Auschwitz concentration camp

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"Auschwitz" and "Auschwitz-Birkenau" redirect here. For the town, see Oświęcim. Distinguish from Austerlitz. Or see Auschwitz (disambiguation)

Auschwitz concentration camp (German: Konzentrationslager Auschwitz [ˌɑʊʃvɪts] (listen)) was a network of concentration and extermination camps built and operated by the Third Reich in Polish areas annexed by Nazi Germany during World War II. It was the largest of the Nazi concentration camps, consisting of Auschwitz I (the Stammlager or base camp); Auschwitz II–Birkenau (the Vernichtungslager or extermination camp); Auschwitz III–Monowitz, also known as Buna–Monowitz (a labor camp); and 45 satellite camps.[1]

Auschwitz had for a long time been a German name for Oświęcim, the town by and around which the camps were located; the name "Auschwitz" was made the official name again by the Nazis after they invaded Poland in September 1939. Birkenau, the German translation of Brzezinka ("birch forest"), referred originally to a small Polish village that was destroyed by the Nazis to make way for the camp.

Auschwitz II–Birkenau was designated by Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler, the Third Reich's Minister of the Interior, as the place of the "final solution of the Jewish question in Europe". From early 1942 until late 1944, transport trains delivered Jews to the camp's gas chambers from all over German-occupied Europe.[2] The camp's first commandant, Rudolf Höss, testified after the war at the Nuremberg Trials that up to three million people had died there (2.5 million gassed, and 500,000 from disease and starvation).[3] Today the accepted figure is 1.3 million, around 90 percent of them Jewish.[4][5] Others deported to Auschwitz included 150,000 Poles, 23,000 Roma and Sinti, 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war, some 400 Jehovah's Witnesses and tens of thousands of people of diverse nationalities.[6][7] Those not killed in the gas chambers died of starvation, forced labor, infectious diseases, individual executions, and medical experiments.[8]

On January 27, 1945, Auschwitz was liberated by Soviet troops, a day commemorated around the world as International Holocaust Remembrance Day. In 1947, Poland founded a museum on the site of Auschwitz I and II, which by 2010 had seen 29 million visitors—1,300,000 annually—pass through the iron gates crowned with the infamous motto, Arbeit macht frei ("work makes [you] free").[9]

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Camps

Auschwitz

German Nazi Concentration and Extermination camp (1940–1945).

The main entrance to Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp

Location of Auschwitz in contemporary Poland

Coordinates 50°02′09″N 19°10′42″E

Other names

Birkenau

Location

Auschwitz, Nazi Germany

Operated by

the Nazi Schutzstaffel (SS), the NKVD (after World War II)

Original use

Army barracks

Operational

May 1940 – January 1945

Inmates

mainly Jews, Poles, Roma, Soviet soldiers

Killed

1.1 million (estimated)

Liberated by

Soviet Union, January 27, 1945

Notable

Viktor Frankl, Primo Levi, Włodzimierz Piekęski, Rudolf Vrba, Elea Wiesel, Maximilian Kolbe

Notable books

If This Is a Man, Night, Man's Search for Meaning

Website

Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum
Main camps

The Auschwitz complex of camps was located administratively in Provinz Oberschlesien of the Third Reich, Regierungsbezirk Katowitz, Landkreis Bielitz, approximately 30 km south of Katowice and 50 km west of Kraków, as part of the Polish areas annexed by the Nazis, encompassing a large industrial area rich in natural resources. There were 48 camps in all. The three main camps were Auschwitz I, Auschwitz II-Birkenua, and a work camp called Auschwitz III-Monowitz, or the Buna. Auschwitz I served as the administrative center, and was the site of the deaths of roughly 70,000 people, mostly ethnic Poles and Soviet prisoners of war. Auschwitz II was an extermination camp or Vernichtungslager, the site of the deaths of at least 960,000 Jews, 75,000 Poles, and some 19,000 Roma. Auschwitz III-Monowitz served as a labor camp for the Buna-Werke factory of the IG Farben concern. The SS-Totenkopfverbände (SS-TV) was the SS organization responsible for administering the Nazi concentration camps for the Third Reich. The SS-TV was an independent unit within the SS with its own ranks and command structure. Obersturmbannführer Rudolf Höss was overall commandant of the Auschwitz complex from May 1940 – November 1943; Obersturmbannführer Arthur Liebehenschel from November 1943 – May 1944; and Sturmbannführer Richard Baer from May 1944 – January 1945.

Yisrael Gutman writes that it was in the concentration camps that Hitler’s concept of absolute power came to fruition. Primo Levi, who described his year in Auschwitz in If This Is A Man, wrote:

[Never has there existed a state that was really “totalitarian.” ... Never has some form of reaction, a corrective of the total tyranny, been lacking, not even in the Third Reich or Stalin’s Soviet Union: in both cases, public opinion, the magistrature, the foreign press, the churches, the feeling for justice and humanity that ten or twenty years of tyranny were not enough to eradicate, have to a greater or lesser extent acted as a brake. Only in the Lager [camp] was the restraint from below non-existent, and the power of these small satraps absolute.[9]

Auschwitz I

Auschwitz I was the original camp, serving as the administrative center for the whole complex. The site for the camp (16 one-story buildings) had earlier served as Austrian army and later Polish army artillery barracks. It was first suggested as a site for a concentration camp for Polish prisoners by SS-Oberführer Arpad Wigan, an aide to Higher SS and Police Leader for Silesia, Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski. Bach-Zelewski had been searching for a site to house prisoners in the Silesia region as the local prisons were filled to capacity. Richard Glücks, head of the Concentration Camps Inspectorate, sent former Sachsenhausen concentration camp commandant, Walter Eisfeld, to inspect the site. Glücks informed SS-Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler that a camp would be built on the site on February 21, 1940.[10] Rudolf Höss would oversee the development of the camp and serve as the first commandant, SS-Obersturmführer Josef Kramer was appointed Höss’s deputy.[11]

Local residents were evicted, including 1,200 people who lived in shacks around the barracks, creating an empty area of 40 km², which the Germans called the “interest area of the camp”. 300 Jewish residents of Oświęcim were brought in to lay foundations. From 1940 to 1941 17,000 Polish and Jewish residents of the western districts of Oświęcim town, from places adjacent to Auschwitz Concentration Camp, were expelled. Germans ordered also expulsions from the villages of Broszkowice, Babice, Brzezinka, Rajsko, Pławy, Haryżew, Bór, and Budy.[12] The expulsion of Polish civilians was a step towards establishing the Camp Interest Zone, which was set up to isolate the camp from the outside world and to carry out business activity to meet the needs of the SS. German and Volksdeutsche settlers moved into some buildings whose Jewish population had been deported to the ghetto.

Main article: First mass transport to Auschwitz concentration camp

The first prisoners (30 German criminal prisoners from the Sachsenhausen camp) arrived in May 1940, intended to act as functionaries within the prison system. The first transport of 728 Polish prisoners, which included 20 Jews, arrived on June 14, 1940 from the prison in Tarnów, Poland. They were interned in the former building of the Polish Tobacco Monopoly adjacent to the site, until the camp was ready. The inmate population grew quickly, as the camp absorbed Poland’s intelligentsia and dissidents, including the Polish underground resistance. By March 1941, 10,900 were imprisoned there, most of them Poles.[11]

The SS selected some prisoners, often German criminals, as specially privileged supervisors of the other inmates (so-called kapos). Although involved in numerous atrocities, only two Kapos were ever prosecuted for their individual behavior; many were deemed to have had little choice but to act as they did.[13] The various classes of prisoners were distinguishable by special marks on their clothes; Jews and Soviet prisoners of war were generally treated the worst. All inmates had to work in the associated arms factories, except on Sundays, which were reserved for cleaning and showering. The harsh work requirements, combined with poor nutrition and hygiene, led to high death rates among the prisoners.

