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**Stitches**

AHS Humanities 10

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October, 2012

Culture of War Fact Page

* Dogfights were a new style of fighting in World War II.
* Prisoners in concentration camps were marked with different colored triangles to indicate race and things of that nature.
* Each prisoner had an identification number
* Auschwitz was a camp in Poland that was both a labor and a death camp
* Camps were often lined with barbed wire or other types of fences
* Auschwitz was comprised of sixteen one-story buildings
* Children, women, and men were all victims in concentration camps
* Hydrogen cyanide was one of the poisonous gasses used in the gas chambers
* Howard was from Minnesota, which would have been very cold and snowy in November
* Block 10 housed the medical experiments in Auschwitz
* Mengele had a laboratory inside Auschwitz
* Josef Mengele had an obsession with twins and loved to experiment on them
* Mengele used marble tables to perform his experiments
* Mengele was called the Angel of Death by many people of the time because he dictated who would be put to death.
* Mengele was a Nazi surgeon
* There were accounts of several operations that Mengele performed, including chemical injections into eyes, children sewn together to create Siamese twins, and things of that nature

The raging storm in the distance smudges the dark clouds. The setting sun gives a deep red glow, as if a dying comrade has smeared his blood across the sky, begging the heavens for one last breath. The base is noisy, riddled with laughter and far-off dogfights, a cacophony of mixed up sounds. This is the sort of cosmic dissonance that has become my daily life.

“Gov?” I hear my name. It echoes through my head, snapping me out of my private thoughts and reluctantly returning me to gruesome reality. “You alright?” Leo stands to my right, obviously tipsy. I understand why he’s drinking. He’s trying to prepare, to numb himself, his soul. We’ve been stationed all over Europe for two years fighting the followers of Hitler and evacuating the countless victims of the tortures inflicted upon them in his name. Tomorrow, we go into the camps. Our commander says it’s to help our morale. That maybe we’ll fight harder if we know what exactly our men are dying for. We know what happens in the camps. We see it in the lucky ones we can get out before the Nazis can put a gun to their heads or steal their children. The triangles on their striped pajamas have blurred into a sort of perverted rainbow. Green, pink, red, purple, black, yellow. We have seen so many identification numbers we can’t even count to ten anymore. Numbers, which we once so faithfully recited in our crisp school clothes, now swim before our weary eyes. After the war, we never want them to pass our lips again.

“Yeah, Leo. I’m fine. Let’s go lights out. We’ve got a big day tomorrow.”

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Have you ever felt a chill unlike that which rides the winter wind? A cold so painful it’s as if your body is freezing from the inside out? Like the devils that lurk in the shadows have taken up residence in your soul? This chill lives in the dead. It’s an infection that spreads when you stare into the empty eyes of a child, still holding her lifeless mother’s hand. This is what I feel.

Auschwitz. What so evil a devil could mastermind such a brutal circle of hell? Never in my life have I seen horrors such as this. The Russians evacuated the camp three days ago, supervising the prisoners’ escape. Auschwitz had been both a death camp and a labor camp, so at least the Soviets had living people to evacuate.

Today, we enter the laboratory of Satan himself.

We move as a group into the camp, at least at first. Then, slowly, men begin to fall away. I realize how few we are and look back. Soldiers, grown men, are on their knees. Some hold rosaries and crosses tightly to their hearts in clenched fists; some simply clasp their hands together and look to the heavens. All are praying. They are praying for salvation from a being greater than they. I look at our commander, stoic and resolute against the backdrop of the barbed fence that lines the camp. He stands, arms crossed, observing. I wonder when he’s going to snap to attention and pull the men off of their knees, telling them that we haven’t seen the worst of it yet. But he doesn’t. Not yet. He allows them this one courtesy because he knows that before we push forward, we will have needed to place our faith in something. I too fall to my knees and pray. All is silent for one brief moment, and then suddenly, we are moving again.

Each step that I take a new horror awaits me. There are sixteen buildings, all one story tall and uniform in design. However, it is not the buildings that capture our attention. There are enormous pits scattered throughout the complex. We know what they are before we come upon them. Nevertheless, nothing could have prepared us for this.

A mass grave stretches before us. Children, women, men. It seems as if there is no end to the death. They are stacked on top of each other. No, not stacked, as that would indicate some sort of order and forethought. These bodies were thrown into this pit. Arms and legs are bent at strange angles, heads suspended in an awkward calm. Some have visible wounds: bullet holes, infected limbs, broken bones. With others it becomes harder to tell what made their heart stop beating. I stare at a woman who had dried blood around her white lips. I can tell that she has been in the gas chamber. Hydrogen cyanide can do awful things to a body before the sweet release of death finds your tormented spirit.

