



Auschwitz

The Nazi Solution



AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORY AND GUIDE

ANDREW RAWSON

Auschwitz – The Nazi Solution

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Introduction

Between May 1940 and January 1945, Auschwitz-Birkenau grew from a small prison camp for enemies of the Reich into a forced labour and extermination camp where over one million people were worked to death or murdered.

This is the story of the Holocaust which spawned the building of the camps, and the men who organized it. It includes an account of how the camps were built and by who; how they were run and who by and how they were guarded; the reasons why people were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau and how some existed there and how others were murdered there. There are the stories of the few prisoners who escaped and other brave individuals who tried to resist against the cruel regime. Finally, learn about the liberation of the camps and what happened to the prisoners and their tormentors after they were freed.

There are also instructions on how to enjoy your stay to Krakow, the best place to stop if you are visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau. There are also suggestions on how to get the best out of your visit to the camps.

Chapter 1

The Holocaust

Germany's Jews had been the victims of restrictive decrees and violence since the Nazis came to power in 1933. Over the next five and a half years they lost their working rights, their financial freedom and their personal freedom. The Jews in Austria and the occupied Czech lands also suffered the same restrictions.

But no one expected the state sponsored attack on Jewish communities on the night of 9 November 1938. *Kristallnacht* (Night of the Broken Glass) was revenge for the murder of Ernst vom Rath, a German diplomat in Paris, by the Jewish student Herschel Grynszpan. Around 400 Jews were killed, another 30,000 were held in concentration camps, over 1,000 synagogues were burnt down and thousands of Jewish businesses were attacked. Around 450,000 people left the Reich in the wake of the attacks, around half of them Jews, but only after paying a large amount to escape.



Broken windows following Kristallnacht.

On 1 September 1939 Germany invaded the west side of Poland and then the Soviet Union entered the east side on the 17th, in accord with the secret deal arranged between Nazi Germany's Foreign Minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, and Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov. In October Hitler explained how he intended to divide German occupied Poland into three areas; one for ethnic Germans, one for Poles and one for Jews. But the plan had serious logistical flaws. Hundreds of thousands of ethnic Germans were escaping Soviet held areas, including the Baltic States and northern Romania. Around 18 million Poles and two million Jews had to be moved to make way for them and they had no money to pay for their emigration.

While the Jews were persecuted, there was no plan, as yet, to exterminate them and Adolf Eichmann suggested moving them to the remote town of Nisko on the eastern boundary of the occupied territory. While Austrian Jews were shipped to the area and housed in appalling conditions, the plan proved to be unworkable and it was soon dropped.

In October 1939 mentally ill and physically disabled patients started being gassed under the Nazi's 'Action T4' euthanasia programme. Hospital patients were taken into a fake shower room in Sonnenstein Castle near Danzig and asphyxiated using carbon dioxide. Others were killed by pumping the gas into sealed vans and by May 1940 10,000 patients had been murdered.

But the senior Nazis hated the unhealthy and unlawful ghettos and saw them as only a temporary measure. They were also soon full to bursting. *SS-Obergruppenführer* Hans Frank, head of the General Government in what had been Poland, was anxious about Jews being dumped in his area and the Reich Security Main Office reduced deportations to his area in April 1940. A month later SS leader Heinrich Himmler made it clear he wanted the Polish people to be leaderless, ill-educated slaves while Polish children deemed suitable for adoption would be sent to Germany.



SS-Obergruppenführer *Hans Frank*.

The head of the SS went on to say he '*hoped to see the term Jews completely eliminated through the possibility of a large-scale emigration of all Jews to Africa or to some other colony.*' The invasion of the Soviet Union was on the cards and it seemed as though the German war machine was unstoppable. With a possible end to the war in sight, the idea of sending Polish Jews to former French African colonies was proposed and Hitler approved of Franz Rademacher's Foreign Office plan to send them to Madagascar.



SS-Reichsführer *Heinrich Himmler*.

At the beginning of December 1940 Himmler sent a memorandum to the Führer entitled '*Some Thoughts on the Treatment of the Alien Population of the East*' in which he outlined how he intended to deal with the problem. Poland would be divided into two areas with the Germans living in the western half, under Hans Frank's General Government administration. But the plan still involved mass migration with half a million Poles being forcibly moved out of houses and businesses to make way for a similar number of Germans. Meanwhile, Jews would be forced into overcrowded ghettos in the cities.

In the spring of 1941, Himmler asked *Reichsleiter* Philipp Bouhler, head of Hitler's Chancellery and Hitler's representative for the T4 program, about getting rid of sick prisoners in the concentration camp system. The program was extended to include concentration camps under codename 'Action 14f13' and a special commission, including the director of Sonnenstein euthanasia centre, Dr Horst Schumann, visited Auschwitz. On 28 July, 573 sick inmates were selected, put on a train and told they were being taken to a hospital. They were; only it was Sonnenstein asylum. Their relatives were informed they had died of natural causes in Auschwitz.

Meanwhile, the war on the Eastern Front was going well as the Wehrmacht advanced deep into Soviet territory. Task forces (*Einsatzgruppen*) reinforced by SS cavalry and police battalions were visiting towns and villages behind the lines and rounding up the Jews. Tens of thousands of men women and children were being made to dig their graves before they were stripped and shot.

But there was a problem. When Himmler visited *Einsatzgruppe B* in Minsk on 15 August, SS and police leader for Belarus and the Urals, *SS-Obergruppenführer* Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski, explained how the shootings were traumatizing his soldiers: '*Look at the eyes of the men in this Kommando, how deeply shaken they are! These men are finished for the rest of their lives. What kind of followers are we training here? Either neurotics or savages.*' Himmler concluded it was time to find a new way to commit mass murder.

In September 1941 *SS Untersturmführer* Dr Albert Widmann of the Criminal Police's Technical Institute visited *Einsatzgruppe B* in Minsk to pass on his experience about gassing. *SS-Gruppenführer* Artur Nebe had already experimented with explosives as a murder weapon but the bunker had collapsed, leaving body parts strewn about. He had also used truck exhaust fumes after discovering that a car did not produce enough carbon monoxide to kill.

Meanwhile, Auschwitz camp had been looking at how to murder the rising number of sick prisoners. Towards the end of August Eichmann visited Auschwitz to discuss the

imminent deportations of Jews from the ghettos. He too wanted to improve the killing facilities and suggested experimenting on the Soviet POWs. As the mobile gas chamber vans were too expensive, Auschwitz commandant *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Rudolf Höss decided to try the pesticide used to fumigate the camp. *Zyklon B* was a crystallized prussic acid (hydrogen cyanide) which came in tins of blue-green granules. It was produced by the German Corporation for Pest Control, *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Schädlingsbekämpfung*, DEGESCH, and distributed to the concentration camps by *Tesch und Stabenow* (TESTA).

Höss and his deputy, Karl Fritzsche, made one of the cellars in block 11 airtight at the beginning of September 1941 and then gathered a group of sick Soviet prisoners inside. Insufficient *Zyklon B* was used and those who survived the gassing had to be shot. A larger quantity of crystals was used two days later and this time it killed everyone. Although Höss had worked out how to murder prisoners, the cellars were far from ideal.

Fritzsche suggested converting the mortuary in the camp's crematorium into a gas chamber. The prisoners could be pushed into the airtight room and the *Zyklon B* could be dropped through a hatch in the ceiling. The ventilation system would extract the poisonous gas and the corpses only had to be dragged into the adjacent crematorium. On 16 September around 900 Soviet soldiers were successfully gassed.

While Höss now had an efficient method of murder, keeping it a secret was going to be difficult. While they used revving motorbike and car engines to drown out the screams from the chamber, a new location was required if the gassings were going to be kept secret.

Operation Barbarossa went better than expected, as the Wehrmacht stormed across the Soviet Union in the summer and autumn of 1941. But the winter weather slowed down the German advance and it had stalled at the gates of Moscow by November. News of a Red Army counterattack in front of the Soviet capital on 5 December angered Hitler.

Then, on 7 December 1941, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and four days later Hitler declared war on the United States, declaring that international Jewry was manipulating President Roosevelt. The following day he reminded the Nazi hierarchy of a prophecy he had made on 30 January 1939:

"I want today to be a prophet again: if international finance and Jewry inside and outside Europe should succeed in plunging the nations once more into a world war, the result will be not the Bolshevization of the earth and thereby the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe."

On 16 December Hans Frank told the General Government in Krakow:

"I must state that if the Jewish clan were to survive the war in Europe, while we

sacrificed our best blood in the defence of Europe, then this war would only represent a partial success. With respect to the Jews, therefore, I will only operate on the assumption that they will disappear, we must exterminate the Jews wherever we find them.”

Himmler noted on 18 December, “*the Jewish question – to be exterminated as partisans.*”

While the Nazis had often considered the Jewish question, Pearl Harbor appears to have been the final straw. The Jews now faced extermination and Auschwitz-Birkenau would play a vital part in the Final Solution.

While senior Nazis were stating their murderous plans, the SS had already started carrying them out, albeit in a small way. The city of Lodi had a ghetto crammed with 164,000 starving Jews and the Gauleiter, Arthur Greiser, and the SS and Police Leader, Wilhelm Koppe, wanted to get rid of them. The only way was to murder them and SS-*Hauptsturmführer* Christian Wirth used his experience of the adult euthanasia programme to build stationary gas chambers which again used vehicle engines to produce carbon monoxide gas.

SS-*Hauptsturmführer* Herbert Lange started killing small groups of Jews at Chelmno, fifty miles northwest of the city, on 8 December 1941. They were undressed and led into a darkened room, which was the back of a van, and then killed with bottled carbon monoxide. Others were driven into the woods and murdered with the van’s exhaust fumes.

But the decision to send all Jews to the East meant that gassing too was too slow. Nearly 60,000 Jews were transported East over the winter of 1941-42 and firing squads had to be used to make space for them. Then the Germans started clearing the Lodz ghetto on 16 January 1942 and the Jewish Council of Elders, under Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, had to choose who went first. By May over 55,000 had been taken to Chelmno and gassed. Rumkowski would be put on the last transport.



The Lodz Ghetto, 'Jewish neighbourhood. Entry Forbidden'.

SS-Gruppenführer Reinhard Heydrich summoned government state secretaries to a villa in Wannsee, near Berlin, on 20 January 1942. The meeting had been postponed from 9 December due to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor but it would be the key turning point in the 'Final Solution'. After months of arbitrary killing by the *Einsatzgruppen*, the extermination of the Jews was going to be organized on an industrial scale.

In July 1941 Hermann Göring, in his capacity as head of the Nazis 'Four Year Plan' authorized Heydrich and the SS to coordinate the government's various departments:

"I hereby charge you to submit a comprehensive blueprint of the organizational, subject-related and material preparatory measures for the execution of the intended Final Solution of the Jewish question."



SS-Gruppenführer *Reinhard Heydrich*

At the meeting Heydrich, aided by Adolf Eichmann, explained that there would be no Jewish emigration to the East, they would be evacuated; a euphemism for murder. Another euphemism for murder was '*Sonderbehandlung*' or 'Special Treatment' and the abbreviation SB would often be written in the camp records. While the fit would be worked to death, the young, elderly and sick would be killed immediately. The group also discussed how to define a Jew, the current methods of evacuation, and future solutions.

While the meeting was a decisive point in the Holocaust, it is important to remember that the decision had been made by Heydrich's superiors. The meeting was called to make sure the state department heads knew they were now working under the SS to eliminate Europe's Jews.

On 17 July 1942 Himmler visited Auschwitz and two days later he announced "I herewith order that the resettlement of the entire Jewish population of the General Government be carried out and completed by December 31." There would be no more sending Jews to holding ghettos, they would be taken straight to the camps and murdered. The massacre of Poland's Jews would be called Operation Reinhard, in memory of the murdered Heydrich.

Auschwitz played only a minor part in the killing of Polish Jews during 1942. The sick, elderly and young were put on trains and taken to fake labour camps hidden in the forests. They were unloaded at a railway station and then all gassed in buildings designed to look like shower blocks. The labour camps did not exist; there were only extermination camps. Belzec began gassing operations in March 1942 in southeast Poland under the command of *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Christian Wirth.

The area of the camp was tiny and it only needed twenty German guards to operate. Around one hundred Ukrainian guards supervised Jews who buried bodies, cleaned the gas chambers and sorted the belongings; the work parties were killed every few days. Sobibor to the north opened in May under Commandant Franz Stangl. Then Treblinka north east of Warsaw, opened in July under *SS-Obersturmführer* Irmfried Eberl.

But not everything went to plan as the trains were left waiting, luggage was left unsorted, the crematoria broke down and bodies were left to rot. Then in autumn 1943 there was a break out at Sobibor. Lieutenant Alexander Pechersky (nickname 'Sasha') and Leon Feldhendler struck on 14 October. One by one the guards were killed with makeshift weapons and then eighty Soviet POWs pushed down the fence and ran across a minefield. Around half of the 600 prisoners escaped but few survived the war. Himmler was furious and on 3 November 43,000 people were murdered in Majdanek camp and all its sub-camps. The massacre was codenamed 'Harvest Festival'.

Over chaotic months that followed Belzec murdered 600,000, Sobibor 250,000 and

Treblinka 850,000. By the time they shut down, most of Poland's Jewish communities no longer existed. Now it was the turn of the rest of Europe's Jewry and Birkenau was ready for them.



The ramp at Birkenau camp today.

Chapter 2

Choosing Auschwitz

Oswiecim is in Upper Silesia, thirty-five miles west of Krakow, in what is now a quiet corner of south west Poland. The town is surrounded by the foothills of the Tatra Mountains, and it stands close to where the River Sola flows into the River Vistula.

Oswiecim was in the Austrian Empire when a camp to house work-seeking immigrants was built on the south side of the town in 1916. Poland gained its independence after the First World War and there were around 4,000 refugees living in the barrack style blocks. They were soon moved on and while the Polish Tobacco Monopoly occupied part of the site, the Polish army took over the rest.

There were around 12,000 Poles living in Oswiecim (nearly 5,000 of them Jews) when German troops invaded Poland on 1 September 1939. General Wilhelm List's 14th Army entered the town three days later and within a matter of hours the war had moved on from Oswiecim. But there were big changes ahead. The town was renamed Auschwitz, the main square became Adolf-Hitler Platz, the streets were given German names and Polish signs were replaced with German ones. Then on 26 October the borders of Upper Silesia were re-drawn, bringing Auschwitz into the German Reich.

Towards the end of 1939 *SS-Oberführer* Richard Glücks, Concentration Camps Inspector, wanted to open a camp in Silesia. On 21 February 1940, he recommended Auschwitz barracks as a suitable site for a new concentration camp to the SS leadership. Heinrich Himmler gave the go-ahead on 27 April and three days later Rudolf Höss visited Auschwitz to inspect the abandoned artillery barracks. He found fourteen single-storey and six two-storey barrack blocks surrounding a parade square; the site also had two administration blocks. Four days later Höss was appointed commandant of one of the first concentration camps in Poland and had a budget of two million Reichsmarks to build a camp for 10,000 prisoners.

The first thirty prisoners were delivered from Sachsenhausen concentration camp in May 1940. They were tough German criminals who would control the Polish prisoners on behalf of the guards. The first train load of 728 Polish political prisoners arrived from

Tarnow prison on 14 June 1940. Six days later another 313 arrived from Nowy Wisnicz and Krakow prisons, followed by another 271 men from Sosnowiec transit camp. To begin with the prisoners were held in the Tobacco Monopoly buildings and they were kept busy with penal exercises until the barrack site had been secured. Tadeusz Wiejowski escaped from the first transport which had been sent directly to the camp on 6 July. A nineteen-hour roll call followed and Dawid Wongczewski collapsed during the long wait; he was the first prisoner to die in Auschwitz.

Building Auschwitz Camp

Families were evicted from nearby houses and around 1,200 unemployed Poles were expelled from the adjacent camp. Around 300 Jews from the town were put to work collecting second hand barbed wire and wooden posts to make the barracks secure. Auschwitz's first sub-camp opened at Sosnica, near Guwicz, in July 1940 so thirty prisoners could remove wire from an old prisoner-of-war camp.

A guard house was built next to the gate which had the words 'Arbeit Macht Frei' or 'Work Will Set You Free' over the top; words Höss had taken from Dachau. The blacksmith Kurt Müller designed it and Jan Liwacz made it.¹

To begin with, simple towers, made from four wooden posts supporting a covered observation platform, were built around the camp perimeters. A single guard operated the machine gun during the day while a second guard manned a searchlight at night.



The sign 'Work Makes You Free' above Auschwitz's gate.

On 21 June all the prisoners were transferred into the barracks and Auschwitz prison camp came into operation. Some prisoners were put to work turning the single-storey barracks into double-storey prisons while others built new blocks on the parade ground. There were eventually twenty-eight barracks inside the fence, each holding between 750 and 1,200 men.