Block 11 of Auschwitz was the “prison within the prison”, where violators of the numerous rules were punished. Some prisoners were made to spend the nights in “standing cells”. These cells were about 1.5 m² (16 sq ft), and four men would be placed in them; they could do nothing but stand, and were forced during the day to work with the other prisoners. In the basement were located the “starvation cells”; prisoners incarcerated here were given neither food nor water until they were dead.[14]
Prisoners placed in these cells would gradually suffocate as they used up all of the oxygen in the cell; sometimes the SS would light a candle in the cell to use up the oxygen more quickly. Many were subjected to hanging with their hands behind their backs for hours, even days, thus dislocating their shoulder joints. [15]

On September 3, 1941, deputy camp commandant SS-Hauptsturmführer Fritz Fritsch experimented on 600 Russian POWs and 250 Polish inmates by gathering them in the basement of Block 11 and gassing them with Zyklon B, a highly lethal cyanide-based pesticide. [16] This paved the way for the use of Zyklon B as an instrument for extermination at Auschwitz, and a gas chamber and crematorium were constructed by converting a bunker. This gas chamber operated from 1941 to 1942, during which time some 60,000 people were killed therein; it was then converted into an air-raid shelter for the use of the SS. This gas chamber still exists, together with the associated crematorium, which was reconstructed after the war using the original components, which remained on-site. [17][18]

Auschwitz II-Birkenau

Construction on Auschwitz II-Birkenau, the extermination camp, began in October 1941 to ease congestion at the main camp. It was larger than Auschwitz I, and more people passed through its gates than through Auschwitz I. It was designed to hold several categories of prisoners, and to function as an extermination camp in the context of Heinrich Himmler's preparations for the Final Solution of the Jewish Question, the extermination of the Jews. [19] The first gas chamber at Birkenau was "The Little Red House", a brick cottage converted into a gassing facility by tearing out the inside and bricking up the walls. It was operational by March 1942. A second brick cottage, "The Little White House", was similarly converted some weeks later. [20]

The Nazis had committed themselves to the final solution no later than January 20, 1942, the date of the Wannsee Conference. In his Nuremberg testimony on April 15, 1946, Rudolf Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz, testified that Heinrich Himmler personally ordered him to prepare Auschwitz for that purpose:

In the summer of 1941 I was summoned to Berlin to Reichsführer-SS Himmler to receive personal orders. He told me something to the effect—I do not remember the exact words—that the Führer had given the order for a final solution of the Jewish question. We, the SS, must carry out that order. If it is not carried out now then the Jews will later on destroy the German people. He had chosen Auschwitz on account of its easy access by rail and also because the extensive site offered space for measures ensuring isolation.

British historian Laurence Rees writes, that Höss may have misremembered the year Himmler said this. Himmler did indeed visit Höss in the summer of 1941, but there is no evidence that the final solution had been planned at this stage. Rees writes that the meeting predated the killings of Jewish men by the Einsatzgruppen in the East and the expansion of the killings in July 1941. It also predates the Wannsee Conference. Rees speculates that the conversation with Himmler was most likely in the summer of 1942. [22] The first gassings, using an industrial gas derived from prussic acid and known by the brand name Zyklon-B, were carried out at Auschwitz in September 1941. [23]

In early 1943, the Nazis decided to increase greatly the gassing capacity of Birkenau. Crematorium II, originally designed as a mortuary, with morgues in the basement and ground-level furnaces, was converted into a killing facility by placing a gas-tight door on the morgues and adding vents for Zyklon-B and ventilation equipment to remove the gas. [24] It went into operation in March. Crematorium III was built using the same design. Crematoria IV and V, designed from the start as gassing centers, were also constructed that spring. By June 1943 all four crematoria were operational. Most of the victims were killed during the period afterwards. [25]

The camp was staffed partly by prisoners, some of whom were selected to be kapos (orderlies, most of whom were convicts) and sonderkommandos (workers at the crematoria). The kapos were responsible for keeping order in the barrack huts; the sonderkommandos prepared new arrivals for gassing (ordering them to remove their clothing and surrender their personal possessions) and transferred corpses from the gas chambers to the furnaces, having first pulled out any gold that the victims might have had in their teeth. Members of these groups were killed periodically. The kapos and sonderkommandos were supervised by members of the SS; altogether 6,000 SS members worked at Auschwitz.

Command of the women's camp, which was separated from the men's area by the incoming railway line, was held in turn by Johanna Langefeld, Maria Mandel, and Elisabeth Volkenrath.

The Gypsy camp

In December 1942, Heinrich Himmler issued an order to send all Sinti and Roma (Gypsies) to concentration camps with Auschwitz being one of the main camps; they had been previously sent to internment camps and ghettos such as the Lodz ghetto, to which 5,000 Ungrika (Hungarian) Roma from Burgenland, Austria were sent. [26] A separate camp for the Roma was set up at Auschwitz II-Birkenau known as the Zigeunerfamilienlager ("Gypsy Family Camp"). The first transport of German Gypsies arrived on February 26, 1943, and housed in Section B-Ile of Auschwitz II. The "Gypsy Family Camp", which was still under construction at the time, was to become a separate subcamp within Auschwitz II. The camp would eventually contain 32 residential and six sanitation barracks and house a total of 20,967 Romani men, women, and children. This does not include a transport of approximately 1,700 Polish Sinti and Roma men, women, and children, previously mentioned, which arrived from Bialystok on March 23, 1943.

Some of the people on the transport had typhus; to avoid an outbreak in the camp they were all killed in the gas chamber.

Amongst the victims who were killed after being shipped to the "Gypsy camp" was nine-year-old Maria Mandel, the commandant of Auschwitz, testified that Heinrich Himmler personally ordered him to prepare Auschwitz for that purpose:

In the summer of 1941 I was summoned to Berlin to Reichsführer-SS Himmler to receive personal orders. He told me something to the effect—I do not remember the exact words—that the Führer had given the order for a final solution of the Jewish question. We, the SS, must carry out that order. If it is not carried out now then the Jews will later on destroy the German people. He had chosen Auschwitz on account of its easy access by rail and also because the extensive site offered space for measures ensuring isolation.

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Dutch girl Anna Maria ("Settela") Steinbach, who appears in an iconic, haunting, still image from a film peering out from a transport train that would take her from the Westerbork detention camp in the Netherlands to her eventual death in the gas chambers at Auschwitz. Steinbach was believed to be Jewish until research uncovered her Sinti heritage in 1994.[27]

German psychologist Eva Justin did a pseudo-scientific study for her doctoral dissertation, titled "Lebensschicksale artfremder Erzogener Zigeunerkinder und ihrer Nachkommen" (English: "The life history of alien-raised Gypsy children and their descendants"). The objective of the study was to ascertain the prevalence of "Gypsy traits" in "Zigeunermischlinge", (Gypsy half-breed) half-Romani children, many half-German, who were taken from their parents and raised in orphanages and foster homes without any contact with Romani culture.[28]

Of the 41 children in the study at St. Josaphspflege orphanage in Mußlingen, Germany, 39 of them (20 boys and 19 girls) were shipped to Auschwitz on May 6, 1944. Of the 39 children, two survived Auschwitz; all the others were killed, most during the final liquidation of the camp on the night of August 2–3, 1944.[29]

During the final liquidation of the Gypsy camp, the remaining 2,897 Romani in the camp were sent to the gas chambers.[30] The murder of the Romani people by the Nazis during World War II is known in the Romani language as "The Porajmos" ("The Devouring").[31]

