

= Auschwitz concentration camp =

Auschwitz concentration camp (German : Konzentrationslager Auschwitz , also KZ Auschwitz [kʰntsʰntʰaʰtsi ʔ oʰnsʰlaʰʰʰ ʰʰaʰʰvʰts]) was a network of German Nazi concentration camps and extermination camps built and operated by the Third Reich in Polish areas annexed by Nazi Germany during World War II . It consisted of Auschwitz I (the original camp) , Auschwitz II ? Birkenau (a combination concentration / extermination camp) , Auschwitz III ? Monowitz (a labor camp to staff an IG Farben factory) , and 45 satellite camps .

Auschwitz I was first constructed to hold Polish political prisoners , who began to arrive in May 1940 . The first extermination of prisoners took place in September 1941 , and Auschwitz II ? Birkenau went on to become a major site of the Nazi Final Solution to the Jewish Question . From early 1942 until late 1944 , transport trains delivered Jews to the camp 's gas chambers from all over German @-@ occupied Europe , where they were killed with the pesticide Zyklon B. At least 1 @.@ 1 million prisoners died at Auschwitz , around 90 percent of them Jewish ; approximately 1 in 6 Jews killed in the Holocaust died at the camp . Others deported to Auschwitz included 150 @,@ 000 Poles , 23 @,@ 000 Romani and Sinti , 15 @,@ 000 Soviet prisoners of war , 400 Jehovah 's Witnesses , and tens of thousands of others of diverse nationalities , including an unknown number of homosexuals . Many of those not killed in the gas chambers died of starvation , forced labor , infectious diseases , individual executions , and medical experiments .

In the course of the war , the camp was staffed by 7 @,@ 000 members of the German Schutzstaffel (SS) , approximately 12 percent of whom were later convicted of war crimes . Some , including camp commandant Rudolf Höss , were executed . The Allied Powers refused to believe early reports of the atrocities at the camp , and their failure to bomb the camp or its railways remains controversial . One hundred forty @-@ four prisoners are known to have escaped from Auschwitz successfully , and on October 7 , 1944 , two Sonderkommando units ? prisoners assigned to staff the gas chambers ? launched a brief , unsuccessful uprising .

As Soviet troops approached Auschwitz in January 1945 , most of its population was evacuated and sent on a death march . The prisoners remaining at the camp were liberated on January 27 , 1945 , a day now commemorated as International Holocaust Remembrance Day . In the following decades , survivors , such as Primo Levi , Viktor Frankl , and Elie Wiesel , wrote memoirs of their experiences in Auschwitz , and the camp became a dominant symbol of the Holocaust . In 1947 , Poland founded a museum on the site of Auschwitz I and II , and in 1979 , it was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site .

= = History = =

= = = Background = = =

Discrimination against Jews began immediately after the Nazi seizure of power in Germany on January 30 , 1933 . The Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service , passed on April 7 that year , excluded most Jews from the legal profession and the civil service . Similar legislation soon deprived Jewish members of other professions of the right to practise . Violence and economic pressure were used by the regime to encourage Jews to leave the country voluntarily . Jewish businesses were denied access to markets , forbidden to advertise in newspapers , and deprived of access to government contracts . Citizens were harassed and subjected to violent attacks and boycotts of their businesses .

In September 1935 the Nuremberg Laws were enacted . These laws prohibited marriages between Jews and people of Germanic extraction , extramarital relations between Jews and Germans , and the employment of German women under the age of 45 as domestic servants in Jewish households . The Reich Citizenship Law stated that only those of Germanic or related blood were defined as citizens . Thus Jews and other minority groups were stripped of their German citizenship . By the start of World War II in 1939 , around 250 @,@ 000 of Germany 's 437 @,@ 000 Jews emigrated to

the United States , Palestine , the United Kingdom , and other countries .

The ideology of Nazism brought together elements of antisemitism , racial hygiene , and eugenics , and combined them with pan @-@ Germanism and territorial expansionism with the goal of obtaining more Lebensraum (living space) for the Germanic people . Nazi Germany attempted to obtain this new territory by invading Poland and the Soviet Union , intending to deport or kill the Jews and Slavs living there , who were viewed as being inferior to the Aryan master race . After the invasion of Poland in September 1939 , German dictator Adolf Hitler ordered that the Polish leadership and intelligentsia should be destroyed . Approximately 65 @,@ 000 civilians were killed by the end of 1939 . In addition to leaders of Polish society , the Nazis killed Jews , prostitutes , Romani , and the mentally ill . SS @-@ Obergruppenführer (Senior Group Leader) Reinhard Heydrich , then head of the Gestapo , ordered on September 21 that Jews should be rounded up and concentrated into cities with good rail links . Initially the intention was to deport the Jews to points further east , or possibly to Madagascar .

= = = Auschwitz I = = =

After this part of Poland was annexed by Nazi Germany , O?wi?cim (Auschwitz) was located administratively in Germany , Province of Upper Silesia , Regierungsbezirk Kattowitz , Landkreis Bielitz . It was first suggested as a site for a concentration camp for Polish prisoners by SS @-@ Oberführer Arpad Wigand , 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 , which already held sixteen dilapidated one @-@ story buildings that had once served as an Austrian and later Polish Army barracks and a camp for transient workers . Reichsführer @-@ SS Heinrich Himmler , head of the Schutzstaffel (SS) , approved the site in April 1940 , intending to use the facility to house political prisoners . SS @-@ Obersturmbannführer (lieutenant colonel) Rudolf Höss oversaw the development of the camp and served as the first commandant . SS @-@ Obersturmführer (senior lieutenant) Josef Kramer was appointed Höss 's deputy . Auschwitz I , the original camp , became the administrative center for the whole complex .