Meanwhile, Commandant Höss and his family lived in a large villa at the north-east corner of the camp and it was surrounded by a concrete fence and trees to maintain their privacy. Every morning he walked the short distance to the administration building so he could speak to his staff, do paperwork and hold meetings. He often took work home and worked in his study. Höss was assisted by deputy and camp commander (*Lagerführer*) Karl Fritzsche and his adjutant and report commander (*Rapportführer*) Gerhard Palitzsch. The administration building housed the camp staff, the camp records and the armoury. Sick guards were cared for in the adjacent hospital building.

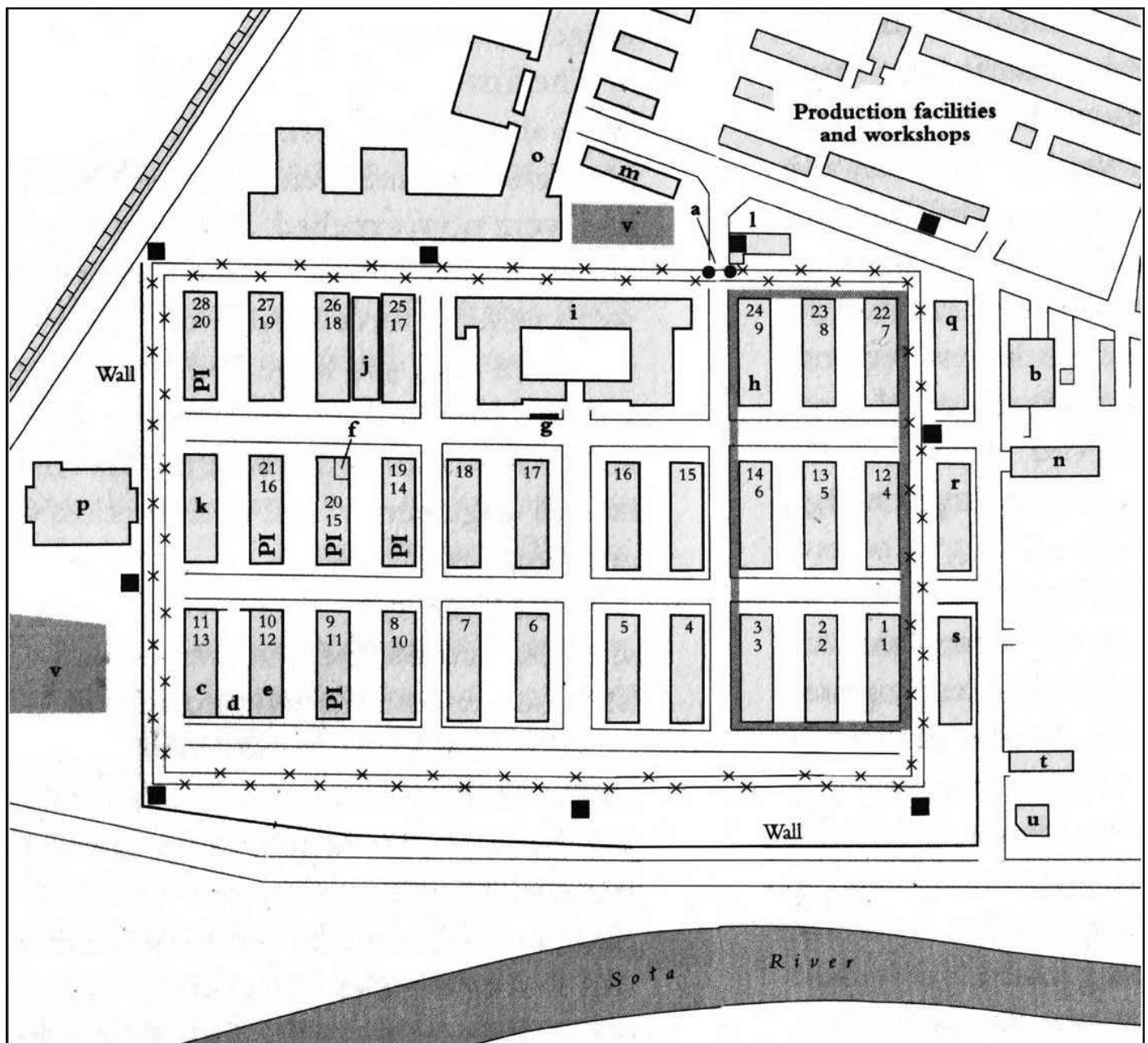
While most of the buildings were accommodation blocks, a few had a special purpose. The camp had a registration building, a disinfection room, showers and a photographic studio to process new prisoners. It had kitchens, utility rooms and a canteen to deal with the prisoners' daily needs. The camp had a library and a music hall in block 24 but their function was limited. In 1943 a number of water pits were dug around the camp so the camp fire brigade had a supply of water. While Commandant Arthur Liebehenschel allowed privileged prisoners to swim in the pool next to Birch Alley, Commandant Richard Baer banned the activity.

In the autumn of 1943 a camp brothel, known as 'the Puff' was opened on the second floor of block 24. Hard working prisoners were rewarded with tokens they could use to visit one of the twenty women after evening roll call. A bell was rung after fifteen minutes, signifying a change over, and the doors had peepholes so the guards could keep order.

Wooden structures were built for the showers, laundry and post office. An induction building and an office block were built just outside the wire. Garages, workshops, a builders' yard and a timber yard were also built outside the camp.



The commandant's house was next to the camp.



Key

a Entrance

b Gas chamber and crematorium

c Block 11, punishment block

d Death wall

e Research block

f Treatment room for lethal injections

g Group gallows

h Writing room

i Kitchens

k SS laundry

l Block leaders' barracks

m Protective custody office

n Gestapo office

o Admissions building (1944)

p Theatre

q SS infirmary

r Administration

s Commandant's office

t Guards office

u Commandant's house

v execution sites

PI Prisoners infirmary

- *The shaded line denotes the Soviet prison camp*
- *The black squares denote the watchtowers*

A plan of Auschwitz I.

The Tobacco Monopoly buildings across the road were turned into offices, store and barracks. Fifteen warehouses were built close to the railway platform on the west side of the camp and prisoners had to unload building materials and load recycled materials. A blacksmith, a workshop, garages and a petrol station were built in the complex.

The road running past the camp was named Barrack Street while the avenue from the main gate was nicknamed Hurry-Hurry Street; it led to Birch Avenue which ran down the east perimeter of the camp.

Plans were eventually drawn up to add another fifty two-storey barrack blocks on the north side of the camp but only twenty were ever built.

Some of the buildings were used for experimenting on prisoners while others were used to punish and execute them. In April 1943, Dr Carl Clauberg opened an operating theatre in block 10. Sterilization experiments were carried out on 400 Jewish women and while some died, others were murdered so autopsies could be carried out. The theatre was moved into the camp extension in May 1944.

Block 11 (originally block 13) was a place to be feared because it housed the penal kommando. *SS-Untersturmführer* Max Grabner ran the interrogation rooms and prisoners had to endure water torture and burning with red-hot irons or petrol. Pole hangings and floggings were either carried out in the block or in the adjacent yard. Police prisoners were also held in the block and *SS-Obersturmbannführer* Dr Rudolf Mildner's local Police Summary Court took over a ground-floor room on behalf of the Gestapo in 1943.

Prisoners were held in the basement cells and some were left to starve, including Father Maksymilian Kolbe who had offered to die in place of another prisoner. Others were made to crawl through a narrow gap on the floor into one of the four tiny standing cells called the 'Bunker'. They were left inside all night, with no space to sit down or crouch and only a tiny air vent to breathe through. Early in September 1941 some of the basement cells were made airtight and the first gassing with Zyklon B was carried out on 600 Soviet POWs and 250 sick Polish prisoners.

Every week Grabner reduced the number of prisoners by carrying out what he called '*dusting out the bunker*'. Prisoners were stripped in the ground floor washroom and escorted into the courtyard. Some were hanged on a portable scaffold while others were shot in the neck in front of the 'death wall' (also known as 'the screen'), a wall of railway sleepers, painted black and backed by sand. The wall was built in the autumn of 1941 and demolished in the autumn of 1943; what we see today was rebuilt in 1946. Block 10 had the windows overlooking the courtyard bricked up, so the prisoners could not see the executions.



Auschwitz I blocks were initially filled with Polish political prisoners and they were later joined by Soviet prisoners of war.

Every day, corpses were collected on carts and stacked in the sick bay cellars, in block 28. To begin with lorries took them to Gliwice's crematorium, over 30 miles away. But a small crematorium and mortuary was opened in August 1940 in the barrack's ammunition bunker. The mortuary was converted into an airtight gas chamber in September 1941 and early gassings were carried out there. The gas chamber and crematorium were converted into an air raid shelter for the SS hospital in September 1944.

The German criminals used their batons to keep the prisoners in line as they built the camp by hand, using second hand materials salvaged from the town and nearby farms. They had to demolish buildings and transport the buildings to the camp at a break-neck speed; and they were encouraged to steal from each other, resulting in arguments and beatings. There were few tools and no protective equipment, resulting in injuries and accidents.

Höss hired local tradesmen to supervise the technical work while the prisoners did the demolishing, digging and carrying. The supervisors were issued pass cards and green armbands, and while a few passed food and medicine to prisoners and took messages, the penalty for being caught was imprisonment in the camp.

By the end of the summer of 1940 Auschwitz camp was a fully functioning prison camp capable of holding up to 30,000 prisoners in a cramped area. The wooden posts had been replaced by 3.3m high concrete posts while Siersza Wodna power plant supplied electricity to Babice substation so 400 volts ran through the fence. Lamps illuminated the perimeter and a concrete slab was installed under the fence to prevent anyone digging underneath.

The prisoners had built their own jail and it had cost the Reich very little. A visit by *SS-Obergruppenführer* Oswald Pohl, head of the SS Main Economic and Administration Office, in September resulted in Auschwitz being changed to a slave labour camp. He wanted to bring the local sand and gravel pits under the SS-owned German Earth and Stone Works (DESt). Two months later Himmler and Höss discussed how to establish laboratories, plant cultivation centres and cattle farms in the area.

Germanizing Auschwitz Town

With the camp established, steps were taken to further Germanize Auschwitz town, to make it 'racially valuable'. The first Jews were deported on 3 April and the new German immigrants lined the streets to watch them go. They were sent to Sosnowiec, Bedzin, and Chrzanow ghettos, and while the fit were sent on to labour camps, the elderly, sick and young would be eventually murdered.

There were plans to turn Auschwitz into a model town using money provided by the

Reich and IG Farben. The Upper Silesia Community Planning Department commissioned Hans Stosberg to begin working on grand plans for Auschwitz as early as December 1940. He worked alongside *Gewoge*, IG Farben's planning department, to design a market garden style town with 1,600 modern houses.



Escorting Jews to Auschwitz railway station for deportation.

New roads, shops, schools and sports facilities were planned, while the Jewish quarter would be demolished to make way for new housing; even the Jewish cemetery would be built on. While Stosberg constantly argued with the SS over the details of town planning it did not bother him that the new town would be next to a concentration camp.

Settlers from across the Reich came to Auschwitz, starting with the camp officials and employees of IG Farben, and they moved into the new and improved housing. Once the factory was complete, Auschwitz's Polish community was assessed to see if individuals fitted the racial profile. Those who passed the test were entered on the *Volksliste* (People's List). Those who did not were categorized as 'protected dependants' who had less rights and were more likely to be deported.

In September 1942 Himmler met all parties to decide the boundaries of the town and the camp, but the arguments continued. In January 1943 a delegation visited Berlin with plans to build a new camp further away so they could improve the town's landscaping. No one was concerned they were building a town next to an extermination centre.

The plans were rejected and in June 1943 the SS were given total control of the camp and the surrounding area. By the end of the year around 6,500 Germans had moved into the town, many looking to escape the Allied bombing raids, and they would know little about what was happening in the nearby camp.

Chapter 3

Birkenau Camp

According to Höss, Himmler spoke of great plans for Auschwitz during his first visit on 1 March 1941. He planned to turn the town into an exemplary settlement for 40,000 Germans while the camp population would be increased to 30,000. When Höss complained he was short of staff, time and materials he was told to employ experts and find solutions. *“Gentlemen, the camp will be expanded. My reasons for it are far more important than your objections... I want to hear no more about difficulties. For an SS officer there are no difficulties. When they come up, it is his job to get rid of them. How you do that is your business, not mine.”*

Höss also recalled that Himmler discussed building a new super camp for 100,000 prisoners. The prisoners would build the camp and the accommodation for the German staff and tradesmen who would supervise the work. They would then build new factories and an agricultural centre. However, the Auschwitz construction office did not mention any plans for Birkenau camp until 12 September 1941.

Relevant meetings were held in Berlin over the days that followed. Himmler and Pohl discussed the Soviet prisoner of war situation with *SS-Obergruppenführer* Reinhard Heydrich, head of the Reich Main Security Office. The problem revolved around the three million prisoners taken during the invasion of the Soviet Union. The Wehrmacht were due to hand 100,000 officers and political commissars over to the SS on 25 September and camps had to be built to house them.

The following day Himmler ordered Hans Kammler, head of the Central SS Building Office, to tell Höss to build a new super camp to house the Soviet prisoners. *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Karl Bischoff was appointed head of the Auschwitz construction office and he would be assisted by Walter Dejaco and Fritz Ertl.

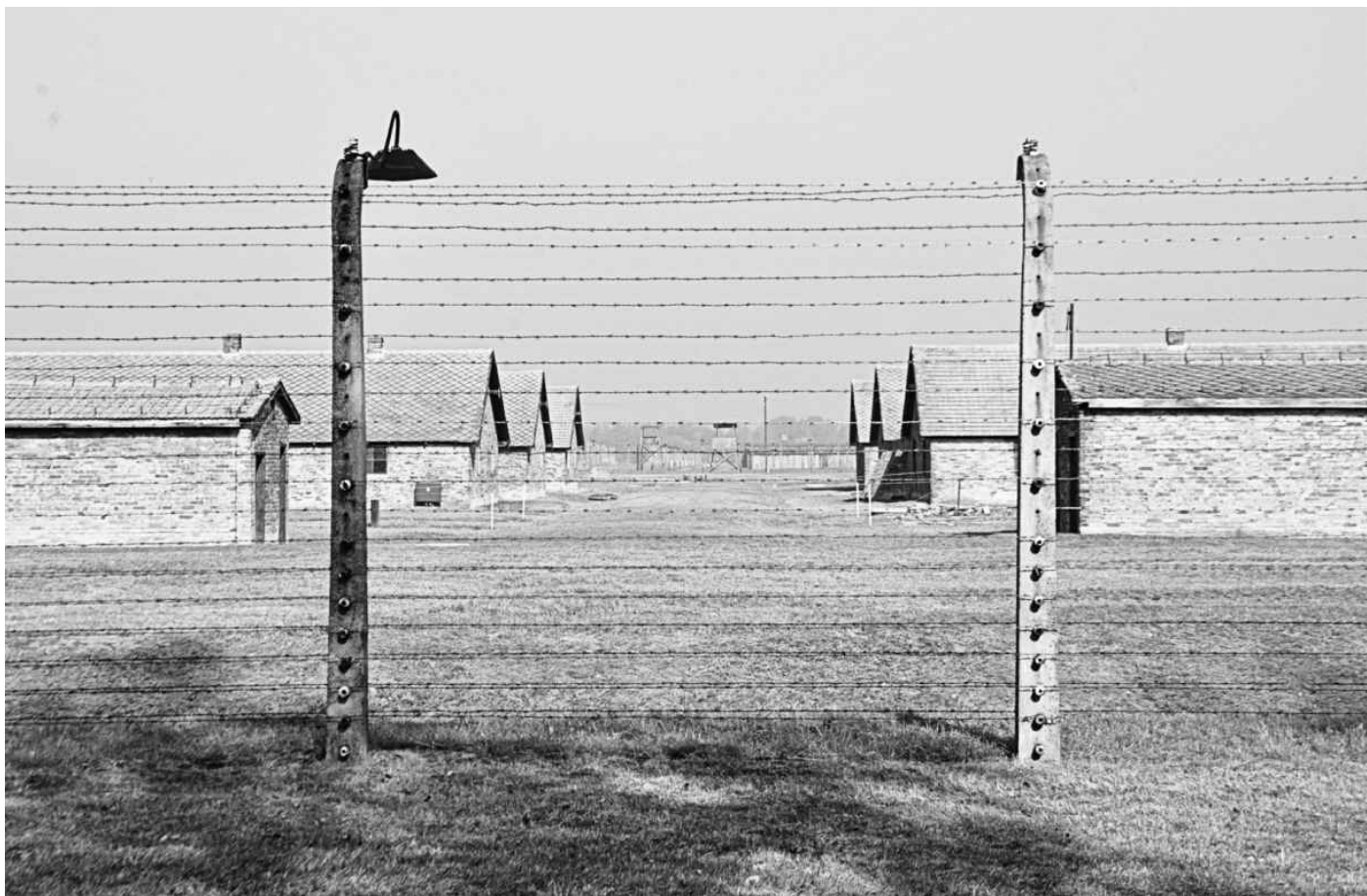
The area near the evacuated village Birkenau (the Poles had called it Brzezinka) had been chosen, west of Auschwitz. There was a budget of 8.9 million Reichsmarks to build a quarantine area for 17,000 new arrivals and a transit area for 80,000 prisoners awaiting transfer to the Reich (there was no talk of gas chambers or crematoria).