### Auschwitz III

**Main article: Monowitz concentration camp**

Monowitz (also called Monowitz-Buna or Auschwitz III), initially established as a subcamp of Auschwitz concentration camp, became one of the three main camps in the Auschwitz concentration camp system, with an additional 45 subcamps in the surrounding area. It was named after the town of Monowice (German, Monowitz) upon which it was built which was located in the annexed portion of Poland. The camp was established in October 1942 by the SS at the behest of IG Farben executives to provide slave labor for their Buna Werke (Buna Works) industrial complex. The name Buna was derived from the butadiene-based synthetic rubber and the chemical symbol for sodium, Na, utilized in the process of synthetic rubber production developed in Germany. Various other German industrial enterprises built factories with their own subcamps, such as Siemens-Schuckert's Bobrek subcamp, close to Monowitz in order to profit from the use of slave labor. The German armaments manufacturer Krupp, headed by SS member Alfried Krupp, also built their own manufacturing facilities near Monowitz.[32]

Monowitz was built as an Arbeitslager (work camp), it also contained an "Arbeitsschulungslager" (Labor Education Camp) for non-Jewish prisoners perceived not up to par with German work standards. It held approximately 12,000 prisoners, the great majority of whom were Jewish, but also contained non-Jewish criminals and political prisoners. Monowitz prisoners were leased out by the SS to IG Farben to labor at the Buna Werke, a collection of chemical factories including those used to manufacture Buna (synthetic rubber) and synthetic oil. The SS charged IG Farben three reichsmarks (RM) per hour for unskilled workers, RM4 per hour for skilled workers and RM1½ for children. There were 45 smaller satellite camps, some of them tens of kilometers from the main camps, with prisoner populations ranging from several dozen to several thousand.[31] The largest were built at Trzebinia, Blechhammer and Althammer. Women's subcamps were constructed at Budy, Pławy, Zabrze, Gleiwitz I, II, III, Rajsko, and Lichtenwerden (now Świta). The satellite camps were named Aussenlager (external camp), Nebenlager (extension or subcamp), and Arbeitslager (labor camp).[33][34][35] Danuta Czech of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum writes that most of the satellite camps were pressed into service on behalf of German industry. Inmates of 28 of them worked for the German armaments industry. Nine camps were set up near foundries and other metal works, six near coal mines, six supplied prisoners to work in chemical plants, and three to light industry. One was built next to a plant making construction materials and another near a food processing plant. Apart from the weapons and construction industries, prisoners were also made to work in forestry and farming.[36]

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**Main article: SS command of Auschwitz concentration camp**

Due to its large size and key role in the Nazi genocide program, the Auschwitz Concentration Camp encompassed personnel from several different branches of the SS, some of which held overlapping and shared areas of responsibility. In all, there were over 7000 members of the SS assigned to Auschwitz during the entirety of the camp's existence.
The overall command authority for the entire camp was the SS-Economics Main Office, known as the SS-Wirtschafts-Verwaltungshauptamt or SS-WVHA. Within the WVHA, it was Department D (the Concentration Camps Inspectorate) which commanded directly the activities at Auschwitz.

The command personnel of Auschwitz, who lived on site and ran the camp complex, were all members of the SS-Totenkopfverbände, or the SS-TV. Due to a 1941 personnel directive from the SS Personalhauptamt, members of the SS-TV were also considered full members of the Waffen-SS. Such personnel were further authorized to display the Death's Head Collar Patch, indicating full membership in both the SS-TV and Waffen-SS.

The Gestapo also maintained a large office at Auschwitz, staffed by uniformed Gestapo officers and personnel. Auschwitz also maintained a medical corps, led by Eduard Wirths, whose doctors and medical personnel were from various backgrounds in the SS. The infamous Joseph Mengele, for example, was a combat field doctor in the Waffen-SS before transferring to Auschwitz after being wounded in combat.

Internal camp order was under the authority of another SS group, answering directly to the Camp Commander through officers known by the title Lagerführer. Each of the three main camps at Auschwitz was assigned a Lagerführer to which answered several SS-non-commissioned officers known as Rapportführer. The Rapportführer commanded several Blockführer who oversaw order within individual prisoner barracks. Assisting the SS with this task was a large collection of Kapos, who were trustee prisoners. SS personnel assigned to the gas chambers were technically under the same chain of command as other internal camp SS personnel, but in practice were segregated and worked and lived locally on site at the crematorium. In all, there were usually four SS personnel per gas chamber, led by a non-commissioned officer, who oversaw around one hundred Jewish prisoners (known as the Sonderkommando) forced to assist in the extermination process. The actual delivery of the gas to the victims was always handled by the SS, this was accomplished by a special SS unit known as the “Hygiene Division” which would drive Zyklon B to the crematorium in an ambulance and then empty the canister into the gas chamber. The Hygiene Division was under the control of the Auschwitz Medical Corps, with the Zyklon B ordered and delivered through the camp supply system.

External camp security was under the authority of an SS unit known as the “Guard Battalion”, or Wachbattalion. These guards manned watchtowers and patrolled the perimeter fences of the camp. During an emergency, such as a prisoner uprising, the Guard Battalion could be deployed within the camp as the need arose; a scene in the film The Grey Zone depicts the Guard Battalion entering and machine gunning a crematorium after the Jewish Sonderkommando rose up against the normal contingent of SS guards.

Various administrative and supply SS personnel were also assigned to Auschwitz, usually "out of the way" of the more horrific activities of the camp, based out of command administrative offices in the main camp of Auschwitz I. Oskar Gröning is one such well known Auschwitz clerk, who has appeared on several documentaries speaking about life in Auschwitz for the SS, and how living in the camp was in fact an enjoyable experience. Auschwitz also maintained a motor pool as well as an arsenal from which all the SS personnel would draw weapons and ammunition, although several of the SS were known to purchase their own handguns and pistols.

In addition to the command and control proper of Auschwitz Concentration Camp, the camp further frequently received orders and directives from other organs of the SS and the Nazi state. The camp itself was located in the Nazi Region of Silesia and therefore under the geographical control of the corresponding Gauleiter (prior to 1942, the camp had been under geographical jurisdiction of the General Government).

Furthermore, the camp fell under the subordinate command of the SS and Police Leader of the region and was often issued orders from the SS-Reichssicherheitshauptamt or RSHA, which was a key SS organization involved in the genocide program. Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler was known to issue orders to the camp commander, bypassing all other chains of command, in response to his own directives. Himmler would also occasionally receive broad instructions from Adolf Hitler or Hermann Göring, which he would interpret as he saw fit and transmit to the Auschwitz Camp Command.

Selection and extermination process

By July 1942, the SS were conducting the infamous "selections," in which incoming Jews were divided into those deemed able to work, who were sent to the right and admitted into the camp, and those who were sent to the left and immediately gassed. Prisoners were transported from all over German-occupied Europe by rail, arriving in daily convoys. The SS forced an orchestra to play as new inmates walked towards their “selection” and possible extermination; the musicians had the highest suicide rate of anyone in the camps, besides Sonderkommandos. The group selected to die, about three-quarters of the total, included almost all children, women with children, all the elderly, and all those who appeared on brief and superficial inspection by an SS doctor not to be completely fit. Auschwitz II-Birkenau claimed more victims than any other German extermination camp, despite coming into use after all the others.
In one failed attempt to muffle the noise, two motorcycle engines were revved up to full throttle nearby, but the sound of yelling could be heard over the engines.[44] 

Sonderkommandos removed gold teeth from the corpses of gas chamber victims; the gold was melted down and collected by the SS. The belongings of the arrivals were seized by the SS and sorted in an area of the camp called “Canada,” so-called because Canada was seen as a land of plenty. Many of the SS at the camp enriched themselves by pillaging the confiscated property.[45]