Local residents were evicted , including 1 @,@ 200 people who lived in shacks around the barracks . Around 300 Jewish residents of O?wi?cim were brought in to lay foundations . From 1940 to 1941 , 17 @,@ 000 Polish and Jewish residents of the western districts of O?wi?cim were expelled from places adjacent to the camp . The Germans also ordered expulsions of Poles from the villages of Broszkowice , Babice , Brzezinka , Rajsko , P?awy , Harm??e , Bór , and Budy to the General Government . German citizens were offered tax concessions and other benefits if they would relocate to the area . By October 1943 , more than 6 @,@ 000 Reich Germans had arrived . The Nazis planned to build a model modern residential area for incoming Germans , including schools , playing fields , and other amenities . Some of the plans went forward , including the construction of several hundred apartments , but many were never fully implemented . Basic amenities such as water and sewage disposal were inadequate , and water @-@ borne illnesses were commonplace .

The first prisoners (30 German criminal prisoners from the Sachsenhausen concentration camp) arrived in May 1940 , intended to act as functionaries within the prison system . The first mass transport to Auschwitz concentration camp , which included Catholic prisoners , suspected members of the resistance , and 20 Jews , arrived from the prison in Tarnów , Poland , on June 14 , 1940 . 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 . By the end of 1940 , the SS had confiscated land in the surrounding area to create a 40 @-@ square @-@ kilometre (15 sq mi) " zone of interest " surrounded by a double ring of electrified barbed wire fences and watchtowers . Like other Nazi concentration camps , the gates to Auschwitz I displayed the motto Arbeit macht frei (" Work brings freedom ") .

== = Auschwitz II @-@ Birkenau == =

The initial victories of Operation Barbarossa in the summer and fall of 1941 against Hitler 's new enemy , the Soviet Union , led to dramatic changes in Nazi anti @-@ Jewish ideology and the profile of prisoners brought to Auschwitz . Construction on Auschwitz II @-@ Birkenau began in October 1941 to ease congestion at the main camp . Reichsführer @-@ SS Heinrich Himmler , head of the Schutzstaffel (SS) , intended the camp to house 50 @,@ 000 prisoners of war , who would be interned as forced laborers . Plans called for the expansion of the camp first to house 150 @,@ 000 and eventually as many as 200 @,@ 000 inmates . An initial contingent of 10 @,@ 000 Soviet prisoners of war arrived at Auschwitz I in October 1941 , but by March 1942 only 945 were still alive , and these were transferred to Birkenau , where most of them died from disease or starvation by May . By this time Hitler had decided to annihilate the Jewish people , so Birkenau was repurposed as a combination labor camp / extermination camp .

The chief of construction of Auschwitz II @-@ Birkenau was Karl Bischoff . Unlike his predecessor , he was a competent and dynamic bureaucrat who , in spite of the ongoing war , carried out the construction deemed necessary . The Birkenau camp , the four crematoria , a new reception building , and hundreds of other buildings were planned and realized . Bischoff 's plans initially called for each barrack to have an occupancy of 550 prisoners (one @-@ third of the space allotted in other Nazi concentration camps) . He later changed this to 744 prisoners per barrack . The SS designed the barracks not so much to house people as to destroy them .

The first gas chamber at Birkenau was the " red house " (called Bunker 1 by SS staff) , a brick cottage converted into a gassing facility by tearing out the inside and bricking up the windows . It was operational by March 1942 . A second brick cottage , the " white house " or Bunker 2 , was converted some weeks later . These structures were in use for mass killings until early 1943 . Himmler visited the camp in person on July 17 and 18 , 1942 . He was given a demonstration of a mass killing using the gas chamber in Bunker 2 and toured the building site of the new IG Farben plant being constructed at the nearby town of Monowitz .

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 incinerators , was converted into a killing factory by installing gas @-@ tight doors , vents for the Zyklon B (a highly lethal cyanide @-@ based pesticide) to be dropped into the chamber , and ventilation equipment to remove the gas thereafter . 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 using these four structures .

== = = The Gypsy camp == = =

On December 10 , 1942 , Himmler issued an order to send all Sinti and Roma (Gypsies) to concentration camps , including Auschwitz . A separate camp for 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 was housed in Section B @-@ IIe of Auschwitz II . Approximately 23 @,@ 000 Gypsies had been brought to Auschwitz by 1944 , 20 @,@ 000 of whom died there . One transport of 1 @,@ 700 Polish Sinti and Roma was killed upon arrival , as they were suspected to be ill with spotted fever .

Gypsy prisoners were used primarily for construction work . Thousands died of typhus and noma due to overcrowding , poor sanitary conditions , and malnutrition . Anywhere from 1 @,@ 400 to 3 @,@ 000 prisoners were transferred to other concentration camps before the murder of the remaining population .