The quarantine area would have thirty barrack blocks, two kitchens, five toilet blocks, five washrooms and two delousing buildings. The main area would have twelve sectors, each with twelve barrack blocks, one kitchen, one toilet block and one washroom. It meant the camp would have a total of 174 barracks, each subdivided into sixty-two bays, each with a three-tier bunk bed. Originally each block was designed to hold 550 prisoners, creating a capacity of 95,700. While this was a third of the space allocated to a prisoner in the German concentration camps, the number was soon increased to 744. It meant the camp could house nearly 130,000 if it was ever finished.

Building the Forced Labour Camp

Thousands of Soviet prisoners began arriving in October and work started at a back-breaking pace. The prisoners marched to and from Birkenau every day and while some levelled the camp area and dug drainage ditches, others demolished the houses by hand. The timber and bricks were then recycled to build the first fifteen barracks. The prisoners worked through terrible weather conditions and completed the quarantine camp in only fourteen days.

Building continued through the winter and over one million bricks were laid in five weeks. Prefabricated wooden huts were soon being delivered to Birkenau and a single carpenter could supervise thirty labourers as they put it together. But the death toll was enormous because many died of illness, malnutrition, beatings and shootings. By the spring, only a few hundred of the 10,000 Soviet prisoners were still alive.



The brick barracks built by the Soviet prisoners of war.

Local tradesmen moved into Birkenau BIa camp following a typhus outbreak in the spring of 1942 and they then transferred to new barracks built between the two camps a few weeks later. Eventually 2,000 local tradesmen, working for over twenty companies, were employed.

While the Birkenau area was a logical choice for the camp, it was far from ideal because the high water table turned the area into a quagmire when it rained or snowed. In the spring of 1942 the penal company started a perimeter ditch, called the *Königsgraben* (the King's Ditch), along the east side of the camp and it discharged into the River Vistula, two kilometres away. Other prisoners dug a network of ditches, sluices and bridges to drain surface water from the rest of the camp. Digging ditches was one of the worst jobs because the prisoners had to stand in water as they shovelled mud from dawn until dusk. An electrified fence, with 760 volts running through the wire, was built next to the perimeter ditches.

The first prisoners from Germany arrived in Birkenau in March 1942 while around 1,200 sick prisoners were transferred from Auschwitz into the new camp. More sectors opened over the next eighteen months and numbers continued to rise at a tremendous rate as the blocks were filled to the brim. Birkenau eventually had two completed camps, BI and BII; while BIII camp was only partially completed. Each camp was divided into sectors, which were suffixed with letters, and each sector was isolated by barbed wire and locked gates so the prisoners could not mix.

Male prisoners, including the surviving Soviet POWs, were moved into sector BIb in March 1942. Women started arriving in sector BIa five months later. Sector BII opened to the south in March 1943 and Roma gypsies were held in sector BIIf after July. Surplus male prisoners moved into sector BIId in August while the penal kommando and the *Sonderkommando* were housed in isolation in sector BIId. The men's quarantine camp in sector BIIa and the camp hospital in sector BIIf also opened in August 1943. A month later the Jews from Theresienstadt ghetto moved into sector BIIf.

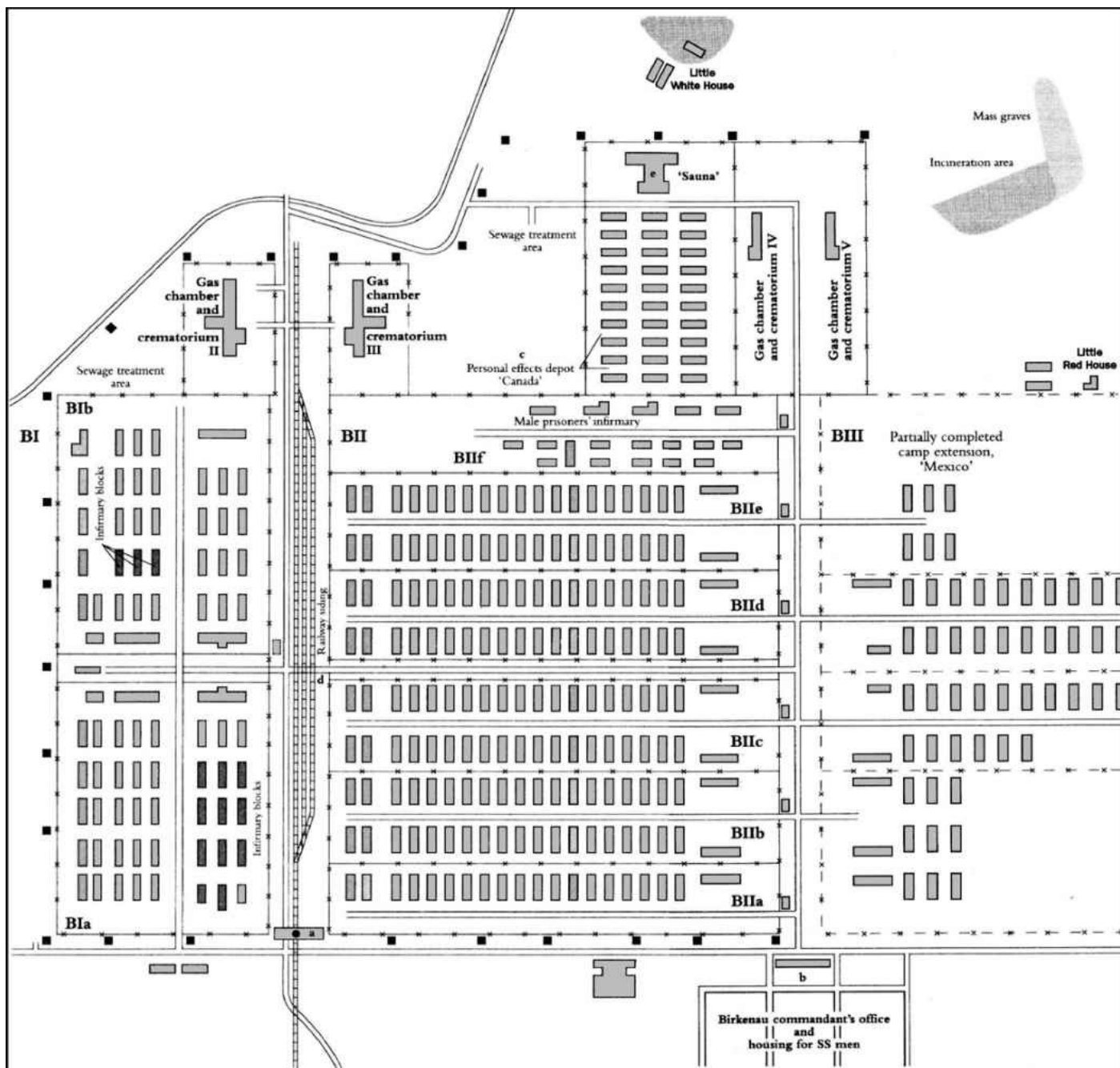
As the number of Jews increased, so did the need for a larger luggage sorting facility and the new Kanada warehouses opened in sector BIIf in December 1943. The spring saw a massive influx of Hungarian Jews and while the male prisoners were distributed throughout the camp, the female prisoners were held in sector BIIf and the partially completed area known as BIII camp or Mexico.

By the summer of 1944 Birkenau had 30 brick barracks and around 250 wooden barracks of various designs. Surviving records tell us that 19,424 men and 39,234 women were registered in the camp while there were another 30,000 unregistered Jewish prisoners.

Sector BIb: The First Camp

The Soviet POWs built the first part of Birkenau camp and thousands died constructing a mixture of masonry and timber blocks over the winter of 1941-42. In March 1942 the 600 survivors were moved into six of the barracks. Additional masonry barracks for the penal company (block 1), the *Sonderkommando* (block 2), and for the Slovakian and French Jews who had just started to arrive, were added over the next three months.

While the sector had a shower block, toilets and washrooms, a typhus epidemic still killed half of the 11,500 prisoners in March 1943. Over the summer the number of prisoners had risen back to 10,000 but in July they were moved to sector BIId. The women in sector BIa were then transferred into sector BIb.



Key

a Guard post and main gate

b Commandant's office and administration

c Kanada sorting huts

d Railway siding for selection (1944)

e Central shower block

• Shaded areas denote mass graves and incineration pits

• Black squares denote watchtowers

A plan of Birkenau.

Sector BIa: The Women's Camp

In August 1942 Ravensbrück concentration camp handed control of the few women held in Auschwitz over to Commandant Höss and he transferred them into sector Birkenau's sector BIa. The number of women prisoners continued to increase and all the men were moved out of BIa to make way for them in July 1943. The women kept their children with them until the gas chambers opened.

Those moved to sector BIa were either working inside the camp, without work or being held in quarantine. Those held in sector BIb had jobs outside the wire and while some worked in the administration and employment offices, others worked in the parcel office or the sewing workshop.

Some of BIb's blocks were hospitals and while those selected to die were held in block 25, Doctor Horst Schumann began carrying out sterilization experiments in block 30 at the end of 1942. Numbers rose as high as 39,000 and in the spring of 1944 the women were moved to other parts of the camp. The fit were transferred to sector BIb (the Theresienstadt Jews had just been gassed) while the sick were moved to sector BIc (the gypsies had just been gassed); the rest were moved to Auschwitz I.



Electric fences and locked gates kept different categories of prisoners apart.

Sector BIIa: The Sick Camp

A men's quarantine camp opened in August 1943. Prisoners were held in the sector until they were ready to be moved to sector BIId. There were fifteen barracks, three toilet blocks, three washrooms and a clinic, but the number of prisoners varied wildly according to the number of transports. In April 1944 sick prisoners were moved into the sector and they were soon joined by exhausted prisoners transferred from the recently closed Majdanek concentration camp, near Lublin. Eventually most of the barracks were occupied by the sick and they were moved to the hospital camp (BIIf) when it closed in November 1944; the few fit prisoners were moved to the workers camp (BIId).

Sector BIIf: The Theresienstadt Camp

The first group of 5,000 prisoners from the Theresienstadt ghetto arrived in September 1943. The plan was to give the impression that Auschwitz was a working camp where the Jews would be safe. Prisoners had to send heavily censored letters back to Theresienstadt ghetto to dispel rumours about extermination camps in the East.

Around 46,000 people were eventually sent to sector BIIf and while many died from disease and malnutrition, 3,800 sick and elderly were gassed in March 1944 to make way for more transports. Around 7,000 prisoners were gassed in July 1944 and 3,000 were transferred to other camps, just in time to house women transferred from Warsaw following the uprising.

Sector BIId: The Hungarian Women's Camp

In May 1944 sector BIId was opened as a transit camp for Jewish women who were selected as fit enough to work from the daily transports arriving from Hungary. Those unfit for work were sent straight to the gas chambers. The camp was closed in October and the women were moved into other sectors.

Sector BIId: The Working Men's Camp

Around 10,000 men moved here from BIb camp in July 1943. Twenty-five of the forty wooden blocks housed prisoners, while the rest housed offices, kitchens, stores, workshops, washrooms and toilets. Auschwitz I Employment Department had an office in the sector and its staff chose which prisoners did what work. The penal company lived in block 11 and the *Sonderkommando* were housed in block 13 for a while, in isolation from the other prisoners.

Sector BIIf: The Gypsy Camp

Roma gypsies began arriving in February 1943 and 1,700 Roma were gassed a month later following a typhoid outbreak. It had twenty-four accommodation barracks, four office and

storage blocks, two kitchens, six washrooms and six toilet blocks. It originally had two hospital blocks but more had to be converted into sick bays as the number of sick increased. Block 31 was a nursery and block 29 was a pre-school area but the children were not safe. Dr Josef Mengele used part of the building next to block 32 to perform his experiments on them.

By May 1943 the number of gypsies had risen to over 14,000 and they were allowed to live in family groups, wear civilian clothing and keep their hair long; only a few were made to work. But more than half had died of malnutrition and disease when the decision was taken to liquidate the camp in the summer of 1944. There were terrible scenes on the night of 2/3 August 1944 as the guards fought to get the gypsies into the gas chambers. Over 3,000 men, women, and children were gassed in just a few hours.



Rebuilt timber barracks remind us of the cramped living conditions.

Sector BIIf: The Hospital Camp

The hospital camp opened with seventeen blocks in July 1943 and SS physicians Heinz Thilo and Josef Mengele were based in block 1. Doctors, nurses and auxiliary personnel had to care for between 1,750 and 2,750 prisoners with limited stocks of medicine and supplies. They also ran operating rooms, a camp dentist and a dietetic kitchen. The nurses lived in block 13 while prisoners destined for the gas chambers were held in block 12.

Sector BIIf: Kanada

Kanada was the prisoner's nickname for the warehouses used to store property taken from the Jews. It was considered to be a 'land of plenty' where food and valuables found in the luggage could be stolen and traded. The guards soon began using the name.

Kanada I had opened on the German Equipment Works (DAW) site close to the Jews Ramp, halfway between Auschwitz and Birkenau, in the summer of 1942. The six wooden barracks were protected by barbed wire and guard towers while clothing taken from the luggage was cleaned in a disinfection chamber.

A much larger Kanada camp opened in December 1943 between sector BIIf and Crematorium IV. Prisoners loaded the luggage left on the railway ramps onto lorries so it could be driven to the sheds. Up to 2,000 prisoners worked in the thirty wooden huts, sorting and storing clothes, valuables and personal items. Nothing was wasted and while shoes and leather goods were taken to the tannery, clothing was exported.

Sector BIII: Mexico (Meksyk)

Work started in the summer of 1943 on a third camp for 60,000 prisoners. By the time work stopped in March 1944 only 32 barracks had been finished and 35 were half built out of the 188 planned blocks. Hungarian Jewish women were moved into the camp starting in May but there were no kitchens, washrooms or toilets; hence the name Mexico, a land short of everything. Some barracks had no bunks and there was a shortage of clothing and blankets. The camp was closed in October 1944 and the prisoners were moved by rail to Gross-Rosen concentration camp.

The Extermination Camp

Starting in February 1942 plans were put in place to turn Birkenau into a centre to exterminate Europe's Jews. From makeshift beginnings the camp was made into a factory of death capable of murdering thousands of people a week and disposing of the bodies in such a fashion there would be no evidence.

The Little Red House and Little White House

Following the Wannsee Conference, Himmler made it clear that the concentration camp system would soon be receiving 150,000 Jews from ghettos. The first transport to reach Auschwitz arrived on 15 February and while the elderly were gassed in the camp's crematorium, Höss was dissatisfied with the arrangement. The camp needed much larger facilities to deal with the proposed influx of Jews. He met his architect, Karl Bischoff, and head of the Central SS Buildings Office, Hans Kammler, on 27 February and they decided it would be easiest to build a new gas chamber near Birkenau camp.

An isolated house outside Birkenau's wire was chosen and two undressing rooms were built close by. The house doors and windows were bricked up to create two sealed rooms, hatches were put in the walls and signs saying 'To the Disinfection' were put over the doors. While the building's official names were 'Bathing Facility for Special Actions' and 'Bunker Number 1', the red brick walls gave it the nickname the 'Little Red House'.



Trains steamed through the Gate of Death into the centre of Birkenau.

The facility was tested on 20 March 1942 and six days later a group of Slovakian women were gassed. The *Sonderkommando* loaded the bodies onto a narrow-gauge railway and lorries and then buried them in a nearby field. Throughout the spring and early summer of 1942 Jews from Upper Silesia and Slovakia were gassed inside the house, 800 at a time.

A second cottage was converted into four smaller gas chambers which were easier to ventilate. Bunker Number 2 could murder 1,200 at a time and its plastered walls resulted in the nickname, the 'Little White House'.

On the night of 4 July, 638 people were escorted to the new bunker and gathered inside. *SS-Unterscharführer* Otto Moll, dressed in a white protective suit and gas mask, dropped the Zyklon B through vents. Everyone was soon dead and again the bodies were buried in the nearby field.

Tens of thousands of Jewish men, women, and children from France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, Bohemia, Slovakia, Norway, Yugoslavia, and Poland were gassed in the two cottages. They closed when the first two purpose-built gas chambers were opened at the end of April 1943.