The gas chambers worked to their fullest capacity from April–July 1944, during the massacre of Hungary's Jews. Hungary was an ally of Germany during the war, but it had resisted turning over its Jews to the Germans until Germany invaded in March 1944. From April until July 9, 1944, 475,000 Hungarian Jews, half of the pre-war population, were deported to Auschwitz, at a rate of 12,000 a day for a considerable part of that period.[46] The incoming volume was so great that the SS resorted to burning corpses in open-air pits as well as in the crematoria.[47]

For most prisoners, the day began before dawn (at 4:30 am according to one report,[49] alternatively, at 3:00 am according to Dr. Miklos Nyiszli, who entered the camp in May, 1944[50]) with reveille or roll call, with 30 minutes allowed for morning ablutions. Dr. Nyiszli describes roll call as lasting four hours, beginning 3:00 am, at which time, “guards, armed with rubber clubs, drove the prisoners from their beds.” The prisoners were then ordered to line up outside in rows of five, and “then began the most inhumane part of roll call”, during which the guards and barracks leader swung at the prisoners with closed fists, arranged and rearranged them without a reasonable explanation, and invented reasons to do such things as order the entire barracks to remain squatting for an hour, their hands raised above their heads, their legs trembling with fatigue and cold. For even in summer the Auschwitz dawns were cold, and the prisoners’ light burlap served as scant protection against the rain and cold.[51] Nyiszli continues: “This sport continued for several hours”, until 7:00 am, when the SS officers arrived. The SS officers re-inspected and re-counted the ranks, inscribed the numbers in their notebooks, and “[if there were any dead in the barracks - and there were generally five or six a day, sometimes as many as ten - they too had to be present for the inspection. And not only present in name, but physically present, standing, stark naked, supported by two living prisoners until the muster was over. For, living or dead, the prescribed number of prisoners had to be present and accounted for.[52]

The prisoners chosen to work as Dr. Josef Mengele’s senior medical staff, however, were given civilian clothes, slept in the medical room of the twelfth “hospital” barracks, and rose to reveille at 7 am for a roll call that took “two or three minutes”. The bed-ridden were also counted, “as well as the previous night's dead. Here too the dead were stretched out beside the living.” These prisoners took breakfast in their rooms.[52]

Nyiszli described the diet of the subaltern medical corps (“For three years they had been eating the KZ bread made from wild chestnuts sprinkled with sawdust[53] and of typical prisoners (“a ration of mouldy bread made from wild chestnuts, a sort of margarine of which the basic ingredient is lignite, thirty grams of sausage made from the flesh of many horses, the whole not to exceed 700 calories. To wash this ration down a half liter of soup made from nettles and weeds, containing nothing fatty, no flour, no salt.”[54] Certain prisoners selected for in vivo or live medical experimentation (such as twins and dwarfs) were better fed and clothed (in civilian clothes). Also, “their bunks were comfortable and possibilities for hygiene were provided.[55]

After roll call, the Kommando, or work details, would walk to their place of work, five abreast, wearing striped camp fatigue, no underwear, and wooden shoes without socks, most of the time ill-fitting, which caused great pain. A prisoner's orchestra (such as the Women's Orchestra of Auschwitz) was forced to play grotesquely cheerful music as the workers marched through the gates in step.[49] Kapo—prisoners who had been promoted to foremen—were responsible for the prisoners’ behavior while they worked, as was an SS escort. The working day lasted 12 hours during the summer, and a little less in the winter. No rest periods were allowed. One prisoner would be assigned to the latrines to measure the time the workers took to empty their bladders and bowels.[56]

After work, there was a mandatory evening roll call. If a prisoner was missing, the others had to remain standing in place until he was either found or the reason for his absence discovered, even if it took hours, regardless of the weather conditions. After roll call, there were individual and collective punishments, depending on what had happened during the day, and after these, the prisoners were allowed to retire to their blocks for the night to receive their bread rations and water. Curfew was two or three hours later. The prisoners slept in long rows of wooden bunks, lying in and on their clothes and shoes to prevent them from being stolen.[57]

According to Nyiszli, “Eight hundred to a thousand people were crammed into the superimposed compartments of each barracks. Unable to stretch out completely, they slept there both lengthwise and crosswise, with one man's feet on another's head, neck, or chest. Stripped of all human dignity, they pushed and shoved and bit and kicked each other in an effort to get a few more inches' space on which to sleep a little more comfortably. For they did not have long to sleep”. [58]

**Medical experiments**

*Main article: Nazi human experimentation*

German doctors performed a wide variety of experiments on prisoners at Auschwitz. SS doctors performed a wide variety of experiments on prisoners at Auschwitz. SS doctors...
tested the efficacy of X-rays as a sterilization device by administering large doses to female prisoners. Prof. Dr. Carl Clauberg injected chemicals into women's uterus in an effort to glue them shut. Bayer, then a subsidiary of IG Farben, bought prisoners to use as guinea pigs for testing new drugs.[59]
The most infamous doctor at Auschwitz was Josef Mengele, known as the "Angel of Death". Particularly interested in research on identical twins, Mengele performed cruel experiments on them, such as inducing diseases in one twin and killing the other when the first died to perform comparative autopsies. He also took a special interest in dwarfs, and he deliberately induced gangrene in twins, dwarfs and other prisoners to study the effects.[60]
Mengele, at the behest of fellow Nazi physician Kurt Heissmeyer, was responsible for picking the twenty Jewish children to be used in Heissmeyer's pseudoscientific[61] medical experiments at the Neuengamme concentration camp. These children, at the conclusion of the experiments, were infamously hanged from wall hooks in the basement of the Bullenhusser Damm school in Hamburg.

**Jewish skeleton collection**

*Main article: Jewish skeleton collection*

The Jewish skeleton collection was obtained from among a pool of 115 Jewish inmates at Auschwitz, chosen for their perceived stereotypical racial characteristics. Rudolf Brandt and Wolfram Sievers, general manager of the Ahnenerbe, were responsible for collecting the skeletons for the collection of the Anatomy Institute at the Reich University of Strasbourg in the Alsace region of Occupied France. Due to a typhus epidemic, the candidates chosen for the skeleton collection were quarantined in order to prevent them from becoming ill and running their value as anatomical specimens; from a letter written by Sievers in June 1943: "Altogether 115 persons were worked on, 79 were Jews, 30 were Jewesses, 2 were Poles, and 4 were Asians. At the present time these prisoners are segregated by sex and are under quarantine in the two hospital buildings of Auschwitz."
The collection was sanctioned by Heinrich Himmler and under the direction of August Hirt. Ultimately 87 of the inmates were shipped to Natzweiler-Struthof. The deaths of 86 of these inmates were, in the words of Hirt, "induced" at a jury rigged gassing facility over the course of a few days in August 1943. One of the victims was shot by the SS when he fought entering the gas chamber. The corpses of 57 men and 29 women were sent to Strasbourg. Josef Kramer who would become the last commandant of Bergen Belsen personally carried out the gassing of 80 of the victims. In 1944 with the approach of the Allies, there was concern over the possibility of the corpses being discovered; at this point they had still not been defleshed. The first part of the process for this "collection" was to make anatomical casts of the bodies prior to reducing them to skeletons. In September 1944 Sievers telegrammed Brandt: "The collection can be defleshed and rendered unrecognizable. This, however, would mean that the whole work had been done for nothing – at least in part – and that this singular collection would be lost to science, since it would be impossible to make plaster casts afterwards."
Brandt and Sievers would be indicted, tried and convicted in the Doctors' Trial in Nuremberg. Hirt committed suicide in Schonenbach, Austria, on June 2, 1945 with a gunshot to the head.[62][63]
The names and biographical information of the murder victims were published in the book Die Namen der Nummern (The Names of the Numbers) by German historian Dr. Hans-Joachim Lang.[64]