On August 2 , 1944 , the SS cleared the Gypsy camp . A witness in another part of the camp later told of the Gypsies unsuccessfully battling the SS with improvised weapons before being loaded into trucks . The surviving population of 2 @,@ 897 was then killed en masse in the gas chambers . The

murder of the Romani people by the Nazis during World War II is known in the Romani language as the Porajmos (devouring) .

== = Auschwitz III == =

After examining several sites for a new plant to manufacture buna , a type of synthetic rubber essential to the war effort , chemicals manufacturer IG Farben chose a site near the towns of Dwory and Monowice (Monowitz in German) , about 7 kilometres (4 @. @ 3 mi) east of Auschwitz I and 3 kilometres (1 @. @ 9 mi) east of the town of O?wi?cim . Financial support in the form of tax exemptions was available to corporations prepared to develop industries in the frontier regions under the Eastern Fiscal Assistance Law , passed in December 1940 . In addition to its proximity to the concentration camp , which could be used as a source of cheap labor , the site had good railway connections and access to raw materials . In February 1941 , Himmler ordered that the Jewish population of O?wi?cim should be expelled to make way for skilled laborers that would be brought in to work at the plant . All Poles able to work were to remain in the town and were forced to work building the factory . Himmler visited in person in March and decreed an immediate expansion of the parent camp to house 30 @, @ 000 persons . Development of the camp at Birkenau began about six months later . Construction of IG Auschwitz began in April , with an initial force of 1 @, @ 000 workers from Auschwitz I assigned to work on the construction . This number increased to 7 @, @ 000 in 1943 and 11 @, @ 000 in 1944 . Over the course of its history , about 35 @, @ 000 inmates in total worked at the plant ; 25 @, @ 000 died as a result of malnutrition , disease , and the physically impossible workload . In addition to the concentration camp inmates , who comprised a third of the work force , IG Auschwitz employed slave laborers from all over Europe .

Initially the laborers walked the seven kilometers from Auschwitz I to the plant each day , but as this meant they had to rise at 3 : 00 am , many arrived exhausted and unable to work . The camp at Monowitz (also called Monowitz @- @ Buna or Auschwitz III) was constructed and began housing inmates on October 30 , 1942 , the first concentration camp to be financed and built by private industry . In January 1943 the ArbeitsausbildungLager (labor education camp) was moved from the parent camp to Monowitz . These prisoners were also forced to work on the building site . The SS charged IG Farben three Reichsmarks per hour for unskilled workers , four for skilled workers . Although the camp administrators expected the prisoners to work at 75 percent of the capacity of a free worker , the inmates were only able to perform 20 to 50 percent as well . Site managers constantly threatened inmates with transportation to Birkenau for death in the gas chambers as a way to try to increase productivity . Deaths and transfers to the gas chambers at Birkenau reduced the prisoner population of Monowitz by nearly a fifth each month ; numbers were made up with new arrivals . Life expectancy of inmates at Monowitz averaged about three months . Though the factory was initially expected to begin production in 1943 , shortages of labor and raw materials meant start @- @ up had to be postponed repeatedly . The plant was almost ready to commence production when it was overrun by Soviet troops in 1945 .

== = Subcamps == =

Various other German industrial enterprises , such as Krupp and Siemens @- @ Schuckert , built factories with their own subcamps . There were 45 such satellite camps , 28 of which served corporations involved in the armaments industry . Prisoner populations ranged from several dozen to several thousand . Subcamps were built at Blechhammer , Jawiszowice , Jaworzno , Lagisze , Mys?owice , Trzebinia , and other centers as far afield as the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia . Satellite camps were designated as Aussenlager (external camp) , Nebenlager (extension or subcamp) , or Arbeitslager (labor camp) . Industries with satellite camps included coal mines , foundries and other metal works , chemical plants , and other industries . Prisoners were also made to work in forestry and farming .

== = Evacuation , death marches , and liberation == =

In November 1944 , with the Soviet Red Army approaching through Poland , Himmler ordered gassing operations to cease across the Reich . Crematoria II , III , and IV were dismantled , while Crematorium I was transformed into an air raid shelter . The Sonderkommando were ordered to remove other evidence of the killings , including the mass graves . The SS destroyed written records , and in the final week before the camp 's liberation , burned or demolished many of its buildings .

Himmler ordered the evacuation of all camps in January 1945 , charging camp commanders with " making sure that not a single prisoner from the concentration camps falls alive into the hands of the enemy . " On January 17 , 58 @, @ 000 Auschwitz detainees were evacuated under guard , largely on foot ; thousands of them died in the subsequent death march west towards Wodzisław Śląski . Approximately 20 @, @ 000 Auschwitz prisoners made it to Bergen @- @ Belsen concentration camp in Germany , where they were liberated by the British in April 1945 .

Those too weak or sick to walk were left behind . When the 322nd Rifle Division of the Red Army arrived at the camp on January 27 they found around 7 @, @ 500 prisoners and about 600 corpses had been left behind . Among the items found by the Soviet soldiers were 370 @, @ 000 men 's suits , 837 @, @ 000 women 's garments , and 7 @. @ 7 tonnes (8 @. @ 5 short tons) of human hair .

The camp 's liberation received little press attention at the time . Rees attributes this to three factors : the previous discovery of similar crimes at Majdanek concentration camp , competing news from the Allied summit at Yalta , and the Soviet Union 's interest , for propaganda purposes , in minimizing attention to Jewish suffering . Due to the vast extent of the camp area , at least four divisions took part in liberating the camp : 100th Rifle Division (established in Vologda , Russia) , 322nd Rifle Division (Gorky , Russia) , 286th Rifle Division (Leningrad) , and 107th Motor Rifle Division (Tambov , Russia) .