While the Little Red House was demolished, the Little White House was used again in May 1944 when the gas chambers could not cope with the Hungarian transports. New burning pits were dug in a nearby field while two wooden barracks were erected to store luggage in. The Little White House was demolished at the end of the autumn. While the foundations were buried, they have been unearthed in recent years.

Disposing of the Corpses

While the gassing was progressing at a tremendous rate, the mass graves were posing a serious problem by the time Himmler made his second visit in July 1942. The summer weather had turned the makeshift graveyard into a serious health hazard. A horrible stench filled the air while the contaminated ground water was poisoning the nearby fish farm. A plague of rats and a typhus epidemic were also sweeping the camp.

A new 1,400 strong *Sonderkommando* was put to work destroying the evidence on Himmler's orders. *SS-Unterscharführer* Franz Hössler supervised the ghastly task of exhuming and burning the bodies on pyres. Wood taken from demolished houses and brush collected from the Pszczyna forests was used but it rarely generated enough heat for the outdoor cremations.

In September Höss visited Chelmno (Kulmhof) extermination camp, near Lodz, to see how Commandant *SS-Standartenführer* Paul Blobel built incineration pits. Holes were dug and grills were installed. The bodies and wood were then stacked in alternate layers and

burnt using petrol or methanol.

By the end of November most of the 100,000 corpses had been disposed of when the *Sonderkommando* tried to escape, worried they were going to be executed. They were right. They were murdered on 9 December and replaced by fit men selected from the next transport.

From time to time the *Sonderkommando* used the incineration pits when the crematoria could not cope or had to be closed for repairs. They were also used during the frenzied killings of the Hungarian Jews and when the Litzmannstadt ghetto was closed.

Building New Crematoria and Gas Chambers

The Little Red and Little White Houses were fully operational when the camp administration discussed how to increase the size of Birkenau to 200,000 prisoners in the autumn of 1942. They decided to build two new crematoria numbered II and III (Auschwitz crematorium was number I).

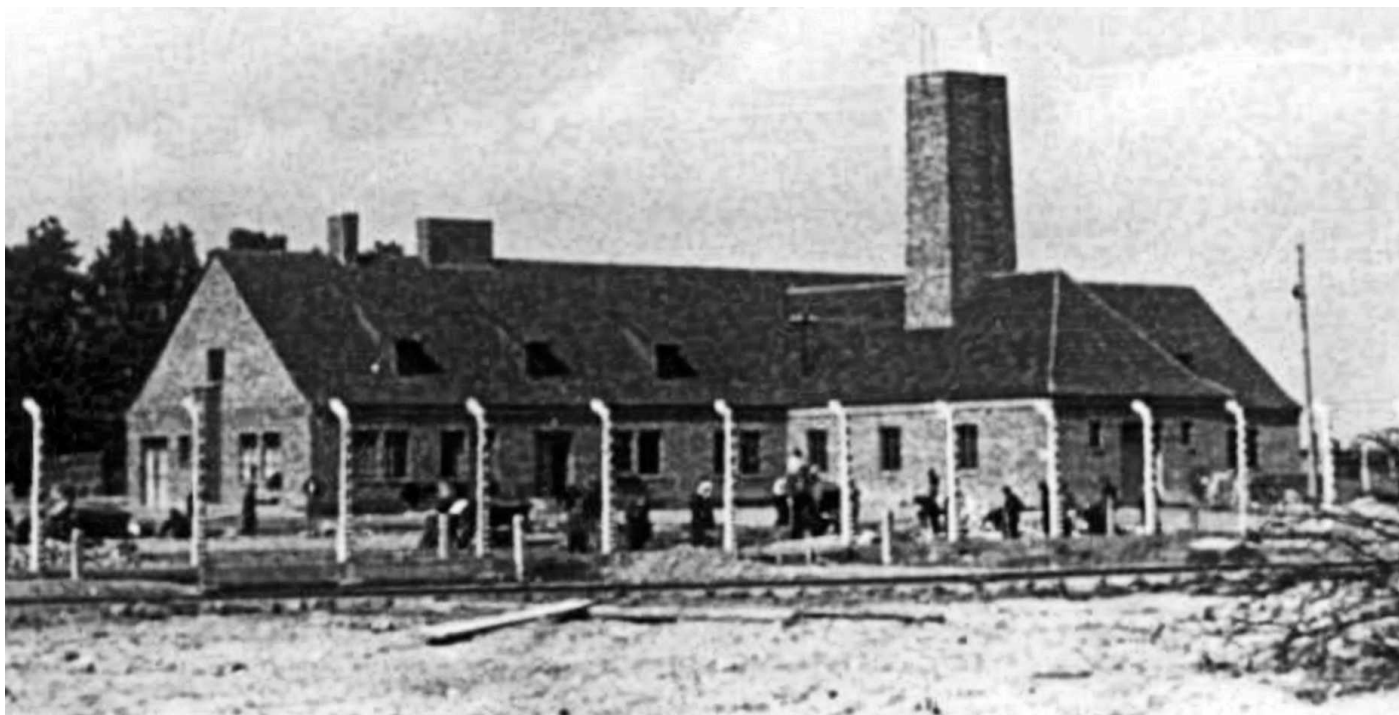
While Karl Bitschoff drew up the original plans, SS architect Walter Dejaco altered them into a combined gassing and cremation facility, disguised as delousing showers. Part of the underground mortuary would be an undressing and storage area while the rest of the basement was turned into a gas chamber. It had an airtight door which swung out (to avoid the bodies blocking the doors) and had a spy hole so the guards could watch the gassing. Hatches were added in the roof so the Zyklon B could be dropped inside.

Stairs replaced the corpse chute down to the basement while a lift would hoist the corpses to the ground floor crematorium. The five triple muffle furnaces in each building could burn 720 corpses every twenty-four hours. For the first time the killing and disposal operation would be carried out under one roof, making it far more efficient.

Three more crematoria were planned but only Crematorium IV and Crematorium V were built and they were a different design. They were large brick buildings with everything on the ground level, removing the need to haul the corpses upstairs. Hatches in the walls allowed the SS orderlies to drop the Zyklon B into the gas chambers. Next door were two quadruple muffle furnaces which could burn 768 bodies every twenty-four hours.

Construction started in September and around 125 prisoners worked on each site, supervised by a Special Leader (*Sonderführer*). While the prisoners did the manual work, private contractors supervised their elements of the construction. Once Lenz and Co had levelled each site, Karl Falck of Gleiwitz and Triton of Katowice installed the drainage and Vedag of Breslau waterproofed the underground rooms. Huta of Kattowitz and Reidel & Son of Bielitz built the walls while Konrad Segnitz installed the roof and Robert

Koehler of Myslowitz built the chimneys. Topf & Sons of Erfurt made the furnaces while losef Kluge of Gleiwitz installed them.



Crematoria IV and V had their changing room, gas chamber and furnace hall on the ground floor.

By the end of February 1943 Crematorium II was ready for testing. On 4 March Kurt Prüfer, chief engineer of Topf & Sons, watched as forty-five men were gassed and their corpses were cremated in Crematorium II. The test was a success and the engineers completed the gas chamber ventilation system while the stokers kept the furnaces burning for ten days to dry them out.

The architect signed off Crematorium IV on 22 March and the following evening 1,492 elderly and women and children from Krakow were gassed. The gassings continued but the incinerator kept overheating until it eventually cracked. While the installation team blamed the *Sonderkommando* for damaging the furnace lining with their fire irons, Topf & Sons were forced to carry out remedial work between 24 April and 8 May.

Crematorium II was ready on 31 March, Crematorium V was operational on 22 April and Crematorium III was handed over on 24 June. Experience showed that around six kilograms of Zyklon B could kill 1,500 people in around fifteen minutes (at least twenty-five tons would be delivered to Auschwitz between 1942 and 1944). It was estimated that with the four crematoria they could gas 4,700 people and dispose of their bodies every day. That was a staggering 150,000 murders a month. Birkenau had been turned into a factory of death.

Chapter 4

The Sub-Camps

Birkenau was a transit camp for forced labour. A large number of prisoners were employed on the twenty-eight sub-camps in the surrounding area while others were transferred to work camps across the Third Reich.

The Auschwitz Zone of Interest

As Auschwitz camp grew, the decision was taken to create a Concentration Camp Zone of Interest, an area covering forty square kilometres. The Germans began evicting people from the town and eight nearby villages in March and April 1941. The village of Monowice (Monowitz) to the east was evacuated to make way for the IG Farben plant. Dozens of farms were also cleared and the animals were confiscated while the land was planted with crops to grow food for the camp.

Over two years 8,500 Poles were moved from the Auschwitz area and replaced by Germans. Some were employed by the camps; some were employed by the factories; while others came from northern Bukovina, as part of the Nazis 'living space' policy (*Lebensraum*) of re-population. Over 1,000 houses were demolished to build barracks in Birkenau while larger houses were built in 'Musterstadt Auschwitz', or 'Model Town Auschwitz'. Workers from German occupied territory were housed in temporary accommodation on the east side of the town.

By the spring 1943 Auschwitz was the only camp in the concentration camp system achieving the three Nazi objectives: working the fit on site, transferring the fit to other labour camps and murdering the unfit. The gas chambers were also used to kill prisoners no longer able to work.

To begin with the prisoners were either marched to their place of work or housed in nearby houses, factories and halls until they built their barracks. While the larger sub-camps had their own administration and facilities with fences and guard towers, the smaller sub-camps often had no more than a few dozen prisoners who were locked in a storeroom or cellars overnight. They were guarded by a mixture of SS guards, soldiers,

police officers and factory guards while their food was delivered from the main camp.

From makeshift beginnings, the Auschwitz Zone of Interest grew into a huge work camp. The industrial sub-camps reported to Auschwitz III after the camp administration was reorganized by Arthur Liebehenschel in November 1943. By the time the camps were evacuated in January 1945, the sub-camps employed over 35,000 prisoners, compared to the 32,000 prisoners in the main camps.

IG Farben and Monowitz

Nazi Germany was short of rubber and fuel for its war effort and it needed chemical plants to make synthetic substitutes. Synthetic rubber was made by passing hydrogen gas over coal at high temperature, a process called hydrogenation. The product was code-named Buna, (Bu for the butadiene-based synthetic rubber and Na the chemical symbol for sodium).

IG Farben was contracted to produce the synthetic materials and the head of the company's chemical division, Dr Otto Ambros, wanted to relocate its synthetic-rubber production to Silesia. Auschwitz was ideal because it had rail links and natural resources, including coal, lime, salt and water.

Himmler discussed the factory during his visit to Auschwitz on 1 March 1941. The company had bought land at Monowitz from the Reich for a subsidized rate and it needed labour. Höss met IG Farben representatives on 27 March and eleven days later the company representative held their first meeting. While the agreed day rates were four Reichsmarks per skilled worker and three Reichsmarks per unskilled worker, the workers received nothing; the money was paid to the SS. The rates for the raw materials which would be extracted from the surrounding mines by slave labour were also agreed. Siemens-Schuckert electrical engineers and the arms manufacturer Krupp would also have manufacturing facilities in the Monowitz area.

Monowitz-Buna or Auschwitz III grew to be the largest sub-camp in the Auschwitz zone of interest. The workers had to walk the four miles from Auschwitz camp until a rail line was built, so a train could take them to work. Work was suspended in the summers of 1941 and 1942 due to typhus outbreaks and over 3,000 prisoners were transferred to the on-site barracks the following winter. The plant had doubled in area and doubled its work force by the summer of 1943.

The prisoners worked slower than German workers and *SS-Obersturmführer* Vinzenz Schöttl took steps to improve their efficiency. A Labour Education Camp was set up to teach non-Jewish prisoners how to work more efficiently, more kapos were employed and a reward system was introduced; even a brothel was opened. But the prisoners worked

slower because they were underfed and mistreated. Slave labour was not as profitable as IG Farben had expected.



Slave labour built IG Farben's huge factory at Monowitz.

While conditions were a little better than the other two camps, prisoners were still beaten and executed. Life expectancy was three to four months, compared to only one month in the nearby mines; unfit prisoners were sent to the main camps to be gassed.

By November 1943 Auschwitz III (the official name for Monowitz) was the third largest synthetic rubber and liquid fuel plant in the Third Reich. It was made into a separate camp and the new commandant, *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Heinrich Schwarz, had 400 staff and guards supervising 11,000 prisoners living in sixty barracks; he was also responsible for nine other sub-camps.

American bombers first hit the IG Farben petro-chemical installations at Monowitz on the night of 4 May 1943. Foggia airfield in Italy was captured by the Allies in the spring of 1944, bringing Auschwitz in range and reconnaissance aircraft were soon photographing the area. Raids were carried out by 127 B-17 Flying Fortresses on 20 August, 96 B-24 Liberators on 3 September, 47 B-24s and 2 B-17s on 18 December and 95 B-24s on 26 December. Between them they dropped 770 tons of bombs and seriously damaged the plant; they also killed around 120 prisoners.

Auschwitz III continued operations until 18 January 1945 when the fit prisoners were marched to Gliwice and then taken by trains into Germany. Those left behind were liberated by the Red Army on 27 January.

Monowitz was not the only synthetics factory in Silesia. Blechhammer sub-camp (later Auschwitz IV) was opened next to Oberschlesische Hydrierwerke synthetic fuel plants in April 1942. To begin with the prisoners dug foundations, constructed roads and built air-raid shelters but after the June 1944 raids many were put to work removing unexploded bombs. In January 1945 over 4,000 workers were evacuated while around 800 sick prisoners were murdered.

Assembly and Recycling Plants

Ten assembly plants were opened between 1941 and 1944 and while some made new products, others salvaged or recycled material. They employed over 10,000 prisoners and some were engaged in hazardous work involving dangerous machinery and molten metal.

The German Equipment Works (DAW) arrived in the Auschwitz area in 1941 and 700 prisoners built a carpenters' workshop to make barrack components, furniture and crates for shells. New workshops were built to renovate ammunition carts and army skis while women turned re-cycled scrap material into string, rope and belts in weaving sheds. The company also ran a general salvage yard and it eventually employed over 3,000 prisoners.

In the spring of 1943 Eintracht mill opened near Swietochlowice, north-west of

Katowice, and 1,300 prisoners began manufacturing parts for anti-aircraft guns. Weichsel Union Metallwerke had been evacuated from the Ukraine to the Auschwitz area in October 1943 and over 1,000 prisoners were put to work making artillery fuses. By November a one kilometre long barbed wire path, called the '*Lion's Corridor*' had been built between the camp and the factory to stop prisoners escaping during the dark winter nights.

A military aircraft salvage yard opened south of Birkenau in October 1943. Luftwaffe personnel supervised 1,300 prisoners and they worked in 100-strong groups, salvaging plane parts, fuel and ammunition from German and Allied aircraft.

Bombing raids forced an electric motor company to move into an old fertilizer factory in Bobrek, north of Auschwitz, in the spring of 1944. The 200 prisoners were treated with a degree of respect because they were experts in their field.