**Escapes, resistance, and the Allies' knowledge of the camps**

*Further information: Auschwitz bombing debate, Witold Pilecki, and Rudolf Vrba*

Information regarding Auschwitz was available to the Allies during the years 1940–43 by the accurate and frequent reports of Polish Army Captain Witold Pilecki. Pilecki was the only known person to volunteer to be imprisoned at Auschwitz concentration camp, spending 945 days there, not only actively gathering evidence of genocide and supplying it to the British in London by German historian Dr. Hans-Joachim Lang.[64]
The attitude of the Allies changed with receipt of the very detailed Vrba–Wetzler report, compiled by two Jewish prisoners, Rudolf Vrba and Alfréd Wetzler, who escaped on April 7, 1944, and which finally convinced Allied leaders of the truth about Auschwitz. Details from the Vrba-Wetzler report were broadcast on June 15, 1944 by the BBC, and on June 20 by The New York Times, causing the Allies to put pressure on the Hungarian government to stop the mass deportation of Jews to the camp.[64]
Starting with a plea from the Slovakian rabbi Weissmandl in May 1944, there was a growing campaign to persuade the Allies to bomb Auschwitz or the railway lines leading to it. At one point Winston Churchill ordered that such a plan be prepared, but he was told that bombing the camp would most likely kill prisoners without disrupting the killing operation, and that bombing the railway lines was not technically feasible. The debate over what could have been done, or what should have been attempted even if success was unlikely, has continued ever since.

**Underground media**

Inmates were able to distribute information from the camp without escaping themselves. The Auschwitz Echo was an underground newspaper published by inmates and distributed as well to the resistance movement in Kraków.[65] Writers included the Communist Party member Bruno Baum. A shortwave transmitter hidden in Block 11 sent information directly to the Polish government-in-exile in London.[70] These reports were the first revelation about the Holocaust and were the principal source of intelligence on Auschwitz for the Western Allies. Nonetheless, those reports were for a long time discarded as "too extreme" by the Allies.[71]

**Birkenau revolt**
By 1943, resistance organizations had developed in the camp. These organizations helped a few prisoners escape; these escapees took with them news of exterminations, such as the killing of hundreds of thousands of Jews transported from Hungary between May and July 1944. On October 7, 1944, the Jewish Sonderkommando (those inmates kept separate from the main camp and put to work in the gas chambers and crematoria) of Birkenau Kommando III staged an uprising. They attacked the SS with makeshift weapons: stones, axes, hammers, other work tools and homemade grenades. They caught the SS guards by surprise, overpowered them and blew up the Crematorium IV, using explosives smuggled in from a weapons factory by female inmates. At this stage they were joined by the Birkenau Kommando I of the Crematorium II, which also overpowered their guards and broke out of the compound. Hundreds of prisoners escaped, but were all soon captured and, along with an additional group who participated in the revolt, executed.\[72\]

There were also plans for a general uprising in Auschwitz, coordinated with an Allied air raid and a Polish resistance (Armia Krajowa, Home Army) attack from the outside.\[67\] That plan was authored by Polish resistance fighter, Witold Pilecki, who organized in Auschwitz an underground Union of Military Organization – (Związek Organizacji Wojskowej, ZOW). Pilecki and ZOW hoped that the Allies would drop arms or troops into the camp (most likely the Polish 1st Independent Parachute Brigade, based in Britain), and that the Home Army would organize an assault on the camp from outside. By 1943, however, he realized that the Allies had no such plans. Meanwhile, the Gestapo redoubled its efforts to ferret out ZOW members, succeeding in killing many of them. Pilecki decided to break out of the camp, with the hope of personally convincing Home Army leaders that a rescue attempt was a valid option. He escaped on the night of April 26 – 27, 1943, but his plan was not accepted by the Home Army as the Allies considered his reports about the Holocaust exaggerated.\[67\]

The post of Crematorium Chief was held consecutively by:

SS - Hauptscharführer Otto Moll
SS - Hauptscharführer Hirsch
SS - Unterscharführer Steinberg
SS - Scharführer Hubert Busch
SS - Oberscharführer Eric Muhfeldt
SS - Oberscharführer Peter Voss

"In the last period of the camps existence the prisoners of the Sonderkommando were used to remove traces of the crime. In October 1944 they were employed in pulling down the walls of the burnt out crematorium IV, and in November 1944 they dismantled the technical installations of the gas chamber and ovens in crematoria II and III which were then blown up.

Lastly, a Polish report in 1946 by Dr. Filip Friedman and Tadeusz discovered the use of a gas van at Auschwitz, used to liquidate people sentenced to death by the special police court, which convened throughout the war at Auschwitz."

On 19 January 1942 SS Sergeant Ulmer of the Central Construction Administration of Auschwitz completed the plans for the construction of Crematorium II and III in Birkenau, which commenced in the summer of 1942.\[73\] The driver was named Arndt, Oberwachtmeister der Polizei-Sonderkommando.

**Individual escape attempts**

At least 802 prisoners attempted to escape from the Auschwitz camps during the years of their operation, of which 144 were successful. The fates of 331 of the escapees are still unknown.\[74\] A common punishment for escape attempts was death by starvation; the families of successful escapees were sometimes arrested and interned in Auschwitz and prominently displayed to deter others. If someone did manage to escape, the SS would pick 10 people at random from the prisoner's block and starve them to death.\[76\]

The most spectacular escape from Auschwitz took place on June 20, 1942, when Ukrainian Eugeniusz Bendera and three Poles, Kazimierz Piechowski, Stanislaw Gustaw Jaster and Józef Lempart made a daring escape.\[76\] The escapees were dressed as members of the SS-Totenkopfverbände, fully armed and in an SS staff car. They drove out the main gate in a stolen automobile, a Steyr 220 belonging to Rudolf Höss. Jaster carried with him a report about conditions in the camp, written by Witold Pilecki. The Germans never recaptured any of them.\[77\]

In 1943, the "Kampfgruppe Auschwitz" was organized with the aim to send out as much information about what was happening in Auschwitz as possible. They buried notes in the ground in the hope a liberator would find them and smuggled out photos of the crematoria and gas chambers.\[76\]

June 24, 1944, Mala Zimetbaum escaped with her Polish boyfriend, Edek Galinski. They also wanted to smuggle out deportation lists Zimetbaum had been able to copy due to her translator job in the office of the "Lagerleitung". They both were arrested on July 6 near the Slovakian frontier and sentenced to be executed on September 15, 1944 in Birkenau; Galinski managed to kill himself before being executed, while Zimetbaum, having failed to commit suicide, died finally after being tortured by the SS.\[78\]

**Evacuation, death marches, and liberation**

Further information: Death marches (Holocaust)

The last selection took place on October 30, 1944. The next month, Heinrich Himmler ordered the crematoria destroyed before the Red Army reached the camp. The gas chambers of Birkenau were blown up by the SS in January 1945 in an attempt to hide the German crimes from the advancing Soviet troops.\[81\] The SS command sent orders on January 17, 1945 calling for the execution of all prisoners remaining in the camp, but in the chaos of the Nazi retreat the order was never carried out. On January 17, 1945, Nazi personnel started to evacuate the facility. Nearly 60,000 prisoners were forced on a death march toward a camp in Wodzisław Śląski (German: Loslau). Those
too weak or sick to walk were left behind. These remaining 7,500 prisoners were liberated by the 322nd Rifle Division of the Red Army on January 27, 1945. Approximately 20,000 Auschwitz prisoners made it to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany, where they were liberated by the British in April 1945.[82] Among the artifacts of industrial-scale mass murder found by the Russians were 348,820 men's suits and 836,255 women's garments.