= = = After the war = = =

After liberation , parts of Auschwitz I served first as a hospital for liberated prisoners . Soviet and Polish investigators worked in the initial months to document the war crimes of the SS . In the two years that followed , the Soviets dismantled and exported the IG Farben factories , and the Birkenau barracks were looted by Polish civilians . Area residents sifted the mass graves and ashes for gold . Until 1947 , some of the facilities were used as a prison camp of the Soviet NKVD .

After the site became a museum in 1947 , exhumation work lasted for more than a decade . Antoni Dobrowolski , the oldest known survivor of Auschwitz , died aged 108 on October 21 , 2012 , in Dąbno , Poland .

Camp commandant Rudolf Höss was pursued by the British Intelligence Corps , who arrested him at a farm near Flensburg , Germany , on March 11 , 1946 . Höss confessed to his role in the mass killings at Auschwitz in his memoirs and in his trial before the Supreme National Tribunal in Warsaw , Poland . He was convicted of murder and hanged at the camp on April 16 , 1947 .

Around 12 percent of Auschwitz 's 6 @, @ 500 staff who survived the war were eventually brought to trial . Poland was more active than other nations in investigating war crimes , prosecuting 673 of the total 789 Auschwitz staff brought to trial . On November 25 , 1947 , the Auschwitz Trial began in Kraków , when Poland 's Supreme National Tribunal brought to court 40 former Auschwitz staff . The trial 's defendants included commandant Arthur Liebehenschel , women 's camp leader Maria Mandel , and camp leader Hans Aumeier . The trials ended on December 22 , 1947 , with 23 death sentences , 7 life sentences , and 9 prison sentences ranging from three to fifteen years . Hans Münch , an SS doctor who had several former prisoners testify on his behalf , was the only person to be acquitted .

Other former staff were hanged for war crimes in the Dachau Trials and the Belsen Trial , including camp leaders Josef Kramer , Franz Hössler , and Vinzenz Schöttl ; doctor Friedrich Entress ; and guards Irma Grese and Elisabeth Volkenrath . The Frankfurt Auschwitz Trials , held in West Germany from December 20 , 1963 to August 20 , 1965 , convicted 17 of 22 defendants , giving them prison sentences ranging from life to three years and three months . Bruno Tesch and Karl

Weinbacher , the owner and the chief executive officer of the firm Tesch & Stabenow , one of the suppliers of Zyklon B , were executed for knowingly supplying the chemical for use on humans .

= = Command and control = =

Camp guards were members of the SS @-@ Totenkopfverbände (Death 's Head Units) . Around 7 @, @ 000 SS personnel in total were posted to Auschwitz during the war . Of these , 4 percent of SS personnel were officers and 26 percent were non @-@ commissioned officers , while the remainder were rank @-@ and @-@ file members . Approximately three in four SS personnel worked in security . Others worked in the medical or political departments , in the camp headquarters , or in the economic administration , which was responsible for the property of dead prisoners . SS personnel at the camp included 200 women , who worked as guards , nurses , or messengers . The overall command authority for the entire camp was Department D (the Concentration Camps Inspectorate) of the SS @-@ Wirtschafts @-@ Verwaltungshauptamt (SS Economics Main Office ; SS @-@ WVHA) .

Auschwitz was considered a comfortable posting by many SS members , due to many amenities and the abundance of slave labor . Of the various prisoner groups , SS officers preferred Jehovah 's Witnesses for household slaves because of their nonviolent behavior . Höss lived with his wife and children in a villa just outside the camp grounds . Other SS personnel were also initially allowed to bring fiancées , wives , and children to live at the camp , but when the SS camp grew more crowded , Höss restricted further arrivals . Facilities for the SS personnel and their families included a library , swimming pool , coffee house , and a theater that hosted regular performances .

One prisoner in each work detail or prisoner block ? usually an Aryan ? was appointed as a Kapo (" head " or " overseer ") . The Kapos received better rations and lodging and wielded tremendous power over other prisoners , whom they often abused . Very few Kapos were prosecuted after the war , due to the difficulty in determining which Kapo atrocities had been performed under SS orders and which had been individual actions .

About 120 SS personnel were assigned to the gas chambers and lived on site at the crematoria . Several SS personnel oversaw the killings at each gas chamber , while the bulk of the work was done by the mostly Jewish prisoners known as Sonderkommando (special squad) . Sonderkommando responsibilities included guiding victims to the gas chambers and removing , looting , and cremating the corpses .

The Sonderkommando were housed separately from other prisoners , in somewhat better conditions . Their quality of life was further improved by access to the goods taken from murdered prisoners , which Sonderkommando were sometimes able to steal for themselves and to trade on Auschwitz 's black market . Hungarian doctor Miklós Nyiszli reported that the Sonderkommando numbered around 860 prisoners when the Hungarian Jews were being killed in 1944 . Many Sonderkommando committed suicide due to the horrors of their work ; those who did not generally were shot by the SS in a matter of weeks , and new Sonderkommando units were then formed from incoming transports . Almost none of the 2 @, @ 000 prisoners placed in these units survived to the camp 's liberation .