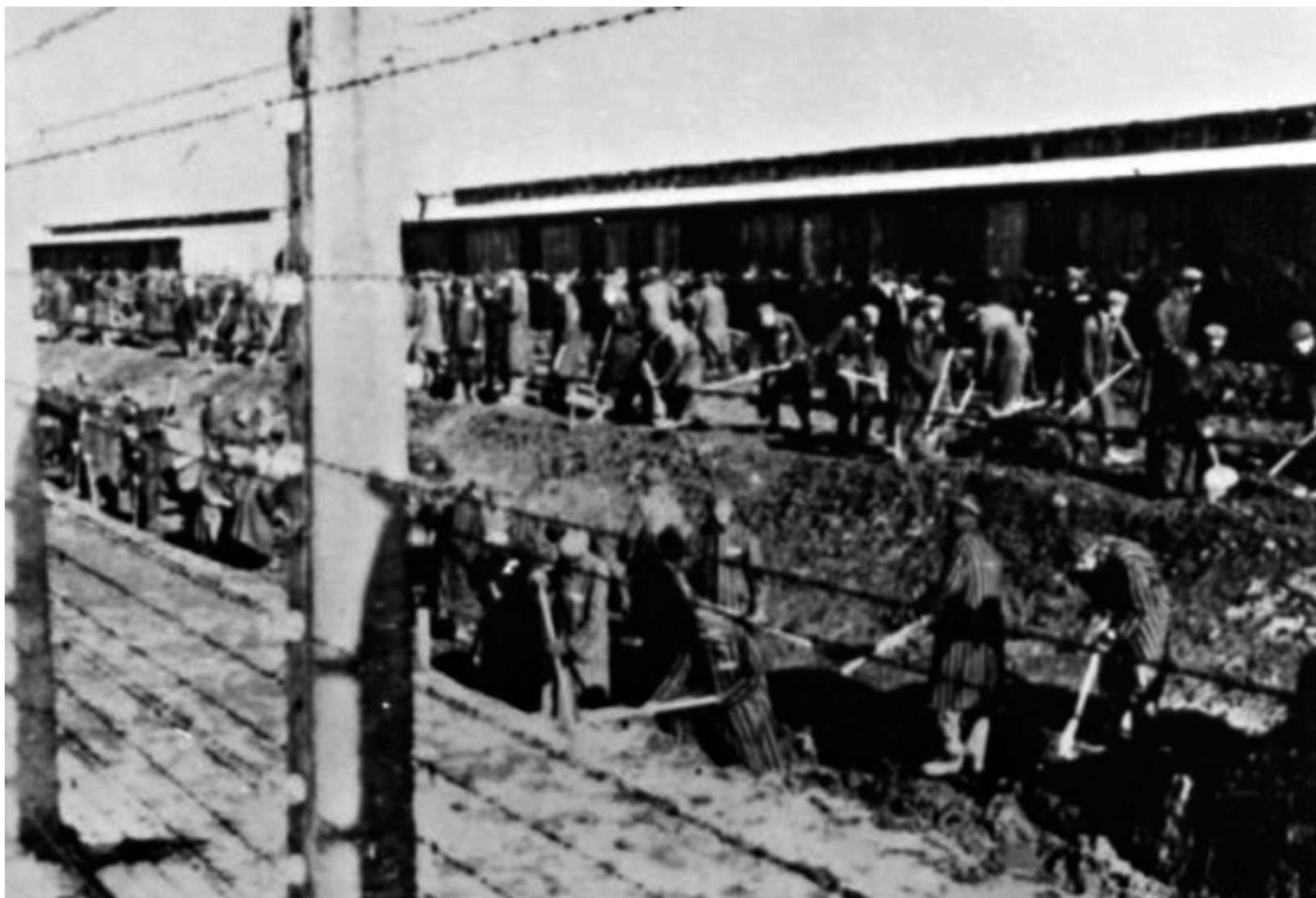
Laura mill opened with 900 prisoners in Siemianowice Slaskie, north of Katowice, in April 1944. A similar number started work at Sosnowitz mill, east of the town, a month later. They both produced gun barrels and artillery shells.

The Hindenburg mill opened in Zabrze, north-west of Katowice in August 1944 and while 350 female prisoners made artillery shells and grenades, around 70 men were engaged in manual work. Another 200 prisoners were put to work on Bismarckhutte steel mill at Chorzow, also north-west of the town, a month later and while some unloaded building material and dug ditches, others made parts for anti-aircraft weapons. Hubertus mill was the last one to open in December, in Lagiewniki, north of the town, with 200 prisoners.

Coal Mines, Power Stations

The Auschwitz area had rich coal deposits and while existing mines were expanded, new ones were opened between August 1942 and February 1944. The work was exhausting and dangerous and the miners reached their limit of endurance after only a few weeks.

Jawiszowice mine was the first to open, south-west of Auschwitz, in August 1942 and it was soon employing 2,500 prisoners. Work on Neu-Dachs mine on the outskirts of Jaworzno, north of the camp, began in June 1943 and 3,600 prisoners were soon digging in old and new tunnels. The guards at Janina coal mine, north-east of Auschwitz, had experienced trouble with the British prisoners of war who were more interested in sabotage than work. Around 400 prisoners replaced them in September 1943 and the number had soon doubled. A similar number were employed at Fürsten mine, east of Katowice.



A kommando digs a drainage ditch along Birkenau's perimeter fence.

In September 1943 prisoners began building an electric power station in Lagischa, near Bedzin, north-east of Katowice. However, the scheme was dropped a year later and 500 prisoners started work on a new power station site at Althammer, west of Katowice. In February 1944 work started on a camp to house prisoners for Günther coal mine in Ledziny, north of Auschwitz. The following September another 1,000 were put to work on Charlotte mine and the adjacent power station.

In August 1944 800 prisoners were moved to Trzebinia Refinery, west of Krakow, where they laid rail tracks, dug ditches, drains and foundations. Following an air raid they installed air-raid shelters and removed unexploded bombs. The same sort of dangerous work was carried out at Tschechowitz Refinery. Golleschau quarry, near Cieszyn, employed up to 500 prisoners laying train tracks and breaking rocks. A similar number were employed in the nearby cement factory.

Farming and Forestry Camps

The first livestock sub-camp opened in the Auschwitz area in 1941. By the end of 1944 SS-Obersturmbannführer Dr Joachim Caesar had six farms with 2,000 prisoners, most of them women, tending livestock and growing food for the camp. Rubber producing plants were also cultivated on one farm.

Prisoners built barracks on the site of Raisko village, south of the camp, in the spring 1941. Over 300 prisoners were then put to work gardening and tending indoor plants. The produce was sold to the SS men and civilian workers.

The farm also cultivated an Asian plant called *kok saghyz* which contained rubber producing *caoutchouc*. Many of the employees were women with relevant degrees and they worked in better conditions because the planting area had to be kept clean.

Over the winter of 1941-42 two small barracks were built on the site of Budy and Harmense villages, south-west of the camp. More barracks were added and there were over 1,000 women working on the two farms by the end of 1944.

Babice farm opened north-east of the camp with 360 prisoners in the spring of 1943, followed by Birkenau farm with 200 prisoners in the summer. In the spring of 1944 the army took the horses from Babice farm and women had to pull the ploughs. The final farm opened for 340 prisoners at Plawy, south of the camp, in the spring of 1944.

To begin with dead bodies were buried in the fields near Birkenau but they soon became a health hazard. The decision was taken to dig them up and burn them on outdoor pyres. Four sub-camps producing timber were set up in the Pszczyna forest over the winter of 1942-43 and while the hand sawn trunks were sent to the forestry service, the branches

was taken to Birkenau to use on the pyres. Radostowitz, Altdorf and Mesersitz sub-camps only had a few dozen prisoners and they closed in the spring of 1943, when the crematoria began working. But Kobier sub-camp continued producing timber until the summer.

Small Camps

There were a number of other small camps in the Auschwitz area. Chelmek sub-camp employed 150 prisoners cleaning the ponds serving the Bata shoe factory, starting in the autumn of 1942. Sosnowiec sub-camp housed 100 prisoners, re-forming the Katowice Council of Jewish Elders offices in the autumn of 1943. Around 400 women started work in Neustadt textile mill in September 1944.

In September 1944, 500 prisoners were placed on a train and taken to south-west Germany, to repair bomb damage in Karlsruhe. The prisoners were then moved around the country so they could clear rubble in bomb damaged cities.

The Czech Border Camps

Three sub-camps were opened across the border, in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, in the autumn of 1943. Men erected buildings and unloaded equipment at the SS and Police Technical Academy in Brno while 600 women were set to work at Lichtewerden thread factory and Emerich Machold textile mill in Freudenthal. On 6 May 1945 the guards changed into civilian clothes and fled.

Between March and July 1944 four sub-camps were built in the Gleiwitz area, near the Czech border. Camp I employed 1,300 prisoners repairing damaged rolling stock but they were made to carry stones back and forward if there was a shortage of work. Camp II had over 1,000 women working with lampblack, an unhealthy filler used in rubber products. Camp III had 600 prisoners making steel products, including artillery shells. Camp IV had 450 prisoners converting truck engines to run on wood gas.

Chapter 5

Organizing the Camps

Auschwitz-Birkenau was part of the Third Reich's concentration camp system and it worked with two organizations, the Reich Main Security Office (RSHA) and the SS Main Economic and Administration Office (WVHA). The RSHA was created in September 1939 to bring together the work of the Security Service (SD), the Secret State Police (Gestapo) and the Criminal Police, (Kripo). The Chiefs of Security and SD worked to imprison and eliminate all 'enemies of the Reich'. The WVHA was established in February 1942 to coordinate SS enterprises. Auschwitz-Birkenau reported to Office D, the Concentration Camp Inspectorate. The office financed the building of the camps, employed the guards, put the prisoners to work and also put them to death.

While many were involved in implementing the Holocaust, five men are responsible for organizing the rounding up, transportation, exploitation and murder of tens of thousands of victims in camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The Organizers

SS-Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler (1900-1945) was a failed chicken farmer and an early member of the Nazi movement who participated in the failed Munich coup in November 1923. He joined the *Schutzstaffel* (SS) two years later and organized protection teams for the Nazi leaders. He became head of the SS in 1929 and directed its expansion into a huge, elite organization which covered state security, military units and business ventures, all in the pursuit of furthering the objectives of the Third Reich. After the Nazis seized power, Himmler became head of the German police and Minister of the Interior. The SS created the concentration camp system to hold enemies of the State outside the judicial system and to use prisoners as forced labour. It would go on to organize the deportation of Europe's Jews to the extermination camps.

Himmler visited Auschwitz for the first time in March 1941 and discussed expanding the camp and its sub-camps in the zone of interest. Auschwitz was turned from a prison camp into a forced labour and transit camp. Four months later he made a second visit and observed the murder of Jews by gassing in the Little White House.

Towards the end of the war Himmler contacted Red Cross officials in an attempt to negotiate a separate peace, but the Western Allies refused to make any deals. Himmler then disguised himself as a regular soldier and handed himself in to British troops; he was recognized and committed suicide on 23 May 1945.

SS-Obergruppenführer Reinhard Heydrich (1904-1942) was dismissed from the Navy in 1931 after an affair with a young lady. He joined the SS in 1932 and his wife introduced him to Himmler. The tall, blond, athletic man rose quickly through the ranks of the SS, due to Himmler's mentoring. In June 1936 he was appointed combined chief of the Security Police and the Security Service and in September 1939 he was appointed head of the Reich Main Security Office (RSHA).

Heydrich became acting Reich Protector of Bohemia and Moravia in September 1941 implementing Nazi measures across the area, while exploiting the Protectorate's work force. In May 1942 he was assassinated by Czech and Slovak soldiers sent by the Czechoslovakian government-in-exile. Himmler held Heydrich's office for the next eight months.

SS-Obergruppenführer Ernst Kaltenbrunner (1903-1946) was a tall man with facial scars and a bad temper. He worked briefly as a lawyer before joining the NSDAP (Nazi Party) and in 1932 he joined the Austrian SS. He was imprisoned twice for political activities, including suspicion of being involved with the assassination of the Austrian Chancellor, Engelbert Dollfuss. By the summer of 1935 Kaltenbrunner was the leader of the Austrian SS and he assisted in the Union (*Anschluss*) with Germany. He rose through the ranks of the SS and the police and on 30 January 1943 was appointed Chief of the Reich Main Security Office. Following the assassination attempt on Hitler on 20 July 1944, Kaltenbrunner tried and executed the accused of plotting against Hitler. He himself was tried in the Nuremberg Trials and was hanged in October 1946.



SS-Obergruppenführer *Ernst Kaltenbrunner*.



SS-Obersturmbannführer *Adolf Eichmann*.

Adolph Eichmann (1906-1962) was a salesman who joined the Austrian NSDAP and SS in 1932. When the party was outlawed he moved to Germany and in 1934 transferred to the Security Service (SD) where he gathered information on Jewish organizations. He specialized in Jewish emigration and moved to Vienna to continue his work following the Union (*Anschluss*) between Germany and Austria.

Eichmann eventually became head of the Jewish Department in the Reich Main Security Office. He helped organise the Wannsee conference for Heydrich and planned the transports which took the Jews to the East. He talked over the technical aspects of extermination during a visit to Auschwitz in the second half of 1941. He also discussed the gas chambers in Birkenau during his second visit a year later. He played a key part in organizing the deportation of Hungary's Jews to Auschwitz.

Eichmann escaped to Argentina after the war but he was tracked down and taken hostage by Mossad, the Israeli intelligence services in 1960. He was sentenced to death in Jerusalem and executed in 1962. The mild mannered clerk was described as epitomizing the 'banality of evil'. So ordinary but so criminal.

SS-Obergruppenführer Oswald Pohl (1892-1951) became a member of the NSDAP in 1923 and he then joined the SA Brown Shirts. He switched to the SS in 1934 and was made chief of its administrative office. In February 1942 he was appointed head of the new SS Main Economic and Administration Office (WVHA), and the Concentration Camps Inspectorate was one of his departments. He visited Auschwitz-Birkenau in September 1942 and June 1944 to see how it was progressing. Pohl was sentenced to death during the Nuremberg trials and hung in June 1951.



SS-Obergruppenführer *Oswald Pohl*.

SS-Gruppenführer Richard Glücks (1889-1945) was a veteran of the First World War and Freikorps before joining the NSDAP in 1930 and the SS two years later. He was an able administrator and bureaucrat and in April 1936 he became chief of staff for Theodor Eicke, then Concentration Camps Inspector and head of the SS Death's Head concentration camp guard units (*SS-Totenkopfverbände*). Glücks was promoted to Concentration Camps Inspector when Eicke was promoted to command the SS *Totenkopf* Division.

In March 1942 he continued his work as head of the new SS Main Economic and Administration Department's Office D, responsible for the concentration camp system. From 1942 on he was involved in the implementation of the Final Solution and made several visits to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Glücks is believed to have committed suicide on 10 May 1945 but there is still speculation about his ultimate fate.



SS-Gruppenführer *Richard Glücks*.

Running the Camps

There was a rigid system of command from the camp commandant, through his staff and the guards down to the prisoners who were coerced into maintaining discipline. The staff ran the camp through a number of departments which organized administration, security and logistics.

The Camp Commandants and Administrators

The commandant fulfilled two functions. He was the camp commandant in charge of the running of the camp, and the garrison commander in charge of the administration staff and the guards. Rudolf Höss was the first, and the one most connected with the camp. He had a long and chequered career, starting with the paramilitary Freikorps in the early 1920s. He was imprisoned for his part in a murder in 1923 and was released in 1928. After getting married and settling down to a life of farming, he was invited to join the SS by Himmler in June 1934.



SS-Obersturmbannführer *Rudolf Höss*.

In November 1934 he was posted to Dachau concentration camp and would use its regime as a model for Auschwitz. He served as Commandant Theodor Eicke's assistant in the summer of 1936 before he was promoted and transferred to Sachsenhausen concentration camp.

Höss was again promoted when he took command of the new Auschwitz concentration camp in the spring of 1940 and he saw it grow into a huge complex over the next three years. Höss was appointed deputy inspector of concentration camps in November 1943 but was back in Auschwitz in May 1944, in time for *Sonderaktion Ungarn*, the gassing of the Hungarian Jews.

SS-Obersturmbannführer Arthur Liebehenschel replaced Höss. He had joined the SS in 1931 and after serving at Lichtenburg camp was appointed inspector of concentration camps in 1937. He was head of the concentration camps office in the SS Main Economic and Administration Office before he was transferred to Auschwitz. Liebehenschel reorganized the Auschwitz Zone of Interest into three camps (Auschwitz, Birkenau and Monowitz) each with its own commandant. As head of the SS garrison he eased the camp regime and stopped selections of regular prisoners, but tens of thousands of Jews were gassed in nearby Birkenau while he was in command. He was transferred to Majdanek camp when Höss returned to Auschwitz in May 1944.



SS-Obersturmbannführer *Arthur Liebehenschel*.

SS-Sturmbannführer Richard Baer became Auschwitz I's final commandant in May 1944. He was appointed SS garrison commander in July and then head of Birkenau in November. After supervising the evacuation and liquidation of Auschwitz in January 1945 he became the commandant of the Mittelbau-Dora camp.

While the camp commandants are well known, many of the men who dealt with the day-to-day running of the camps have faded into obscurity.

SS-Hauptsturmführer Karl Fritzsche was camp director and Höss's deputy during the early months and he often met new prisoners off the train with a welcome speech. *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Josef Kramer was Höss's adjutant during the same period and he helped Fritzsche to develop the harsh camp regime. Maximilian Grabner was the head of the Political Department, responsible for many interrogations, tortures, punishments and executions. *SS-Hauptscharführer* Gerhard Palitzsch supervised many of the executions in front of the Death Wall.



SS- Sturmbannführer *Richard Baer*.

SS-Hauptsturmführer Hans Aumeier was camp director until August 1943 and was responsible for the exploitation, punishment and execution of prisoners. He went on to run other camps but was sentenced during the Auschwitz garrison trial after the war and hanged in 1948. *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Heinrich Schwarz was Aumeier's deputy and he later replaced him. He went on to become commandant of Auschwitz III, the Monowitz camp, and eventually became commandant of the Natzweiler camp.

SS-Sturmbannführer Fritz Hartjenstein was appointed commander of Birkenau guard garrison in September 1942 and was then promoted to command Birkenau in November 1943. He transferred to Natzweiler concentration camp in France in May 1944.

Three men were recalled to Auschwitz in time to supervise the gassing of the Hungarian Jews, starting in May 1944. Höss returned as overall commandant while Kramer returned as Birkenau's commandant. Kramer later became commandant of Belsen and earned the nickname the 'Beast of Belsen'. They were helped by another returnee, Otto Moll; he ran the crematoria.



SS-Hauptsturmführer *Josef Kramer*.