“Over here!” my comrade calls out, breaking the stillness. I tear my eyes away from the unfortunate soul and walk to him. With a shaky finger, he points to the near corner of the grave. I can already see the tears forming in his eyes. It takes me a moment, but I see the cause of his distress. A small girl lies crumpled against the cold dirt corner of the pit. She lies face up, bright green eyes wide open. Then, my gaze drifts to her hands. A tattered stuffed bunny rabbit is clasped in her hand, ears torn and fur matted. Someone must have smuggled it in for her. Perhaps that is why she was killed. The rabbit is almost unrecognizable except for one thing: I know this bunny well. I shakily reach into my pocket and pull out a worn photograph of the family that waits for me back home. It was taken at Christmas, and my children are huddled under the sparkling tree, surrounded by the gifts I know my wife worked night and day to afford. There, clutched in my beautiful daughter’s hand, is a stuffed rabbit. True, the fur is clean and brown and the ears are whole, but it is the same rabbit. I let out a small cry and other men come to join me. Even though this child is not mine who sleeps safely snuggled in her bed, she is someone’s baby. As I stare into her blank eyes, all I see is my daughter and the face of the monster that stole this little girl’s life from her. I can’t help it. I turn on my heels and walk away.

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I find a quiet section of the complex and sit with my back to the fence. Silently, I close my eyes and dig my hands into the cool earth. We are in the heart of winter and I must break through the frozen topsoil with my numb fingertips. Even inches underneath the surface, the frost is still biting its frozen teeth into the dirt. My hands chill quickly but I keep them buried. This war is carving into me as if I am a rock and it is the ocean, slowly turning me into a tide pool. With every unwelcome wave, it leaves behind little bits of itself on my very essence. Just when I feel as if all is calm, it crashes into me again, severing pieces of myself and replacing it with foreign entities. These are not delicate demons. Their strange bodies claw and thrash, fighting further into me until they are all that occupy my mind. I fight these alien ideas back and think of home. Minnesota, chilly and tranquil in the November winds. The snow would be a thick blanket on the ground, unwavering against the warmhearted sun. My daughter and my son bundled up in their winter coats making snowmen, noses rosy from the frosty breeze. I can nearly hear their giggles and screams as they chase each other around the yard. My mind drifts to my wife, standing on our doorstep with two steaming cups of cocoa in her delicate hands, calling in our troublemakers from their weekend fun. Maybe if I yell loud enough, strong enough, I can break through the illusion and be back home with them again. A sudden burst of frigid wind entangles me, knocking my mind from its joyful reverie and back to the unforgiving grip of truth.

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I walk through the complex with Harry and Daniel, two men who I have served with for months. We don’t speak. At this moment, I’m not sure any of us can. We have seen eight graves, countless bodies, and unspeakable horrors. We happen upon an unmarked door in Block 10. Though we have a sinking realization that we will never be the same after we walk through it, we give each other a small nod. We are in this together. I slowly pull open the door and we are immediately engulfed in the stench of rotting flesh and disease. We pull our undershirts over our nose and descend into the dark staircase before us.

We are on the stairs for what seems like only moments in the blackness before we touch down on a stone floor. I feel along the cold walls until my fingers find a light switch and I flip it. Several light bulbs illuminate the damp space, showing our eyes what sort of place we have happened upon. It appears as though we have found the experimental laboratory of Josef Mengele.

I wish I could pull out my eyes, or go back before I had ever seen this. Mengele, it appears, had an affinity for twins. Hard marble tables lie before us in pairs. IVs and tool trays are scattered about the room. The room is long, maybe 70 feet by 30 feet. We had heard rumors about the kinds of things that happened behind closed doors in rooms such as this. The Angel of Death. This is what they called Mengele. He was a Nazi scientist here at Auschwitz, given free reign over the children. Especially the twins. There were accounts of chemical injected into children’s eyes in an attempt to change their eye color. Children were sewn together to create Siamese twins. Removal of organs and limbs, extreme isolation, dissections without anesthesia, sex change operations. The list went on. We had thought these were nothing but stories, just gross exaggerations meant to shock us into fully believing in the cause. It appears as though we were wrong. We walk down the room, careful to avoid the various medical paraphernalia scattered about the lab. It is towards the back of the laboratory that we come upon the source of the smell. A pair of what look like teenage gypsy twins is lying on a marble slab. A boy and a girl, both are guiltless victims of this psychopath. It appears as though whatever experiment they had been a part of has not gone the way it was supposed to. Bags of blood are stacked on a tray next to the girl. We see what was done to them. Mengele had attempted to cut one hand from each of the twins and attach it to the other. Their left hands looked like something out of Frankenstein. They are swollen, and green around the cut. It looks so odd, staring at the hands. The boy is well built and muscular and such a dainty, feminine hand does not belong with him. We stand for several minutes, just conceding the sad fate of these two children. In a moment, our names float in on the wind, being called by our commander. We quickly cross our bodies and look to the sky, trying to protect their souls for the ascent to heaven.

We make our way up the stairs and out of the complex, finding our commander and the rest of our comrades in the main field near the entrance of the camp. By this time, the sun is setting. Our commander has a grim look on his stern face. He says only eight words that shatter the silence: “Do you see what we are fighting for?”

He lets this sit for a single moment and then makes an about-face and leaves us. The sky is water-colored with pastels, each color losing itself in the next. A faint glow surrounds everything, illuminating the world in a gentle, glimmering blush. It feels as if the world has stopped turning. I inhale and wish that I could stay here in this moment, suspended in the still infinite twilight until the breath leaves my ruined soul.

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