= = Life in the camps = =

The prisoners ' day began at 4 : 30 am (an hour later in winter) with morning roll call . Dr. Miklós Nyiszli describes roll call as beginning 3 : 00 am and lasting four hours . The weather was cold in Auschwitz at that time of day , even in summer . The prisoners were ordered to line up outdoors in rows of five and had to stay there until 7 : 00 am , when the SS officers arrived . Meanwhile , the guards would force the prisoners to squat for an hour with their hands above their heads or levy punishments such as beatings or detention for infractions such as having a missing button or an improperly cleaned food bowl . The inmates were counted and re @-@ counted . Nyiszli describes how even the dead had to be present at roll call , standing supported by their fellow inmates until the ordeal was over . When he was a prisoner in 1944 ? 45 , five to ten men were found dead in the barracks each night . The prisoners assigned to Mengele 's staff slept in a separate barracks and

were awoken at 7 : 00 am for a roll call that only took a few minutes .

After roll call , the Kommando , or work details , walked to their place of work , five abreast , wearing striped camp fatigues , no underwear , and ill @-@ fitting wooden shoes without socks . A prisoner 's orchestra (such as the Women 's Orchestra of Auschwitz) was forced to play cheerful music as the workers left the camp . Kapos 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 . Much of the work took place outdoors at construction sites , gravel pits , and lumber yards . No rest periods were allowed . One prisoner was assigned to the latrines to measure the time the workers took to empty their bladders and bowels . Sunday was not a work day , but the prisoners did not rest ; they were required to clean the barracks and take their weekly shower . Prisoners were allowed to write (in German) to their families on Sundays . Inmates who did not speak German would trade some of their bread to another inmate for help composing their letters . Members of the SS censored the outgoing mail .

A second mandatory roll call took place in the evening . 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 , regardless of the weather conditions , even if it took hours . After roll call , individual and collective punishments were meted out , depending on what had happened during the day , before the prisoners were allowed to retire to their blocks for the night and 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 .

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 " .

The types of prisoners were distinguishable by triangular pieces of cloth , called Winkel , sewn onto on their jackets below their prisoner number . Political prisoners had a red triangle , Jehovah 's Witnesses had purple , criminals had green , and so on . The nationality of the inmate was indicated by a letter stitched onto the Winkel . Jews had a yellow triangle , overlaid by a second Winkel if they also fit into a second category . Uniquely at Auschwitz , prisoners were tattooed with their prisoner number , on the chest for Soviet prisoners of war and on the left arm for civilians .

Prisoners received a hot drink in the morning , but no breakfast , and a thin meatless vegetable soup at noon . In the evening they received a small ration of moldy bread . Most prisoners saved some of the bread for the following morning . Nyiszli notes the daily intake did not exceed 700 calories , except for prisoners being subjected to live medical experimentation , who were better fed and clothed . Sanitary arrangements were poor , with inadequate latrines and a lack of fresh water . In Auschwitz II @-@ Birkenau , latrines were not installed until 1943 , two years after camp construction began . The camps were infested with vermin such as disease @-@ carrying lice , and the inmates suffered and died in epidemics of typhus and other diseases . Noma , a bacterial infection occurring among the malnourished , was a common cause of death among children in the Gypsy camp .

Block 11 of Auschwitz I 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 held four men ; they could do nothing but stand , and were forced during the day to work with the other prisoners . Prisoners sentenced to death for attempting to escape were confined in a dark cell and given neither food nor water while being left to die .

In the basement were the " dark cells " , which had only a very tiny window and a solid door . Prisoners placed in these cells gradually suffocated as they used up all the oxygen in the cell ; sometimes the SS lit 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 .

= = Selection and extermination process = =

On July 31 , 1941 , Hermann Göring gave written authorization to Heydrich , Chief of the Reich Main Security Office (RSHA) , to prepare and submit a plan for Die Endlösung der Judenfrage (the Final Solution of the Jewish question) in territories under German control and to coordinate the participation of all involved government organizations . The resulting Generalplan Ost (General Plan for the East) called for deporting the population of occupied Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union to Siberia , for use as slave labor or to be murdered . In addition to eliminating Jews , the Nazis also planned to reduce the population of the conquered territories by 30 million people through starvation in an action called the Hunger Plan . Food supplies would be diverted to the German army and German civilians . Cities would be razed and the land allowed to return to forest or resettled by German colonists .

Plans for the total eradication of the Jewish population of Europe ? eleven million people ? were formalized at the Wannsee Conference on January 20 , 1942 . Some would be worked to death and the rest would be killed . Initially the victims were killed with gas vans or by Einsatzgruppen firing squads , but these methods proved impracticable for an operation of this scale . By 1942 , killing centers at Auschwitz , Sobibór , Treblinka , and other Nazi extermination camps replaced Einsatzgruppen as the primary method of mass killing .

The first mass exterminations at Auschwitz took place in early September 1941 , when 900 inmates were killed by gathering them in the basement of Block 11 and gassing them with Zyklon B. This building proved unsuitable for mass gassings , so the site of the killings was moved to the crematorium at Auschwitz I (Crematorium I , which operated until July 1942) . There , more than 700 victims could be killed at once . In order to keep the victims calm , they were told they were to undergo disinfection and de @-@ lousing . They were ordered to undress outside and then were locked in the building and gassed . After its decommissioning as a gas chamber , the building was converted to a storage facility and later served as an air raid shelter for the SS . The gas chamber and crematorium were reconstructed after the war using the original components , which remained on site . Some 60 @, @ 000 people were killed at Crematorium I.