Death toll

The exact number of victims at Auschwitz is impossible to fix with certainty. Since the Nazis destroyed a number of records, immediate efforts to count the dead depended on the testimony of witnesses and the defendants on trial at Nuremberg. While under interrogation Rudolf Höss, commandant of Auschwitz concentration camp from 1940 to 1943, said that Adolf Eichmann told him that two and a half million Jews had been killed in gas chambers and about half a million had died “naturally”. Later he wrote “I regard two and a half million far too high. Even Auschwitz had limits to its destructive possibilities.”[85] Communist Polish and Soviet authorities maintained a figure “between 2.5 and 4 million”,[86] and the Auschwitz State Museum itself displayed a figure of 4 million killed, but “[few (if any) historians ever believed the Museum's four million figure”,[87] Raul Hilberg’s 1961 work The Destruction of the European Jews estimated the number killed at 1,000,000, and Gerald Reitlinger’s 1968 book The Final Solution described the Soviet figures as “ridiculous”, and estimated the number killed at “800,000 to 900,000”.[87] In 1983, French scholar George Wellers was one of the first to use German data on deportations to estimate the number killed at Auschwitz, arriving at 1.613 million dead, including 1.44 million Jews and 146,000 Poles.[88] A larger study started later by Franciszek Piper used timetables of train arrivals combined with deportation records to calculate 960,000 Jewish deaths and 140,000–150,000 ethnic Polish victims, along with 23,000 Roma and Sinti,[89] a figure that has met with significant agreement from other scholars.[89]

After the collapse of the Communist government in 1989, the plaque at Auschwitz State Museum was removed and the official death toll given as 1.1 million. Holocaust deniers have attempted to use this change as propaganda, in the words of the Nizkor Project:

”Deniers often use the ‘Four Million Variant’ as a stepping stone to leap from an apparent contradiction to the idea that the Holocaust was a hoax, again perpetrated by a conspiracy. They hope to discredit historians by making them seem inconsistent. If they can't keep their numbers straight, their reasoning goes, how can we say that their evidence for the Holocaust is credible? One must wonder which historians they speak of, as most have been remarkably consistent in their estimates of a million or so dead… Few (if any) historians ever believed the Museum's four million figure, having arrived at their own estimates independently. The museum’s inflated figures were never part of the estimated five to six million Jews killed in the Holocaust, so there is no need to revise this figure.”[87]

Antoni Dobrowolski, the oldest known survivor of Auschwitz, passed away at the age of 108 on 21 October 2012. He died in the northwestern Polish town of Dębno, according to Jarosław Mensfelt, a spokesman at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.[81]

Timeline of Auschwitz

The timeline of events at the Auschwitz concentration camp began in January 1940 when the location was first visited by Arpad Wagand, an aide to the Higher SS and Police Leader for Silesia, Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski. The original intent of the camp was to intern Polish political prisoners. The original uses of the camp were added to and the capacity expanded over the course of the next four years, which reflected the political and economic decisions of the Third Reich, including the implementation of the Final Solution.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>February 21, 1940</td>
<td>In January Arpad Wagand, aide to Höhere SS- und Polizeiführer für Silesia Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski, suggests the Polish military barracks at Oświęcim as a site for a concentration camp for Polish prisoners. Inspector of concentration camps Richard Glücks sends Sachsenhausen commandant Walter Eißfeld to inspect the site. On February 21 Glücks informs Reichsführer SS Heinrich Himmler that the site will be developed into a concentration camp.[90]</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 20, 1940</td>
<td>The first prisoners, 30 German career criminals from Sachsenhausen, arrive. Most will be made kapos; prisoner no. 1 is a German of Polish descent, Bruno Brodniewicz. Among this group is Kurt Pachala from Breslau (prisoner no. 24) who was tortured and then sent to a “standing cell” in the basement of Block 11 where he died of thirst and hunger on January 14, 1943 as punishment for the June 20, 1942 escape of four prisoners.[90]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 14, 1940</td>
<td>First mass transport, consisting of 728 Polish political prisoners from Tamów. They are held in the building which housed the Polish Tobacco Monopoly, until the camp is ready. Among the prisoners is Edward Galinski who would later make an escape with his girlfriend.[95]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 1, 1941</td>
<td>Reichsführer SS and Chief of German Police Heinrich Himmler inspects the camp. Because nearby factories use prisoners for forced labor, Himmler is concerned about the camp's capacity. On this visit, he orders both the expansion of Auschwitz I camp facilities to hold 30,000 prisoners and the building of a camp near Birkenau for an expected influx of 100,000 Soviet prisoners of war. Himmler also orders that the camp supply 10,000 prisoners for forced labor to construct an IG Farben factory complex at Dwory, about a mile away. Himmler made additional visits to Auschwitz in 1942, when he witnessed the killing of...</td>
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prisoners in the gas chambers.

**September 3, 1941**
The first gassings of prisoners occur in Auschwitz I. The SS tests Zyklon B gas by killing 600 Soviet prisoners of war and 250 other ill or weak prisoners. Testing takes place in a makeshift gas chamber in the cellar of Block 11 in Auschwitz I. The success of these experiments leads to the adoption of Zyklon B as the killing agent for Auschwitz II-Birkenau.

**January 25, 1942**
Himmler informs Richard Glücks, the Inspector of Concentration Camps, that 100,000 Jewish men and 50,000 Jewish women are to be deported from Germany to Auschwitz as forced laborers.

**March 27, 1942**
Deportations of Jews from France commence, primarily from Drancy internment camp. In total, approximately 75,000 French Jews are transported to Auschwitz (see Timeline of deportations of French Jews to death camps).[96]

**February 15, 1942**
The first transport of Jews from Bytom (Beuthen) in German-annexed Upper Silesia arrives in Auschwitz I. The SS camp authorities kill all those on the transport immediately upon arrival with Zyklon B gas. German SS and police authorities deport around 175,000 Jews to Auschwitz in 1942.

**June 20, 1942**
First transport of Slovakian Jews arrives.[44]

**August 4, 1942**
First transport of Jews from Belgium are deported to Auschwitz. Due to rescue efforts by resistance groups in Belgium, approximately 25,000 of the country's 57,000 registered Jews find hiding within the country and survive the war.[99][100]

**January 1, 1943 – March 31, 1943**
German SS and police authorities deport approximately 105,000 Jews to Auschwitz.

**January 29, 1943**
The Reich Central Office for Security orders all designated Roma residing in Germany, Austria, and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia to be deported to Auschwitz. The first transport of Roma from Germany arrives. The SS authorities house them in Section B-Ile of Auschwitz-Birkenau, which becomes known as the "Zigeunerlager or the Roma family camp." By the end of 1943 more than 18,000 Roma were incarcerated there, and 23,000 deported to other parts of the camp complex.