The Camp Administration

The Commandant's Department, or Department I, ran the camp administration. While a staff sergeant supervised the work, an adjutant dealt with correspondence and personnel matters on the commandant's behalf. Some of the many elements of the department were the weapons section, the service section and vehicle pool, the post office, the judicial section and the jail. Josef Kramer and Karl Hocker were two of the camp adjutants.



SS-Hauptscharführer *Otto Moll*.

The Political Department, or Department II ran the induction office, it created the register of prisoners and maintained prisoner files; it also had to write up the death certificates. Its staff interrogated prisoners on behalf of the police, investigated resistance activities and scrutinized guards accused of violating regulations. The department also carried out executions, ran the crematoria and controlled the extermination of the Jews.

The Gestapo established a summary court in Katowice in the summer of 1942 to deal with 'enemies of the state'. While the department was subordinate to the camp commandant and garrison commander, its officers also worked for the Gestapo and they could appeal to their superiors in Katowice. *SS-Untersturmführer* Hans Schurz took over the department after Maximilian Grabner was arrested in 1943.

Civilians accused of anything from damaging property to fraud, from theft to handling stolen goods, and from listening to foreign radio to helping the resistance, could be tried. To begin with prisoners were held at Myslowice prison, near Katowice, until their trial. Trucks would then drive them to Auschwitz where they were executed in the yard next to block 11. Following a typhus outbreak in Myslowice in 1943, prisoners were transferred to Auschwitz where they were held in block 2a and later in block 11.



The condemned were brought from block 11 on the right and shot in front of the Death Wall. Note block 10's windows were blocked up.

The court visited the camp every few weeks and prisoners were initially shot in front of the Death Wall; after the spring of 1944 they were taken to one of Birkenau's crematoria to be executed. No one was acquitted and few were given prison sentences. It is estimated that around 4,000 people were executed by the department.

The Camp Directorate Department, or Department III, was in charge of managing the prisoners. Karl Fritzsch and Hans Aumeier were department heads and they took charge of the camp when the commandant was absent. They monitored prisoner behaviour and submitted requests for formal sentencing, sending representatives to any executions and punishments. The department also recorded block transfers and roll calls. Additional camp directors and report officers were appointed as the camp grew.

The Employment Department, Department IIIa, became independent of the Camp Directorate in September 1942 with *SS-Untersturmführer* Heinrich Schwarz at its head; he was replaced by *SS-Obersturmführer* Maximilian Sell in November 1943. The department accepted work assignments and allocated prisoners and guards to work parties. It also compiled invoices for work completed by outside companies.

The Administrative Department, Department IV, was run by *SS-Obersturmbannführer* Karl Möckel and *SS-Sturmbannführer* Willi Burger. It organized many things, including the prisoner's food and kitchens, clothing and laundry, the bath houses and the printing press. It ran the SS farms in the early days. The department was also responsible for prisoner property, including the tens of thousands of suitcases taken off the Jews who were gassed. The department eventually had three offices and nine sections to administer the collection of items.

The Health Service Department, Department V, was responsible for the health of the guards and the prisoners. The garrison doctor was helped by the guard doctors, the camp doctors, dentists, chemists, orderlies and medical personnel. While there were six garrison doctors, only the final one, Doctor Eduard Wirths made any attempt to improve the sanitary conditions. But he did so while thousands of Jews were being murdered in Birkenau's gas chambers.



Birkenau's administration building.

The SS doctors did little more than oversee the hospital and check the paperwork, a lot of it falsified. Instead of working to improve the health of patients, they concentrated on carrying out medical and surgical experiments on the prisoners. Prisoner doctors were allowed to work when the workload increased but there were few medicines or supplies available. The SS doctors became involved in the selection process early in 1942. They greeted the trains and selected who would live and who would die with nothing more than a cursory glance and a flick of their thumb.

The Welfare and Training Department, Department VI, was headed by SS-*Oberscharführer* Kurt Knittel after the spring of 1942 and he was responsible for supporting the camp guards and their families. The department put on concerts, plays and films, and organized activities including team sports. It also arranged training courses to improve efficiency and social evenings to improve teamwork.

SS-*Untersturmführer* August Schlachter headed the Concentration Camp Construction Board when it was renamed the New Construction Board. At the end of 1941 SS-*Sturmbannführer* Karl Bischoff took over what was then called the Central Construction Board of the *Waffen SS* and Auschwitz Police. He was responsible for most of the developments in the Birkenau camp. SS-*Obersturmführer* Werner Jothan took over in November 1943 and he supervised the final stages of construction.

The department had more than a dozen sub-departments dealing with design, finance, inspection, transport, surveying, purchasing and storage. The design office was headed by SS-*Obersturmführer* Walter Dejaco and the draughtsmen turned his outline sketches into detailed plans, sometimes with the help of outside contractors.

Bischoff and Dejaco designed and supervised the construction of the crematoria and gas chambers, with Kurt Prüfer, an engineer from the Topf und Söhne Company. The department planned a huge commandant's headquarters and a residential area for the guards but they were never built.

Chapter 6

Running the Camps

A mix of male and female guards were helped by dogs as they worked to keep the camps functioning. But most of the discipline was maintained by privileged prisoners who dealt out punishments in exchange for favours.

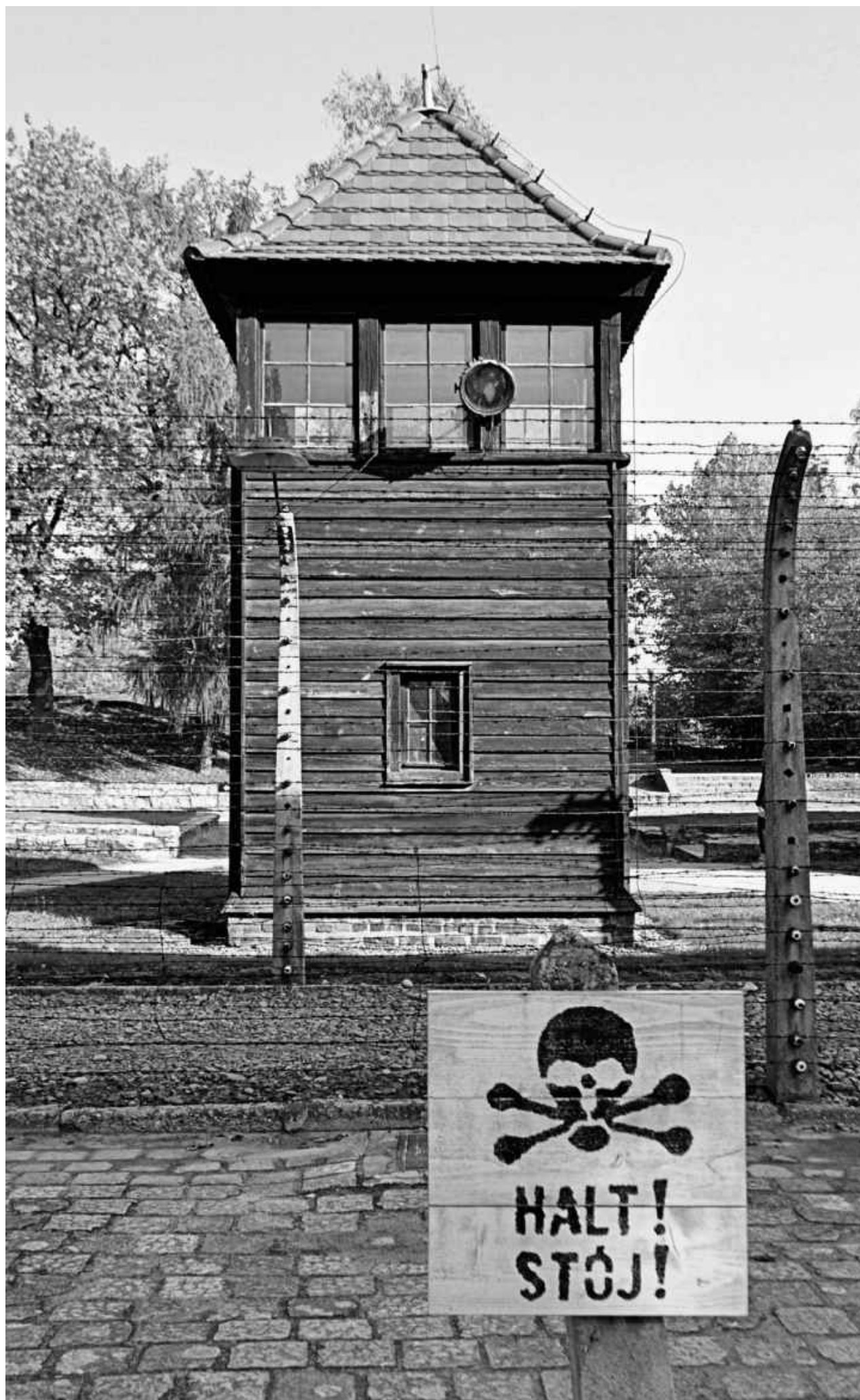
The Camp Guards

A commandant was in charge of each camp and he had subordinates running each sub-camp. Their squad leaders organized several work parties or barracks while work duty leaders organized the guards. Block leaders supervised the barrack blocks. Each work duty leader and block leader had a report leader to do their paperwork.

Guards were instructed in the Berlin SS economic offices and while they were told not to talk about their top secret work, they were not told what it was before they were sent to Auschwitz. They were also reminded about their oath, 'My loyalty is my honour'.

The number of guards increased as Auschwitz, Birkenau and the sub-camps grew in size. There were 700 guards in March 1941, 2,000 in June 1942 and 3,000 by 1944. They were organized into camp battalions with ten sentry companies, two staff companies and the dog company. The garrison was increased to 4,480 in January 1945, to help supervise the evacuation of the camps.

Three out of four guards looked after the prisoners and they were armed with a mixture of old German bolt-action *Mauser* 98k rifles, sub-machine guns and captured weapons, including Soviet, Italian and Yugoslavian models. During the morning roll call an outer cordon was established around the area where the work parties were due to go. It took around 100 guards to cover Auschwitz I and around 270 to cover Birkenau. Extra guards joined work parties heading outside the cordon while the rest of the camp battalion provided security for the sub-camps. Once the work parties had returned to camp, the outer cordon returned to their barracks while the night shift moved into the guard towers. It only needed fifteen guards to cover Auschwitz I and another twenty-eight to watch over Birkenau.



A guard tower looks down on a halt sign which warns against approaching the electric fence.

Early in 1944 larger, prefabricated towers complete with enclosed platforms and windows were erected to make the guards more comfortable. The corner towers were 4.5m × 4.5m and 11.6m high while the intermediate towers measured 3m × 3m and were 7 m high. Internal towers built to the old design were erected overlooking the new railway ramp inside Birkenau. Additional ones were built to cover the camp extension and building stores adjacent to Auschwitz I. A number of concrete air-raid shelters were built along the fence so the guards could cover gaps in the fence if it was damaged during a bombing raid.

A five-metre wide 'Neutral Zone' delineated by small concrete posts connected by wire was just inside the perimeter fence. The area was covered by gravel, to make it difficult to cross quietly at night. Warning signs marked with a skull and crossbones and the words 'Halt!' and 'Caution! High Voltage! Danger of Death!' warned prisoners not to enter. The spaces between the double rows of fencing delineating Birkenau's sub-camps were also no-go areas.

A small work party kept the Neutral Zone clean but anyone was liable to be shot dead if they entered the area. The sentry responsible was cited in the camp orders of the day and rewarded with leave. A few prisoners who had lost the will to live ran across the gravel and threw themselves on the electric fence, a method of committing suicide known as 'going to the wire'. Only two prisoners, Roman Cieliczko and Jerzy Tabeau, escaped through the wire.

From time to time prisoners were confined to barracks when selections were being made or the sick were being taken to the gas chambers. Movement was also restricted during epidemics, such as the typhus outbreak in the summer of 1942.

Occasionally there were full scale lock downs so the guards could be re-deployed, such as when the Theresienstadt camp and the gypsy camp were liquidated. There were also emergency lock downs during the *Sonderkommando* mutiny and the Allied bombing of the Buna-Werke chemical plant.

Female Guards

Women could not join the SS but they could join its auxiliary organization and become an *SS-Aufseherin*, or overseer. Many chose to serve in a concentration camp and they were trained at Ravensbrück women's camp. They wore a jacket and skirt, a cape, a brimless cap and high boots. They were armed with a pistol and used a cane or riding crop to administer beatings.



Irma Grese.

The first group of overseers arrived in March 1942, when female prisoners were transferred to Auschwitz I, and while some lived in houses in Zasole village, the rest stayed in barracks. Johanna Lagenfeld was their first supervisor and she was replaced by Maria Mandl in October 1942. There was a recruitment drive for female auxiliaries in 1942 because of a shortage of male guards and around 180 female supervisors would eventually work in Auschwitz and Birkenau.

Irma Grese was one infamous female overseer who arrived in Birkenau in March 1943. After supervising several work parties she was promoted to block leader and then to report supervisor. Her good looks belied her brutal behaviour and she was nicknamed the 'Beautiful Beast'. She was evacuated to Ravensbrück camp and then Bergen-Belsen; she was hanged in December 1945.

The Dog Company

Himmler recommended using dogs to patrol concentration camps when it became difficult to recruit guards. Around 150 guards joined the canine company in the summer of 1942 and the kennels were located next to Birkenau's barracks. *Wachtmeister* Josef Bailer taught dog handling until he was replaced by *SS-Obersturmführer* Hans Merbach. The guards had no qualms about setting their dogs on the prisoners.

The Ukrainian Guard Company

SS-Untersturmführer Theodor Lange organized 150 Ukrainians into a guard company in the spring of 1943. Each man was paired with a German guard. Some patrolled the outer cordon, others escorted work parties to their sites. But some became worried about their fate and fifteen deserted on the night of 3 July. They were tracked down and while eight were killed and one was badly injured, three SS guards died in the gun battle. The rest were sent to concentration camps across Germany.

The Guards Relax

The officers lived with their families in houses in Auschwitz and they had prisoners, usually German Jehovah's Witnesses, working as domestic servants. The officers frequented a large bar opposite the railway station and there were many drunken evenings. Visiting dignitaries were often entertained at the bar and while Himmler had a flat nearby, he rarely visited the camp. The rank and file living in barracks had access to mess facilities, a recreation centre and a shooting range. They often enjoyed good food, drink and cigars during evening feasts and there was a hospital if they fell sick.



Solahütte retreat.

Starting in 1940 Franz Hössler supervised the building of a large rustic recreation centre at Solahütte, twelve miles south of Auschwitz. It was built overlooking the Miedzybrodzkie reservoir, upstream along the Sola River and was completed in 1942. Buses took the staff and their families to the resort so they could enjoy hunting, hiking and excursions. Guards attended training courses, while their wives served afternoon tea and held evening dinner parties. Male prisoners cleaned and did maintenance tasks, while female prisoners worked in the kitchen.

Privileged Prisoners

The SS used hardened criminals to keep order and discipline in the camps. They were given extra privileges, including their own room with a bed and wardrobe, extra food and warm clothes, but only if they did their job well. They were sacked if they failed and the rest of the prisoners would then seek their revenge.

A *stuben* was responsible for keeping a barrack room clean and the occupants disciplined, with the help of their favourites. They controlled the prisoners from the last roll call until the first roll call and reported to the block leader, who in turn reported to a camp elder. They also distributed the food and often kept extra rations for themselves and their favourites. Some *stuben* and block leaders had teenage boys called 'pipels' waiting on them and they were sometimes encouraged to give sexual services in return for their protection.

A *kapo* controlled a work party, or *kommando*, and they lived together, away from the rest of the prisoners. A kapo gathered his kommando after the morning roll call, took them to their work site and made the prisoners work while a guard looked on. At the end of the shift they returned the prisoners to the parade ground and handed them over, the living and the dead. The guards also employed trusties, usually German prisoners, who were given a degree of freedom to carry out set tasks.

Kommandos could be as small as a handful of prisoners or as large as several hundred. The larger kommandos were run by an 'over kapo' (*über Kapo*) who supervised a number of kapos, each controlling around 100 prisoners. They in turn had 'under kapos' (*unter Kapo*) looking after small groups of around ten prisoners.

The first kapos and stuben were German criminals and they wore civilian clothes, boots and armbands; some were allowed to grow their hair long to distinguish them from the rest of the prisoners. They carried a club or a stick as a sign of their authority and would make the prisoners work at the double and punish any who failed to keep up.

The first kapos and stuben were German criminals and they showed contempt for the Polish and Soviet prisoners under their charge. They often beat the prisoners while the SS

guards looked on and even murdered some for attempting to undermine their authority. The Polish and Jewish block elders who took over later were usually easier on the prisoners.