Mass exterminations were moved to two provisional gas chambers (Bunkers 1 and 2) , where the killings continued while the larger Crematoria II , III , IV , and V were under construction . Bunker 2 was temporarily reactivated from May to November 1944 , when large numbers of Hungarian Jews were exterminated . In summer 1944 the capacity of the crematoria and outdoor incineration pits was 20 @, @ 000 bodies per day . A planned sixth facility ? Crematorium VI ? was never built .

Prisoners were transported from all over German @-@ occupied Europe by rail , arriving in daily convoys . By July 1942 , the SS were conducting " selections " . Incoming Jews were segregated ; those deemed able to work were sent to the selection officer 's right and admitted into the camp , and those deemed unfit for labor were sent to the selection officer 's left and immediately gassed . The group selected to die , about three @-@ quarters of the total , included almost all children , women with small children , all the elderly , and all those who appeared on brief and superficial inspection by an SS doctor not to be completely fit . After the selection process was complete , those too ill or too young to walk to the crematoria were transported there on trucks or killed on the spot with a bullet to the head . 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 pilfering the confiscated property .

SS officers told the victims they were to take a shower and undergo delousing . The victims undressed in an outer chamber and walked into the gas chamber , which was disguised as a shower facility . Some were even issued soap and a towel . The Zyklon B was delivered by ambulance to the crematoria by a special SS bureau known as the Hygienic Institute . The actual delivery of the gas to the victims was always handled by the SS , on the order of the supervising SS doctor . After the doors were shut , SS men dumped in the Zyklon B pellets through vents in the roof or holes in the side of the chamber . The victims were dead within 20 minutes . Despite the thick concrete walls , screaming and moaning from within could be heard outside . In one failed attempt to muffle the noise , two motorcycle engines were revved up to full throttle nearby , but the sound of yelling could still be heard over the engines .

Sonderkommando wearing gas masks then dragged the bodies from the chamber . The victims ' glasses , artificial limbs , jewelry , and hair were removed , and any dental work was extracted so the gold could be melted down . The corpses were burned in the nearby incinerators , and the ashes were buried , thrown in the river , or used as fertilizer .

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 until Germany invaded that March . A rail spur leading directly into Birkenau was completed that May to deliver the victims closer to the gas chambers . From 14 May until early July 1944 , 437 @, @ 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 . The incoming volume was so great that the SS resorted to burning corpses in open @-@ air pits as well as in the crematoria . The last selection took place on October 30 , 1944 .

= = = Medical experiments = = =

German 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 uteruses in an effort to glue them shut . Bayer , then a subsidiary of IG Farben , bought prisoners to use as research subjects for testing new drugs . Prisoners were also deliberately infected with spotted fever for vaccination research and exposed to toxic substances to study the effects .

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 noma in twins , dwarfs , and other prisoners to study the effects .

Kurt Heissmeyer took twenty Jewish children from Auschwitz to use in pseudoscientific medical experiments at the Neuengamme concentration camp . In April 1945 , the children were killed by hanging to conceal the project .

A skeleton collection was obtained from among a pool of 115 Jewish Auschwitz inmates , chosen for their perceived stereotypical racial characteristics . Rudolf Brandt and Wolfram Sievers , general manager of the Ahnenerbe (a Nazi research institute) , were responsible for delivering the skeletons to the collection of the Anatomy Institute at the Reich University of Strasbourg in the Alsace region of Occupied France . The collection was sanctioned by Himmler and under the direction of August Hirt . Ultimately 87 of the inmates were shipped to Natzweiler @-@ Struthof and killed in August 1943 . Brandt and Sievers were later convicted in the Doctors ' Trial in Nuremberg .

= = = Death toll = = =

The exact number of victims at Auschwitz is difficult to fix with certainty , because many prisoners were never registered and much evidence was destroyed by the SS in the final days of the war . As early as 1942 , Himmler visited the camp and ordered that " all mass graves were to be opened and the corpses burned . In addition the ashes were to be disposed of in such a way that it would be impossible at some future time to calculate the number of corpses burned . "

Shortly following the camp 's liberation , the Soviet government stated that four million people had been killed on the site , a figure now regarded as greatly exaggerated . While under interrogation , Höss said that Adolf Eichmann told him that two and a half million Jews had been killed in gas chambers and about half a million more had died of other causes . Later he wrote , " I regard the figure of two and a half million as far too high . Even Auschwitz had limits to its destructive possibilities " . Gerald Reitlinger 's 1953 book *The Final Solution* estimated the number killed to be 800 @, @ 000 to 900 @, @ 000 , and Raul Hilberg 's 1961 work *The Destruction of the European Jews* estimated the number killed to be a maximum of 1 @, @ 000 @, @ 000 Jewish victims .

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 a figure of 1 @, @ 471 @, @ 595 deaths , including 1 @. @ 35 million Jews and 86 @, @ 675 Poles . A larger study started by Franciszek Piper used timetables of train arrivals combined with deportation records to calculate at least 960 @, @ 000 Jewish deaths and at least 1 @. @ 1 million total deaths , a figure adopted as official by the Auschwitz @- @ Birkenau State Museum in the 1990s . Piper also stated that a figure of as many as 1 @. @ 5 million total deaths was possible .