**March 13, 1943**
Out of a transport of 2,000 Jews from the Kraków Ghetto, 1,492 are gassed in the basement gas chamber of Crematorium II at Birkenau in the evening. This operation tests the gas chamber's ventilation and air extraction equipment installed by J.A. Topf engineer Heinrich Messing, who declared it operational earlier that day.[101]

**March 22, 1943**
Crematorium IV is ready for use.[102]

**March 31, 1943**
Crematorium II is handed over to the Auschwitz authorities.[101] Holocaust scholar Robert Jan van Pelt comments that more people lost their lives in this room than in any other room on Earth: 500,000 people.[103]

**April 4, 1943**
Crematorium V is ready for use.[102]

**April 22, 1943**
Transport 20 from the transit camp in Mechelen, Belgium arrives in Auschwitz. A Jewish doctor, Youra Livschitz, and his two non-Jewish high school friends Robert Maistriau and Jean Franklemon, managed to stop the train on the tracks with only a lantern and a handgun when it rounded a curve in Boortmeerbeek, Belgium and open the doors on some of the rail cars. Some prisoners managed to escape then, over 200 more jumped from the train en route.[104]

**April 26–27, 1943**
Witold Pilecki escapes during the night. He would later take part in the Warsaw Uprising, get captured...
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>1943</td>
<td>and spend the remainder of the war in P.O.W. camps.</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 30, 1943</td>
<td>Josef Mengele arrives at Auschwitz. He often took part in &quot;selections&quot; of incoming prisoners on the ramp at Birkenau. During his time at Auschwitz he engaged in pseudoscientific experiments on camp inmates. He had a special fascination with twins. Mengele was known as &quot;the Angel of Death&quot;. He escaped to South America after the war and was never brought to justice.[103]</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 24, 1943</td>
<td>Crematorium III is ready for use.[106]</td>
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<tr>
<td>July 19, 1943</td>
<td>Largest mass hanging at Auschwitz, public gallows constructed of train rails and railroad ties, specifically constructed to simultaneously hang 12 Polish prisoners, part of the Survey Kommando, for helping three prisoners escape. Two of the hanged are Boguslaw Ohrt; [no. 367] and Janusz Pogonowskino [no. 253][107]</td>
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<td>February 21, 1944</td>
<td>Primo Levi arrives in the camp from Italy.</td>
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<td>April 7, 1944</td>
<td>Two Jewish prisoners, Rudolf Vrba and Alfréd Wetzler, escape and pass a 32-page report of what is happening in the camp to Jewish officials in Slovakia. Their information becomes known as the Vrba-Wetzler report.</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 2, 1944</td>
<td>The first two transports of Hungarian Jews arrive in Auschwitz. Throughout May and June 1944, Hungarian Jews are deported to the camp at a rate of 12,000 a day.</td>
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<td>May 16, 1944</td>
<td>Elie Wiesel arrives with his family on or around this date. His mother and youngest sister are immediately sent to be gassed.</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 22, 1944</td>
<td>Romani-Sinti, deported from the Netherlands arrive in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Settela Steinbach, an eleven-year-old Sinti girl is caught on film peering out from the transport on May 19, by Jewish prisoner Rudolf Breslauer, who was ordered to film the deportation by the commandant of the Westerbork transit camp. Settela would die in the gas chamber.</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 6, 1944</td>
<td>The Allies land in Normandy, France to begin the liberation of Western Europe.</td>
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<td>June 15 and 20, 1944</td>
<td>The first reports regarded as credible that describe the mass murder taking place in the camp are published by the BBC and The New York Times respectively, based on the Vrba-Wetzler report.</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 24, 1944</td>
<td>Polish born Jewish girl Mala Zimetbaum (prisoner no. 19880) and her Polish boyfriend Edward &quot;Edek&quot; Galinski (prisoner no. 518) escape from Birkenau. Galinski, one of the first deportees to Auschwitz, was wearing an SS uniform provided to him by SS-Rottenfuehrer Edward Lubusch, an ethnic German raised in Poland. They were caught on July 6, 1944 and returned to Auschwitz. They were imprisoned in separate cells in Block 11; both were sentenced to death. On September 15, 1944, Galinski was hung. Mala slit her wrists with a razor blade interrupting her execution. She was, according to various accounts taken to the crematorium to be burned alive. It is not known whether that occurred or she was shot in the crematorium.[108][109]</td>
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<tr>
<td>July 7, 1944</td>
<td>In response to the publication of the Vrba-Wetzler Report, governments around the world put pressure on Regent Miklós Horthy of Hungary to halt the deportation of Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz, which he does on July 7, 1944.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 2-3, 1944</td>
<td>The Zigeunerlager family is liquidated during the night; 2,897 men, women, and children perish in the gas chamber; 1,400 surviving men and women are transferred to Buchenwald and Ravensbruck for slave labor. An estimated 20,000 Roma were killed there in Auschwitz. Among the murdered are Romani mischlinge, used by Nazi race scientist Eva Justin in her pseudoscientific race research.</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 12–13, 1944</td>
<td>Almost 6,000 residents of Warsaw are transported to Auschwitz in response to the Warsaw Uprising (approximately twice as many females as males, including over a thousand children).</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 3, 1944</td>
<td>Anne Frank is transported to Auschwitz along with her mother Edith and sister Margot; on October 28, 1944 Anne and Margot were chosen in a selection to be transferred to Bergen-Belsen. Edith was left behind where it was reported she died of starvation. Anne and Margot would both die in March 1945 in the typhus epidemic at Bergen-Belsen only weeks before the camp's liberation by the British on April 15, 1945.[110]</td>
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Began in Poland sentences Rudolf Höss to death on April 2, 1947 and he is hanged on April 16.

Members of the Jewish prisoner “special detachment” (Sonderkommando) that was forced to remove bodies from the gas chambers and operate the crematoria stage an uprising. They successfully blow up Crematorium IV and kill several guards. Women prisoners had smuggled gunpowder out of nearby factories to members of the Sonderkommando. The SS quickly suppresses the revolt and kills all the Sonderkommando members.

The last selections take place on the Jewish ramp at Birkenau; 1,689 people from a transport from Theresienstadt concentration camp are sent to the gas chambers. After this, only individuals are gassed after selection within the camp. The last 13 people to be killed this way were women, gassed or shot in crematorium II on November 25.[111]

As Soviet forces approach, SS chief Heinrich Himmler orders the destruction of the Auschwitz-Birkenau gas chambers and crematoria. During this attempt to destroy the evidence of mass killings, prisoners are forced to dismantle and dynamite the structures.

Twenty Jewish children, 10 boys and 10 girls ages 5 to 12, are selected from Block 10, by Josef Mengele at the behest of Kurt Heissmeyer. The children are sent to Neuengamme concentration camp. There they are infected with tuberculosis and subjected to medical experimentation. They are ultimately murdered by being hanged in the basement of the Bullenhusser Damm school in Hamburg.[112]

The Red Army launches the Vistula-Oder Offensive; Soviet troops liberate Łódź on January 17, only 877 Jews remain in the ghetto out of a high of 163,177 people in 1941; Warsaw and Kraków are both liberated on January 19. The advance heads toward Oświęcim.

As Soviet units approach the camp, the SS evacuates prisoners to the west. Tens of thousands, mostly Jews, are forced to march to the cities of Loslau and Gleiwitz in Upper Silesia. During the march, SS guards shoot anyone who cannot continue. In Loslau and Gleiwitz, the prisoners are placed on unheated freight trains and deported to concentration camps in Germany, particularly to Flossenbürg, Sachsenhausen, Gross-Rosen, Buchenwald, and Dachau, and to Mauthausen in Austria. Nearly 60,000 prisoners are forced on death marches from the Auschwitz camp system. As many as 15,000 die. Thousands more are killed in the days before the evacuation.

Soviet troops enter the Auschwitz camp complex and liberate 7,000 prisoners, including children.

British troops capture the camp's first commandant, Rudolf Höss, who is living as a farmer called Franz Lang.

Poland sentences Rudolf Höss to death on April 2, 1947 and he is hanged on April 16.

After the war

Main article: Auschwitz Trial

After the war, parts of Auschwitz 1 and/or its guards' quarters served first as a hospital for sick liberated prisoners.[113] Until 1947 some of the facilities were used as an NKVD and MBP prison camp. The Buna-Werke were taken over by the Polish government and became the foundation for the region's chemical industry. At Auschwitz 1 the Gestapo building was demolished and on its site was built a gallows on which Standartenführer SS Rudolf Höss was hanged on April 17, 1947 for numerous war crimes.[114] On November 24, 1947, the Auschwitz trial began in Kraków, when the Poland's Supreme National Tribunal tried 41 former staff of the Auschwitz concentration camps complex. The trials ended on December 22, 1947, with 23 death sentences issued, as well as 16 imprisonments ranging from life sentence to 3 years.

