

# Auschwitz



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## Auschwitz

How could all this have happened? This is one of the many questions associated with the Holocaust. The Third Reich of no doubt one of the world's largest and most feared empires. It could have easily overthrown the Roman Empire and was the most worthy adversary of the British Empire. The most overwhelming and terrifying aspect of the Second World War has got to be the ghettos, concentration camps and of course the death camps. The camp that stands out in everybody's mind has got to be Auschwitz. Out of the 6.8 million killed there were 6000 killed at Auschwitz a day. What some people may not know is that Auschwitz was actually three camps fused into one. The most potent and efficient way of mass murder was the gas chamber. That is if you lasted the trip there.

But the most insulting part of the whole ordeal to the Jewish was being burned in one of the many Crematoriums.

The Nazis established Auschwitz in April 1940 under the direction of Heinrich Himmler, chief of two Nazi organizations-the Nazi guards known as the Schutzstaffel (SS), and the secret police known as the Gestapo. The camp at Auschwitz originally housed political prisoners from occupied Poland and from concentration camps within Germany.

## Construction

of nearby Birkenau (Brzezinka), also known as Auschwitz II, began in

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October

1941 and included a women's section after August 1942. Birkenau had four gas chambers, designed to resemble showers, and four crematoria, used to incinerate bodies.

Approximately 40 more satellite camps

were established around Auschwitz. These were forced labor camps and were

known collectively as Auschwitz III. The first one was built at Monowitz and held Poles who had been forcibly evacuated from their hometowns by the Nazis. Prisoners were transported from all over Nazi-occupied Europe by rail, arriving at Auschwitz in daily convoys. Arrivals at the complex were separated into three groups. One group went to the gas chambers within

a few hours; these people were sent to the Birkenau camp, where more than 20, 000 people could be gassed and cremated each day. At Birkenau, the Nazis

used a cyanide gas called Zyklon-B, which was manufactured by a pest-control

company. A second group of prisoners were used as slave labor at industrial factories for such companies as I. G. Farben and Krupp. Camp Commandant Rudolf Hoess admitted to a minimum figure of 2. 5 million deaths at Auschwitz.

Reflecting back some years later on the experiments in the basement of

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Block 11 and later in Gas Chamber and Crematorium 1, Hoess said:

" At the time I did not think about the problem of killing Soviet prisoners of war. It was an order and I had to execute it. However, I will say frankly that killing that group of people by gas relieved my anxieties. It would soon be necessary to start the mass extermination of the Jews, and until that moment neither I Eichmann had known how to conduct a mass killing. A sort of gas was to be used, but it was not known what kind of gas was meant and how to use it. Now we had both the gas and the way of using it. I had always been concerned at the thought of mass shootings, particularly of women and children. I was already sick of executions. Now my mind was at ease."

Some prisoners survived through the help of German industrialist Oskar Schindler, who saved about 1000 Polish Jews by diverting them from Auschwitz to work for him, first in his factory near Krakow and later at a factory in what is now the Czech Republic. A third group, mostly twins and dwarfs, underwent medical experiments at the hands of doctors such as Josef Mengele, who was also known as the " Angel of Death." The camp was staffed partly by prisoners, some of whom were selected to be kapos (orderlies) and sonderkommandos (workers at the crematoria).

Members of these groups were killed periodically. The kapos and sonderkommandos

were supervised by members of the SS; altogether 6000 SS members worked at Auschwitz. 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. In October 1944 a group of sonderkommandos destroyed one of the gas chambers at Birkenau.

They and their accomplices, a group of women from the Monowitz labor camp, were all put to death. When the Soviet army marched into Auschwitz to liberate the camp on January 27, 1945, they found about 7600 survivors abandoned there. More than 58, 000 prisoners had already been evacuated by the Nazis and sent on a final death march to Germany. In 1946 Poland founded a museum at the site of the Auschwitz concentration camp in remembrance of its victims.

By 1994, about 22 million visitors-700, 000 annually-had passed through

the iron gates that bear the cynical motto Arbeit macht frei (work makes one free).

German war interests required the maximization of economic benefits from this cold-blooded murder. Before the bodies were burned the victim's hair was cut off and fillings and false teeth made of precious metals were removed. The hair was used for making haircloth, and the metals were melted into bars and sent to Berlin. After the liberation tons of hair were found in camp warehouses; the Nazis had not had time to process it all. Proof that this hair came from victims of gassing was provided by The Krakow Institute of Judicial Expertise, whose analyses showed that traces of prussic acid, a poisonous component typical of Zyklon compounds, were present in the hair.

In 1941-1944 prisoner of KL Auschwitz, then of KL Gross-Rosen and KL Flossenburg-Leitmeritz, from which he escaped in April 1945. After the war, journalist, author of many articles about Auschwitz: active in many associations and organizations, acting, for example as Secretary General of the International Auschwitz Committee and member of the Main Commission for the investigation of Nazi Crimes in Poland.

Deniers acknowledge that some Jews were incarcerated in places such as

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Auschwitz, but they maintain, as they did at the trial of a Holocaust denier in Canada, it was equipped with " all the luxuries of a country club, including a swimming pool, a dance hall and recreational facilities." Some Jews may have died, they said, but this was the natural consequence of wartime deprivations."