By nation , the greatest number of Auschwitz 's Jewish victims were from Hungary , accounting for 438 @, @ 000 deaths , followed by Polish Jews (300 @, @ 000 deaths) , French (69 @, @ 000) , Dutch (60 @, @ 000) , and Greek (55 @, @ 000) . Fewer than one percent of Soviet Jews murdered in the Holocaust were killed in Auschwitz , as German forces had already been driven from Russia when the killing at Auschwitz reached its peak in 1944 . Approximately 1 in 6 Jews killed in the Holocaust died at the camp .

The next largest group of victims were non @- @ Jewish Poles , who accounted for 70 @, @ 000 to 75 @, @ 000 deaths . Twenty @- @ one thousand Roma and Sinti were killed , along with 15 @, @ 000 Soviet POWs and 10 @, @ 000 to 15 @, @ 000 peoples of other nations . Around 400 Jehovah 's Witnesses were imprisoned at Auschwitz , at least 152 of whom died . An estimated 5 @, @ 000 to 15 @, @ 000 gay men prosecuted under German Penal Code Section 175 (proscribing sexual acts between men) were detained in concentration camps of which an unknown number were sent to Auschwitz ; of those sent to Auschwitz 80 percent died .

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

Inmates were at times able to distribute information from the camp via messages and shortwave radio transmissions . The Polish government @- @ in @- @ exile in London first reported the gassing of prisoners on July 21 , 1942 . However , these reports were for a long time discarded as exaggerated or unreliable by the Allied Powers , Germany 's opponents .

Information regarding Auschwitz was also available to the Allies during the years 1940 ? 43 by the accurate and frequent reports of Polish Home Army (Armia Krajowa) Captain Witold Pilecki . Pilecki was the only known person to volunteer to be imprisoned at Auschwitz concentration camp , spending 945 days there . He gathered evidence of genocide and organized resistance structures known as Zwi?zek Organizacji Wojskowej (ZOW) at the camp . His first report was smuggled to the outside world in November 1940 , through an inmate who was released from the camp . He eventually escaped on April 27 , 1943 , but his personal report of mass killings was dismissed as exaggeration by the Allies , as were his previous reports .

The first information about Auschwitz concentration camp was published in winter 1940 ? 41 in the Polish underground newspapers Polska ?yje (" Poland lives ") and Biuletyn Informacyjny (" Newsletter ") . From 1942 members of the Bureau of Information and Propaganda of the Warsaw area Home Army published in occupied Poland a few brochures based on the accounts of escapees . The first of these was a fictional memoir " O?wi?cim . Pami?tnik wi??nia " (" Auschwitz : Diary of a prisoner ") , written by Halina Krahelska and published in April 1942 in Warsaw . Also published in 1942 were the books Auschwitz : obóz ?mierci (" Auschwitz : camp of death ") written by Natalia Zarembina , and W piekle (" In Hell ") by Zofia Kossak @- @ Szczucka , the Polish writer , social activist , and founder of ?egota .

In 1943 , the Kampfgruppe Auschwitz (Combat Group Auschwitz) was organized with the aim of sending out information about what was happening . Sonderkommandos buried notes in the ground , hoping they would be found by the camp 's liberators . The group also took and smuggled out photographs of corpses and preparations for mass killings in mid @- @ 1944 .

The attitude of the Allies changed with receipt of the detailed , 32 @- @ page Vrba ? Wetzler report , compiled by two Jewish prisoners , Rudolf Vrba and Alfréd Wetzler , who escaped on April 7 , 1944 . This report finally convinced Allied leaders that mass killings were taking place in Auschwitz . Details from the Vrba @- @ Wetzler report were released to the Swiss press by diplomat George Mantello and printed on June 6 by The New York Times . Auschwitz Plans originating with the Polish government were provided to the U.K foreign ministry in August 1944 .

Starting with a plea from the Slovakian rabbi Chaim Michael Dov Weissmandl in May 1944 , there was a growing campaign by Jewish organizations to persuade the Allies to bomb Auschwitz or the railway lines leading to it . At one point British Prime Minister Winston Churchill ordered that such a plan be prepared , but he was told that precision bombing the camp to free the prisoners or disrupt the railway was not technically feasible .

In 1978 , historian David S. Wyman published an essay titled " Why Auschwitz Was Never Bombed " , arguing that the US Air Force had the capability to attack Auschwitz and should have done so ; books by Bernard Wasserstein and Martin Gilbert raised similar questions about British inaction . Since the 1990s , other historians have argued that Allied bombing accuracy was not sufficient for Wyman 's proposed attack , and that counterfactual history is an inherently problematic endeavor . The controversy over this decision has lasted to the present day in both countries .

= = = Individual escape attempts = = =

At least 802 prisoners attempted to escape from the Auschwitz camps , mostly Polish or Soviet prisoners fleeing from work sites outside the camp . 144 were successful . The fates of 331 of the escapees are unknown . 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 picked ten people at random from the prisoner 's block and starved them to death .

A daring escape from Auschwitz was staged on June 20 , 1942 by four Polish prisoners : Eugeniusz Bendera (auto mechanic at the camp) , Kazimierz Piechowski , Stanisław Gustaw Jaster , and Józef Lempart . After breaking into a warehouse , the four dressed as members of the SS @-@ Totenkopfverbände (the SS units responsible for concentration camps) , armed themselves , and stole an SS staff car , which they then drove unchallenged through the main gate .