After liberation, local Polish farming population returning to the area searched the ruins of Birkenau thoroughly for re-usable fallen bricks, so they could rebuild farm buildings for shelter needed for the next winter. That explains the "missing rubble" argument brought up by Holocaust deniers.[citation needed]

Today, at Birkenau the entrance building and some of the southern brick-built barracks survive; but of the almost 300 wooden barracks, only 19...
have been reconstructed from authentic materials: 18 near the entrance building and one, on its own, farther away. All that survives of the others are chimneys, remnants of a largely ineffective means of heating. Many of these wooden buildings were constructed from prefabricated sections made by a company that intended them to be used as stables; inside, numerous metal rings for the tethering of horses can still be seen.

Creation of the museum

Main article: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum

The Polish government decided to restore Auschwitz I and turn it into a museum honouring the victims of Nazism: Auschwitz II, where buildings (many of which were prefabricated wood structures) were prone to decay, was preserved but not restored. Today, the Auschwitz I museum site combines elements from several periods into a single complex: for example the gas chamber at Auschwitz I (which had been converted into an air-raid shelter for the SS) was restored and the fence was moved (because of building work being done after the war but before the museum was established). However, in most cases the departure from the historical truth is minor, and is clearly labelled. The museum contains many men's, women's and children's shoes taken from their victims; also suitcases, which the deportees were encouraged to bring with them, and many household utensils. One display case, some 30 metres (98 ft) long, is wholly filled with human hair which the Nazis gathered from people before they were sent to labor or before and after they were killed.

Auschwitz I and the remains of the gas chambers there are open to the public. The camp is on the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites. The ashes of the victims were scattered between the huts, and the entire area is regarded as a grave site. Most of the buildings of Auschwitz I are still standing. The public entrance area is outside the perimeter fence in what was the camp admission building, where new prisoners were registered and given their uniforms. At the far end of Birkenau are memorial plaques in many languages, including Romani.

The museum has allowed scenes for three films to be filmed on the site: Pasażerka (1963) by Polish director Andrzej Munk, Landscape After the Battle (1970) by Polish director Andrzej Wajda, and a television miniseries War and Remembrance (1978). Permission was denied to Steven Spielberg to film scenes for Schindler's List (1993). A "mirror" camp was constructed outside the infamous archway for the scene where the train arrives carrying the women who were saved by Oskar Schindler.

"Arbeit macht frei" sign theft

The 5-metre (16 ft), 41-kilogram (90 lb) wrought-iron "Arbeit macht frei" sign over the entrance to Auschwitz I was stolen in the early morning of December 18, 2009. The thieves unscrewed the sign at one end and broke it off its mountings at the other end, then carried the sign 300 metres to a hole in the concrete wall, where they cut four metal bars blocking the opening. After the theft, authorities replaced the stolen sign with a replica, which was originally made to replace the original sign while it was being restored some years earlier. Shortly afterward, border control security was increased, and random police checks occurred.

Police found the sign, cut into three parts, in northern Poland two days later in the home of one of five men who were arrested. An unnamed overseas buyer is believed to have been involved. The sign was made by Polish workers on Nazi orders after the Auschwitz barracks were converted into a labor camp to house captured Polish resistance fighters in 1940.

The Aftonbladet newspaper reported that the sign had been stolen by Polish thieves paid by and working on behalf of a Swedish right-wing extremist group hoping to use proceeds from the proposed sale of the sign to a collector of Nazi memorabilia, to finance a series of terror attacks aimed at influencing voters in upcoming Swedish parliamentary elections. The theft was organised by the Swedish former Nazi, Anders Höglström.

On March 18, 2010, a Polish court sentenced three men to prison for stealing the sign. They pleaded guilty. The sentences were from 18 months to 30 months. They were fined £2,300 each. Two of them were granted compassionate leave, but in April the three did not report to the prison to serve their sentences, and police were trying to find them.

It has been announced that the sign will not be returned to its old location, but rather will only be shown in an enclosed room of the museum.

Israeli Air Force historic flight

On 4 September 2003 a formation of three Israeli Air Force F-15 Eagles performed on a fly-over of Auschwitz-Birkenau. At the same time a ceremony took place at the camp below, where the names of victims of the transport that arrived at Auschwitz on 4 September 1943 were read. At the request of the Israeli Defence Forces delegation to Poland, Yad Vashem employees had searched the Hall of Names for individuals who were murdered on the same day. The flight was lead by Major-General Amir Eshel, the son of Holocaust survivors. As he flew above the camp, Eshel broadcast a message to the IDF ceremony taking place below:

"We pilots of the Air Force, flying in the skies above the camp of horrors, arose from the ashes of the millions of victims and shoulder their silent cries, salute their courage and promise to be the shield of the Jewish people and its nation Israel."

Eshel later explained that "We're talking about a personal dream of 15 years ... This is the most significant expression of the rebirth of this nation. As the IAF, we are the most concrete expression of the might of the Jewish people and there's no one better than us to express it." The Israeli delegation had been in Poland on the occasion of the Polish Air Force's 85th anniversary and had participated in the Radom Air Show.
Auschwitz Album – a collection of pictures taken at Auschwitz during its operation.

Auschwitz Trial

Central Labour Camp Jaworzno Arbeitslager Neu-Dachs (Jaworzno)

Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials

Höcker Album

International Auschwitz Committee

International Youth Meeting Center in Oświęcim/Auschwitz

Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Anthropology, Human Heredity, and Eugenics

List of Nazi concentration camps

List of victims and survivors of Auschwitz

Oświęcim synagogue

Przyszowice massacre

Research Materials: Max Planck Society Archive

Shark Island Extermination Camp

SS command of Auschwitz concentration camp

Survivor syndrome

Timeline of deportations of French Jews to death camps

Tourism in Poland

See also

Elisabeth Klein; one of the 86 victims in the “Jewish skeleton collection”

Notes

Photographs and commentary marking the 60th anniversary of the camp's liberation — first published 1994.

Interactive Virtual Reality panoramas of Auschwitz and Birkenau

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Memorial and museum website


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Nysil, Mikos Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eye-witness Account Mayflower, 1977 ASIN B000QIZILC


Druhavetovavalka.cz — Pages show pictures and videos of the day taken at places connected with World War II

Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum — (English), (German), (Polish) — Website

A Virtual Tour of Auschwitz/Birkenau — Annotated images of the camp (accessed February 14, 2008)

Interactive image map of Birkenau

Auschwitz Jewish Center — situated in the town of Oświęcim

(Polish) Auschwitz-Birkenau and city Oświęcim

Data and summary facts

Video footage from a 2003 visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau

Selected Photos from the Auschwitz Album with commentary by Oliver Lustig

Liberation of Auschwitz – 60th Anniversary — United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Holocaust Encyclopedia — Auschwitz — United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Cybrary of the Holocaust — Holocaust education site

Anna Helman is the last living survivor of the plot to blow up Crematorium IV at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Her Holocaust experiences are discussed in her novel Never Far Away: The Auschwitz Chronicle of Anna Helman

Auschwitz-Birkenau 2005 — Photographs and commentary marking the 60th anniversary of the camp's liberation

Photos From Auschwitz and Birkenau — Detailed Photos From Auschwitz and Birkenau by Alan Jacobs

Virtual Reality panoramas of Auschwitz and Birkenau — Interactive Virtual Reality panoramas of Auschwitz and Birkenau

Auschwitz, Then and Now Photo/Art Exhibit — Paintings by survivor Jan Komski – click and see an actual photo taken in the same place depicted in
The Holocaust

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