The camp administration was keen on paperwork and each kapo and stuben had a scribe, who spoke and wrote German, working for them. They kept daily records about each block and kommando, documenting all aspects of every prisoner's life and death. The stuben scribes also distributed the mail while the kapo scribes ordered tools and materials.

A few scribes were employed by the camp administration to type up and copy documents. While some were able to smuggle out stolen or copied documents, others were killed after they had copied sensitive material.

Bruno Brodniewitsch was Auschwitz's prisoner number 1. He was a trusted man until prisoners left a note telling the guards where he was hiding stolen valuables. After being held in a cell inside block 11, he was appointed camp elder in the gypsy camp and then served his time in several sub-camps. Ernst Krankemann was an early kapo of the penal company. He was a huge man who led the team which pushed the road roller around the camp. He too was caught stealing valuables and was executed or murdered in July 1941.

The prisoners nicknamed the kapos and block elders according to their attitude. Franciszek Karasiewicz and Mieczyslaw Katarzynski were both known as Bloody; Alojzy Stahler was known as the Strangler; Leo Wietschorek was nicknamed the Terrible; Adek Rosenberg was called Nasty.

Bureaucracy

Every prisoner had a number (names were forgotten on arrival) and his movements from arrival until departure, often through death, were recorded. Each prisoner had a file which recorded their arrival, their transfer dates, their release date and, in many cases, their death. Conviction records and imprisonment orders were added to a prisoner's files.

The scribe's office maintained records for the whole camp, noting arrivals, transfers and deaths on thousands of card files, logged in both alphabetical and numerical order. Each block leader and kommando kapo had a scribe to record the prisoners under their control.

The camp's Employment Department compiled a list of work assignments and allocated prisoners to them. The camp's Health Service kept a record of prisoners staying in the hospitals; it also noted the names of out-patients. In the early days the deceased were listed in the mortuary register, the crematorium register and the book of the dead. A

death report and a death certificate were also issued and the next of kin were notified.

While records were supposed to be meticulously maintained, there were many errors. A cause of death was sometimes falsified to cover up an execution or a death from a beating or torture. Some names did not appear in the registers. The errors increased dramatically when the Jewish transports began arriving in the spring of 1942. Those gassed immediately, which were the majority, were not registered. The SS then burnt most of the prisoner records just before they evacuated the camp in January 1945.

The Camp Doctors and Medical Experiments

The camp's SS doctors experimented on a large number of prisoners, most of them Jewish. Prisoners were poisoned, operated on and murdered for autopsies, all in the pursuit of unethical medical research. A lot of work was carried out on sterilization. Civilian, Wehrmacht and SS companies commissioned many of the experiments. Many victims were starved, maimed, suffered painful side effects, died under the knife or were put to death so an autopsy could be performed. There were no anaesthetics, no post-operative care and many of the crippled prisoners were gassed once the experiments were over.

SS-Hauptsturmführer Eduard Wirths was Auschwitz's chief doctor between September 1942 and January 1945. While he worked hard to keep the garrison healthy, he did nothing for the prisoners unless they were useful to him. He ordered arbitrary and pseudo-scientific experiments in Auschwitz, delegating operations to his subordinates who operated on men in block 28 and women in block 10. He studied the sterilization of women using surgery or radiation and performed biopsies to study cervical cancer. Wirths was promoted to *SS-Sturmbannführer* in September 1944 and was transferred to Mittelbau-Dora concentration camp in January 1945.

SS-Brigadeführer Carl Clauberg was a gynaecologist who had studied the sterilization of women before he transferred to Auschwitz women's camp at the end of 1942. In April 1943 he began work with formaldehyde injections in Auschwitz's block 10.

SS-Hauptsturmführer Bruno Weber opened a branch of the SS Hygiene Office in Auschwitz's block 10 in February 1943. Prisoners who were experts in the fields of bacteriology, pathology, biology and chemistry carried out research and analysis on chemicals and hygiene problems. The office later moved to the Rajsko sub-camp.

SS-Sturmbannführer Horst Schumann used X-rays to sterilize prisoners before cutting out their ovaries or testicles for testing. He left for Sonnenstein in September 1944. *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Friedrich Entress introduced the phenol injection used to kill prisoners. He often carried out operations on healthy prisoners to practice his surgical skills. *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Helmuth Vetter tested drugs and infected prisoners with typhus to study

their effects; Schumann and Entress did the same.

Wladyslaw Dering was a Polish gynaecologist who had been sent to Auschwitz in August 1940 for his involvement in the Polish Secret Army. As director of the camp's surgical department he had to operate on men and women sterilized by the SS doctors. As camp hospital elder he worked with Jewish physician Maximilian Samuel to help prisoners.

One name linked with Birkenau is *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Josef Mengele. He had been wounded on the Eastern Front before he was transferred to Auschwitz in May 1943. Mengele was assigned to the gypsy camp where he studied racial groups, physical anomalies, genetic defects, multiple pregnancies and dwarves. Some patients had their medical problems recorded while others were killed by phenol injection so autopsies could be carried out.



Richard Baer, Dr Josef Mengele and Rudolf Höss relax at Solahütte.

Mengele was promoted to be head doctor in Birkenau, where he was nicknamed the 'Good Uncle' because he used his charm to get his patients' trust, many of them children. But he had nothing but contempt for them and often experimented on twins, killing one after the other died, so he could carry out comparative autopsies. Myklos Nyiszli was a Hungarian prisoner, qualified in forensic medicine. He worked for Dr Mengele from May 1944 to January 1945, performing autopsies, writing up notes and preserving organs. He was also the *Sonderkommando's* doctor.

SS-Hauptsturmführer August Hirt was chairman of the Institute for Scientific Research, a department of the Ancestral Heritage organization (the *Ahnenerbe*) which carried out medical experiments on prisoners in an attempt to prove the superiority of the Aryan race. In 1943 SS Doctor Bruno Beger, a racial anthropologist working for the *Ahnenerbe*, visited Auschwitz to select prisoners as potential 'specimens'; nearly ninety were gassed in Natzweiler concentration camp and their bodies were preserved.

Corruption

To begin with prisoners' property was supposed to be held by the camp administration so it could be returned on release or forwarded to next of kin if they died. But Jewish prisoners had their belongings confiscated as property of the Third Reich. In January 1943 there was a change of policy when the SS Main Economic and Administration Office ordered the confiscation of all property from Polish, Soviet and Jewish prisoners alike; the same policy was applied to property of the Roma gypsies in 1944, just before they were all gassed.

The Jews were allowed to take personal baggage, usually around forty kilograms, when they left their ghetto, as part of the ruse to make them believe they were being relocated to a new camp. Of course they never saw their luggage again after they left it on the ramp; most went straight to the gas chamber. The suitcases were taken to the Kanada warehouses and sorted so the contents could be shipped to Germany or recycled.

The prisoners in Kanada sometimes took cigarettes, Reichsmarks and jewellery from the luggage and used it to bribe their kapos. They were not alone. While every SS guard knew he faced the death penalty 'for raising his hand to Jewish property' many still stole from the mountain of suitcases.

In the autumn of 1943 *SS-Sturmbannführer* Konrad Morgen, an SS judge and magistrate of the State Criminal Police Office, was sent to Auschwitz to examine allegations of corruption. He found large quantities of contraband in the guards' lockers and several were imprisoned in the administration building basement; even Rudolf Höss faced a prolonged investigation. But the barracks where the evidence was stored burned

down just before Morgen concluded his work and only a few guards were prosecuted for corruption.

In October 1944 block 11's commander, Maximilian Grabner, was accused of executing prisoners without Berlin's permission. He in turn blamed Höss for ordering him to 'clear out' the block on a regular basis, which was a euphemism for murdering the surplus of prisoners. Grabner was released when Gestapo head, *SS-Gruppenführer* Heinrich Müller, stopped the investigation.

The Camp Museum

In the autumn of 1941 Pole Franciszek Targosz suggested opening a museum in Auschwitz. Commandant Höss agreed and Targosz set about collecting rare and valuable objects taken from new arrivals. Prisoner art, including paintings, prints, drawings and carvings, were also displayed. The museum opened in block 6 but it moved to block 24 the following spring. It closed in February 1944 and many items were stolen following the liberation of the camp.

The Camp Orchestras

Several orchestras were formed in Auschwitz. The first had 120 members and it began playing in March 1941 next to the camp gate, setting the marching tempo for the kommandos leaving for work. It also played Sunday concerts for the guards and the occasional concert for the prisoners. Birkenau formed a men's orchestra of around thirty-five members in August 1942 and a larger women's orchestra in April 1943; both were disbanded in the autumn of 1944. Monowitz also had an orchestra which played from August 1943 to January 1945.

While some instruments were sent by families, most were taken from the luggage sorted in Kanada. While the male members were assigned light duties, the women had no duties. They lived in better conditions thanks to Austrian Alma Rose (registered under the name Obna Vanleeuwen), the orchestra manager and conductor.

Chapter 7

The Transports

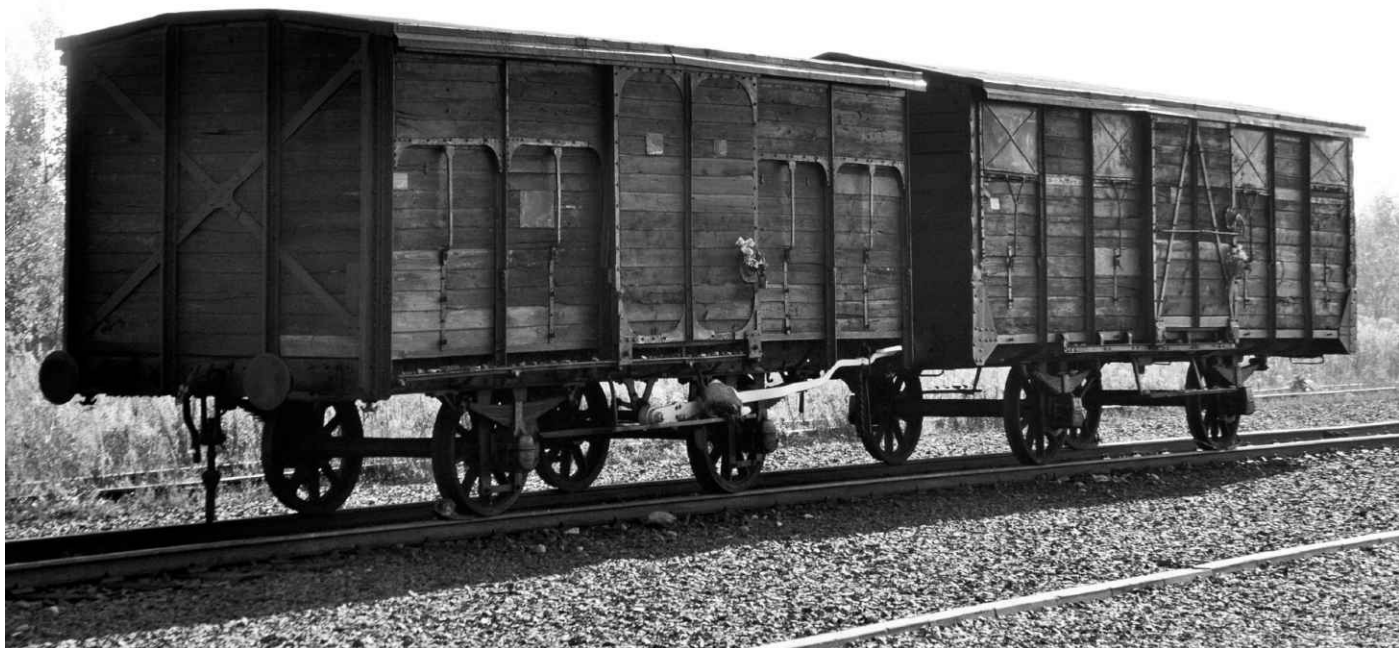
After weeks or months existing in a crowded ghetto, the Jews often welcomed the news that they were going to be transported to the East. The Germans made false promises about work camps and settlements and the Jews rarely knew they were being taken to extermination camps.

While the Polish Jews had an idea what the Germans were capable of, having seen many friends and family members taken away, the Jews from Western Europe had not. Only a few had heard rumours about the death camps and even fewer believed them because they preferred to think they were needed to work. After all, no one could believe that a civilized nation like Germany was capable of genocide.

The Jews had to pay for their own deportation and the *Reichsbahn* national railway charged adults four *pfennigs* per mile while children were charged only two *pfennigs* per mile. A fifty per cent discount was offered if a transport carried over 1,000 people and there was no charge for the return journey; after all they would not be coming back.

The police and Gestapo escorted the Jews to a local railway station or siding where a train with around twenty covered cattle trucks was waiting. They were then crammed inside with their luggage where they fought for air from the tiny windows covered in barbed wire.

They spent days travelling across Europe, and were hungry, thirsty and exhausted by the time they reached their destination. A few tried to escape by forcing boards from the wagon floors or walls but their fellow deportees often stopped them, fearing a reprisal. The guards shot at anyone who did get out.



Two cattle trucks on the Judenrampe.

Eventually the train arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau, sometimes several days after setting off. To begin with trains halted in the siding next to Auschwitz camp. The camp director, Karl Fritzsche, often greeted the new arrivals with a warning speech.

“You have not come here to a sanatorium, but to the German concentration camp Auschwitz. Jews can stay alive here for two weeks, priests a month, and the rest three months. The only way out of here is through the chimney. If you don’t like it, you can throw yourself on the barbed wire right now.”

The railway siding was extended by the spring of 1942 and over half a million Jews stepped down onto it over the next two years. Or to put it another way, a transport carrying 1,000 people arrived on most days. It is still known as the ‘*Judenrampe*’ (Jews Ramp). There would be a cacophony of noise when the wagon doors opened. Guards shouted as prisoners helped the arrivals out, mothers and children cried for each other as the guard dogs barked. A temporary wooden platform was built so the elderly, the sick and children could climb down from the train and it was soon replaced by a permanent concrete platform. Despite the noise, effort was made to calm the prisoners while force was rarely used. The SS guards spoke of showers, hot soup and work and then told everyone to leave their luggage behind as they were walked to the camp.

Although plans to build a ramp inside Birkenau were drawn up at the end of 1941, they were not acted on for two years. A new branch line was then built into the centre of the camp and it ran through the infamous ‘Gate of Death’. The sidings and ramps were completed in the spring of 1944, in time for Special Action Hungary. It meant the trains could deliver the Hungarian Jews to within a few hundred metres of the gas chambers.

Selection

To begin with all the prisoners were marched straight into Auschwitz I. In the spring of 1941 the first Jewish transports were filled with healthy men and women from Slovakia and France. The first transports carrying unfit Slovakian Jews arrived in late April 1942 and they were followed by Polish Jews from Silesia and the Dabrowa Basin. A transport carrying the first mixed group of Jews arrived on 4 July 1942 and they were segregated into the fit and unfit on the railway ramp, a process known as the selection.

Once everyone had climbed down from the train, the SS guards separated the crowd into two columns, of men and women. Young children stayed with their mothers while those over fourteen years old remained with their fathers. Then the SS doctors decided who was fit for work by just looking at their physical condition and age for a few seconds. With a flick of the thumb men and women were sent left and right; one direction meant forced labour and the other meant immediate death.

The unloading, organizing and selection took several hours and the guards tried to keep everyone calm. But it was a traumatic time as families were split apart. To begin with mothers who could work were separated from their children but the guards soon realized it was easier to let them stay together, to avoid upsetting scenes; it meant mothers would die with their young ones.

As those deemed fit enough to work were marched to the showers, those who were not were escorted to the gas chambers while lorries marked with a Red Cross carried the sick and infirm. Anyone still left on the ramp, the sick, abandoned children and other stragglers, were shot once the rest had gone. A kommando then loaded the luggage onto lorries, so it could be taken to the nearby Kanada warehouses. They also cleared the ramp of rubbish, so it was ready for the next transport.

Oswald Pohl had instructed Höss to confiscate the prisoners' possessions on behalf of the SS Main Economic and Administration Office in September 1940. Anything of value was sent to Berlin; anything of use was sent to the Ethnic German Liaison Office for use by German settlers; everything else was sent to the Reich Ministry of Economy for recycling. Nothing was wasted.

Block 26 in Auschwitz was soon overflowing so six warehouses were built close to the Jews Ramp. The kommando nicknamed the place Kanada after the country, because it was a safe and plentiful place compared to the rest of the camp. The sheds were a good place to work because they were under cover and there was the opportunity to pilfer food, clothes and valuables from the mountains of suitcases. The guards adopted the nickname and they also helped themselves to money, gold and jewels.



Prisoners translate as the SS doctors select who will live and who will die.

In December 1943 a new sorting complex with thirty wooden barracks was opened between Crematoria III and IV. Over 1,500 prisoners, many of them women, sorted through the looted property in shifts. The transport kommando delivered the luggage to Kanada on trucks. The suitcases were opened and the contents sorted. The prisoners had to search everything for valuables because it could be hidden anywhere, including inside food or sewn into the seams of clothes. Anything of value had to be dropped into a locked wooden box in the centre of the room.