On June 24 , 1944 , a Belgian @-@ Polish Jew , Mala Zimetbaum , escaped with her Polish boyfriend , Edek Galiński dressed in a stolen prisoner @-@ guard uniform . They were later recaptured , tortured , and executed by the SS . On July 21 , 1944 , inmate Jerzy Bielecki , dressed in an SS uniform and using a faked pass , managed to cross the camp 's gate together with his Jewish girlfriend , Cyla . Both survived the war .

= = = Birkenau revolt = = =

The Sonderkommando units were aware that as witnesses to the killings , they themselves would eventually be killed to hide Nazi crimes . Though they knew that it would mean their deaths , the Sonderkommando of Birkenau Kommando III staged an uprising on October 7 , 1944 , following an announcement that some of them would be selected to be " transferred to another camp " ? a common Nazi ruse for the murder of prisoners . The Sonderkommando attacked the SS guards with stones , axes , and makeshift hand grenades . As the SS set up machine guns to attack the prisoners in Crematorium IV , the Sonderkommando in Crematorium II also revolted , some of them managing to escape the compound . The rebellion was suppressed by nightfall .

Ultimately , three SS guards were killed ? one of whom was burned alive by the prisoners in the oven of Crematorium II ? and 250 Sonderkommando were killed . Hundreds of prisoners escaped , but were all soon captured and executed , along with an additional group who participated in the revolt . Crematorium IV was destroyed in the fighting , and a group of prisoners in the gas chamber of Crematorium V was spared in the chaos .

= = Legacy = =

In the decades since its liberation , Auschwitz has become a primary symbol of the Holocaust . Historian Timothy D. Snyder attributes this to the camp 's high death toll as well as to its " unusual combination of an industrial camp complex and a killing facility " , which left behind far more

witnesses than single purpose killing facilities such as Chełmno or Treblinka . The United Nations General Assembly has designated January 27 , the date of the camp 's liberation , as International Holocaust Remembrance Day . In a speech on the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation , German chancellor Helmut Kohl described Auschwitz as the " darkest and most horrific chapter of German history " .

Notable memoirists of the camp include Primo Levi , Elie Wiesel , and Tadeusz Borowski . In *If This Is a Man* , Levi wrote that the concentration camps represented the epitome of the totalitarian system :

[N] ever 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 .

Psychiatrist Viktor Frankl drew on his imprisonment at Auschwitz in composing *Man 's Search for Meaning* (1946) , one of the most widely read works about the camp . An existentialist work , the book argues that individuals can find purpose even among great suffering , and that this sense of purpose sustains them . Wiesel wrote about his own imprisonment at Auschwitz in *Night* (1960) and other works , and became a prominent spokesman against ethnic violence . In 1986 , he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize .

Camp survivor Simone Veil was later elected President of the European Parliament , serving from 1979 ? 82 . Two Auschwitz victims ? Maximilian Kolbe , a priest who volunteered to die by starvation in place of a stranger , and Edith Stein , a Jewish convert to Catholicism ? were later named saints of the Roman Catholic Church .

= = = Auschwitz @-@ Birkenau State Museum = = =

On July 2 , 1947 , the Polish government passed a law establishing a state memorial to the victims of Nazism on the site of the camp . In 1955 , an exhibition opened displaying prisoner mug shots ; hair , suitcases , and shoes taken from murdered prisoners ; canisters of Zyklon B pellets ; and other objects related to the killings . UNESCO added the camp to its list of World Heritage Sites in 1979 . In 2011 , the museum drew 1 @, @ 400 @, @ 000 visitors .

Pope John Paul II performed mass over the train tracks leading to the camp on June 7 , 1979 . In the decades following his visit , controversies erupted over a group of Carmelite nuns founding a convent on the site and erecting a large cross originally used in the pope 's mass . Protesters objected to what they saw as Christianization of the site , while others argued that the cross 's presence effectively recognized the camp 's Catholic victims .

On September 4 , 2003 , three Israeli Air Force F @-@ 15 Eagles performed a fly @-@ over of Auschwitz @-@ Birkenau during a ceremony at the camp below . The flight was led by Major @-@ General Amir Eshel , the son of Holocaust survivors . On January 27 , 2015 , some 300 Auschwitz survivors and other guests gathered under a giant tent at the entrance to Auschwitz II Birkenau to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the camp 's liberation . Attendees included president of the World Jewish Congress Ronald Lauder , film director Steven Spielberg , and world leaders such as Polish president Bronisław Komorowski and King Willem @-@ Alexander of the Netherlands . As the number of remaining survivors decreases each year , the attendance at the event is unlikely to be surpassed at future major anniversaries . Commemorations also took place at Yad Vashem in Israel , Theresienstadt concentration camp , and in Berlin and Moscow .

Museum curators note that some visitors try to take artefacts as souvenirs , which is strictly prohibited and usually leads to criminal charges . For example , on June 22 , 2015 , two British men were convicted of theft for stealing apparel buttons and shards of decorative glass they found on the ground near the area where camp victims ' confiscated personal effects were stored . The men , both 17 years old , received probation and were fined £ 170 . Curators said that similar thefts happen once or twice a year .

