistance and rescuers <http://www.hmd.org.uk/genocides/the-holocaust/liberation-resistance-and-rescuers>.