The female prisoners who worked in Kanada were allowed to keep their hair long and the extra food meant they were less likely to become malnourished. The SS guards sometimes forced themselves on the women even though sexual relations of any sort were considered to be 'race crime'.

Those Fit for Work

Those deemed fit enough to work by the SS doctors were turned from human beings into numbered prisoners. New prisoners had always been showered on arrival in Auschwitz but two new shower blocks were opened in Birkenau in the summer of 1942 to deal with a typhus epidemic. The shower blocks also included disinfection facilities for cleaning clothing with Zyklon B, hot air and steam.

Prisoners were stripped in the undressing room and had their heads shaved. Prisoners had all their hair shaved for three reasons. Firstly, to remove their identity; men had to wear caps while women wore headscarves, making them all look the same. Secondly, the typhus carrying lice thrived in human hair. Thirdly, it made it harder for escapees to disguise themselves. The prisoners were roughly shaved, endured a rough medical examination and the affected areas were then rubbed with disinfectant soaked rags, a humiliating and painful experience. The *Sonderkommando* also had to shave hair from those who had been gassed.

In August 1942 the WVHA directed Auschwitz to collect, disinfect and store the prisoners' hair. Plans to process the hair never materialized and in January 1943 huge quantities were sold to German companies for half a Reichsmark per kilogram to make haircloth and felt. Bales of haircloth and two tons of hair belonging to almost 40,000 people are held by the Auschwitz museum.

Auschwitz was the only camp in the concentration camp system where prisoners were tattooed and it started with Soviet POWs in the autumn of 1941. A metal stamp with long needles was pushed into the left side of the prisoner's chest, leaving an imprint of their camp number and prisoner category.

While all the Soviet prisoners were tattooed on the chest, Polish, French and

Slovakian Jewish men were tattooed on the left forearm starting in the spring of 1942. Jewish women were marked after July 1942 while non-Jewish women prisoners were tattooed at the start of 1943.

Jews awaiting transfer to other camps were not tattooed and neither were those who were immediately gassed. German and Austrian prisoners, and prisoners held for re-education and on behalf of the police were not marked; Poles deported during the Warsaw Uprising were left unmarked as well.

Prisoners showered in groups of around fifty, in water which was usually scalding hot or freezing cold, and then had to wait naked outside until they were given a new uniform; many caught a chill in cold or wet weather. The group of shocked and bewildered prisoners were then marched to their barracks. They also all looked the same in their uniforms and now had numbers instead of names.

A new central shower block was opened in December 1943. In it prisoners were showered and covered in fumigation powder. Clothes were fumigated with the same Zyklon B used in the gas chambers, all to stop lice and typhus. Smaller shower blocks served the gypsy camp and the hospital camp. The prisoners only had limited and irregular access to the showers and they did little to improve hygiene across the camp.

Starting early in 1941, all prisoners were photographed by the camp Identification Service as soon as they had been inducted. Four pictures were taken: one in camp dress, one in profile, one face-on, and a half-profile photograph while wearing a cap or neckerchief. The prisoner's number, nationality and category were displayed on the lower-left-hand corner of the first photograph.

Starting in 1942 new arrivals were photographed in the camp studio in block 26 in Auschwitz. The majority of Jews were never photographed and a shortage of photography supplies meant that only German prisoners were recorded after 1943. The service also took photographs of visits by dignitaries and recorded the selection and gassing of the Jews.

SS-Hauptscharführer Bernhardt Walter and *SS-Unterscharführer* Ernst Hofmann ordered the prisoners to burn all the records when the camp was evacuated. They ignored their orders and saved almost 40,000 photographs; many are now on display in the Auschwitz museum.



Head shaved, tattooed and showered, prisoners file out to receive their uniform; their identity replaced with a number.

New arrivals were then held in a quarantine barracks to make sure they had no contagious diseases. During their stay they were intimidated, forced to do exercises and beaten while they learned the camp rules. Many prisoners were held in Birkenau's sub-camps for several weeks until they were transferred to labour camps across the Third Reich.

Those Unfit for Work

The sick, elderly, infirm and young, including mothers with their children, were escorted the short distance to one of the crematorium buildings where they were met by the *Sonderkommando*. The first *Sonderkommando* (Special Work Detail) of Jewish prisoners was formed in April 1942 to run the Little Red House and another started work at the Little White House when it opened. The *Sonderkommando* herded the elderly, the sick and mothers with their children into the changing room as the armed guards looked on (climbing down the steps into the basement of Crematoria II and III) and were encouraged to undress. They would have seen signs stating they had entered the camp showers and were about to be deloused. Everyone was told to hang their clothes on numbered pegs and tie their shoes together, giving the impression they would be returning. During busy periods everyone would wait and undress in the trees surrounding the crematoria.

They then ushered the hundreds of naked men, women and children into the fake shower room, assuring them it was a shower room, creating a mass of naked bodies. And then the door slammed shut. On the occasions when there were too few people to warrant using the gas chamber, the *Sonderkommando* led them into the crematorium washroom and held them while an SS guard shot them in the neck.

Tesch & Stabenow employees handled the gas until the SS Health Service Department recruited them. They had taken the Zyklon B to the gas chambers in a fake ambulance marked with a large red cross. They had donned gas masks and the doomed would have seen flashes of light as the hatches opened. The Zyklon B granules were then poured into metal-meshed, hollow columns. The hatches shut and only then did they realize they had been tricked into entering a gas chamber; and it was too late.

The *Sonderkommando* would have heard the screams and when they stopped, fans were turned on to extract the gas. After the door opened the *Sonderkommando* had to pull apart the heaps of bodies, with their blue faces, and blood dribbling from the noses and mouths. Some cleaned the changing room and stacked the clothes in the nearby storeroom, ready to be taken to the Kanada warehouses.

The *Sonderkommando* had to search the clothes and bodies for valuables and while they were supposed to hand them in, some took items to trade. In September 1940

Himmler gave orders to recover dental gold from those killed and over the next two years fifty kilograms were collected for use by the SS dental clinics. The *Sonderkommando* also had to remove gold teeth from the corpses. They were initially cleaned in hydrochloric acid and melted into bars or coins in the SS infirmary in Auschwitz I; after the summer of 1943 the gold was melted down in Crematorium III. The gas chambers were soon producing over ten kilograms a month.

Expert stokers from the Auschwitz I crematorium and the Little Red and White Houses were transferred to the Birkenau crematoria when they opened. They were 'promoted' to kapos and had to teach new recruits how to work efficiently. A hoist was used to lift the bodies from the basement gas chambers in Crematoria II and III. While electric elevators were planned, they were never installed. Leather thongs were used to drag the bodies across the floor in Crematoria IV and V and they were then placed head to foot in threes onto a steel board, ready to be pushed into the furnace.

The rest of the *Sonderkommando* cleaned the gas chamber with water hoses and occasionally white-washed the rooms to conceal their gruesome history. The preparation, gassing and cleaning took around two hours and it only needed a couple of armed SS men to supervise the work.

The *Sonderkommando* also had to clean out the furnaces and while some ashes were used to build roads and embankments, others were tipped onto compost heaps on the nearby farms. Some of the surplus was loaded onto lorries and dumped in the Vistula or Sola rivers while some was scattered around the crematoria and burning pits. The *Sonderkommando* also had to smash bones into powder, some of which was sold as bone meal to a fertilizer company.



Mothers wait with their children in the woods around the gas chambers.

The SS went to great lengths to keep the gassing process a secret from the rest of the camp and the 400 strong *Sonderkommando* were kept in isolation in block 2 of sector BIb; they were later moved to block 13 in sector BIId. Half of the group were gassed when the number of transports reduced in February 1944.

The size of the *Sonderkommando* was increased to 900 when Special Action Hungary began and they were moved into the crematorium lofts and the out of service Crematorium IV, to further isolate them from the rest of the camp. They worked in two twelve-hour shifts and some burnt corpses in open air incineration pits when the crematoria were too busy.

The *Sonderkommando* had been planning a revolt with the help of Combat Group Auschwitz, but the kapos informed the SS and the leader, Yaacov Kamiriski was executed. His co-conspirators continued to collect makeshift weapons and other supplies while Roza Robota, Ala Gertner, Regina Safirsztajn and Estera Wajcblum were smuggling gunpowder to them from the Union-Werke by hiding it on corpses.

The number of transports fell again in September 1944 and 200 volunteers were recruited to work at Gliwice sub-camp. But it was a trick, and when they entered the disinfection shower they were gassed. No one volunteered when more volunteers for Gliwice sub-camp were called so the kapos were ordered to choose 300 men. The *Sonderkommando* felt they had nothing to lose and on the afternoon of 7 October the workers in Crematorium IV attacked their guards and set fire to their building. Crematorium II *Sonderkommando* also set upon their guards.

A few escaped into the woods but they were surrounded in the Rajska area where some were shot and others were trapped in a barn and burnt alive. Over 400 were killed trying to escape and many more were executed during a roll call. The three women were arrested following the mutiny and tortured for weeks; they were hanged in Auschwitz camp's extension on 6 January 1945.

While the *Sonderkommando* was reduced to 200 prisoners and later down to 100, it continued its work until the camp was evacuated. Six men wrote a mixture of farewell letters, notes about life in the ghettos, the deportations and their work. They then buried them in tins around the crematoria, in the hope that they would be found after the war and their story could be told. The containers were discovered between 1945 and 1980.

David Olere of France was one of the few to survive working with the *Sonderkommando*. He explained how the gas chambers were run and drew many sketches, creating a valuable insight into their gruesome work. Another of the writers was Salmen Gradowski, an organizer of the October 1944 mutiny.

Chapter 8

The Prisoners

Many types of people were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau but they were all considered to be 'enemies of the State' by the Nazis. There were criminals, political activists, prisoners of war, anti-socials, gypsies, religious activists and, of course, the Jews.

The number of prisoners in the camps varied tremendously over the years and statistics were laboriously kept. By the end of 1940 there were around 6,000 prisoners in Auschwitz but numbers soon rose as high as 17,000. By the summer of 1944 there were over 47,000 men and women in Birkenau, over 9,000 men working on the Monowitz site and 17,000 men and women employed on smaller sub-camps.

But these numbers are misleading because they do not include the thousands of Jews being held in Birkenau, awaiting transportation to labour camps across the Third Reich. They also do not include the thousands of Jews taken straight to the gas chambers.

The prisoners fall into two broad categories; firstly those imprisoned for their beliefs and secondly those imprisoned for their ethnicity.

Why were People Imprisoned?

Following the Reichstag fire in Berlin in February 1933, the Decree for the Protection of the People and the State meant the police could arrest suspects without the right to trial and hold them indefinitely. By August 1944 95 per cent of the camp population were political prisoners.

Across the Third Reich, members of political parties, unions, the intelligentsia and the resistance were arrested for belonging to banned organizations. Anyone breaking one of the many draconian Nazi laws could be held. The laws covered everything from breaking a curfew, leaving a job, refusing to work overtime or arguing with their manager. Sabotage, gambling and smuggling were also banned activities. It was even illegal to possess a radio, sing patriotic songs, complain or tell jokes against the regime.

The Nazis believed religion undermined the State and that religious groups could be used for subversive means. People were arrested for their beliefs and while some prisoners

had their faith strengthened, others lost faith in what was a hell on earth. While practising religion and carrying religious objects were banned, some Catholic priests did what they could to carry out their duties in secret. Some rabbis did the same for the Jews at the risk of being punished severely.

One religious group which deserves a special mention is the International Association of Bible Students, now better known as the Jehovah's Witnesses. Their activities had been banned since 1933 because the Nazis considered their religious principles and pacifistic views to be subversive. Around 400 Witnesses were held in Auschwitz and they were identified by a purple triangle. They were given trusted jobs. The men were often posted on good kommandos, and the women were employed as family servants, in the offices, the guards' rest centre and in the mess and kitchens. Witnesses were supportive of others both practically and spiritually, getting them a better chance of survival.

The Nazis considered gypsies to be racially dangerous and their way of life to be anti-social. They thought the same about mixed relationships between Aryans and gypsies. The Germans had systematically murdered gypsies in the Soviet Union, while Polish gypsies were sent to concentration camps; there was an uneven policy in Slovakia.

The number of Jews in Auschwitz was small to begin with but it increased dramatically when the gas chambers opened in the spring of 1942. The majority were immediately gassed while the rest were treated harshly as they worked on some of the toughest kommandos. They were not allowed food parcels or letters and the yellow star on their uniform singled them out for beatings.

In all, over one million Jews were deported to Auschwitz and around 900,000 were gassed immediately – around twenty per cent of the almost six million Jews murdered in the Holocaust. Of the 200,000 registered to work, around half died from beatings and illness.

While the prisoners came from all over Europe and were sent to Auschwitz for many reasons, a few groups deserve a special mention.

Polish Prisoners

The first prisoners sent to Auschwitz were Polish political prisoners, members of the intelligentsia and underground organisations as well as those arrested in police round-ups. They were the largest group by mid-1942 and their families were allowed to send food parcels at the end of the year.

A ghetto was opened in Litzmannstadt (Lodz) in February 1940 and it was filled with Jews from the area of Poland annexed to the Reich. They were soon joined by Jews

transferred from Germany, Austria, Luxembourg and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Head of the Judenrat, Chaim Rumkowski, encouraged the Jews to send their children and the elderly to the East first where 75,000 were murdered in Kulmhof extermination centre. The rest were then used as slave labour.

In 1941 100,000 Jews from across Upper Silesia were moved into forty-five ghettos across the Dabrowa Basin. Mojzesz Merin, Chairman of the Central Jewish Council of Elders, selected the elderly and sick for deportation for the Germans, in the belief he could save the rest. While the fit and healthy were sent to work in Germany, the first deportations to Auschwitz began in May 1942. Merin delayed the sealing of the ghettos until he and his deputy Fanny Czarna were arrested in July 1943. The transports then began in earnest and over 85,000 Jews were either sent to labour camps or to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Between November 1942 and August 1943 80 per cent of the 140,000 Poles living in the Zamosc region of Poland were deported. While some were sent to work across the Reich, the rest were sent to Auschwitz. They were being moved to make space for Germans as part of the Nazis' living space plan (*Lebensraum*). Not everyone cooperated. Many peasants went into hiding in the woods and the Polish partisans fought back. It took longer than expected to transport everyone to Auschwitz and large numbers were gassed on arrival. Around 145,000 Poles were sent to Auschwitz and half lost their lives.



Male prisoners line up for the next roll call.

Another 7,000 Jews were murdered in Kulmhof camp in the summer of 1944 and the rest were taken to Auschwitz. In August 45,000 were gassed, 3,000 were held in Auschwitz and 19,000 were transferred to other concentration camps. Rumkowski and his family were put on the last transport to Auschwitz in August 1944. Less than 10,000 of the 200,000 Litzmannstadt Jews survived.

Soviet Prisoners

Red Army prisoners of war were the next large group to arrive in Auschwitz. As the Wehrmacht advanced into Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, four *Einsatzgruppen* (Action Groups) began executing 'enemies of the state' behind the front line. On 2 July 1941 Heydrich stated the groups would execute Communist politicians, political commissars and 'Jews in the service of the party or the state'. Officers and political commissars were removed from POW camps, so they could not influence the rank and file with their political ideals and the first few hundred arrived in Auschwitz in July 1941.



Few Soviet prisoners of war survived; they were either shot, starved or beaten to death.

They had the letters SU sewn onto their uniforms and were given a new series of numbers. The numbers were originally sewn onto the uniforms but the high death rate meant they were recycled, creating chaos at the roll calls. The camp responded by tattooing a prisoner's number on his left breast.

The Soviets were put to work building and extending Auschwitz camp and were treated far worse than any other prisoners. Many were beaten to death or shot in the gravel pits; few survived longer than a few weeks. In September 1941 600 Soviet prisoners were gassed in the cellars of block 11 during the first experiments with Zyklon B.

By October 1941 there were around 10,000 Soviet POWs in Auschwitz I and they were put to work building Birkenau camp. By the time they were moved into sector BIb in March 1942, there were only 600 left. Six months later the few survivors were sent to work in the Reich. Only 1,000 out of the 15,000 Soviet prisoners sent to Auschwitz survived the war. They then found that their own country considered them traitors for allowing themselves to be captured. A long spell in a Soviet Gulag followed.

German Jews

The Nazi Propaganda Minister, Dr Joseph Goebbels, was also Berlin's Gauleiter and he wanted the city's Jews to be deported to the east. Anti-Semitic laws meant that only a quarter were allowed to work and on 15 August 1941 Goebbels' state secretary, Leopold Gutterer, said he wanted to send the rest to Russia to be murdered. Goebbels felt the same way and four days later he complained to Hitler about Jewish men idling in Berlin while young Aryan men were fighting on the Eastern Front. They agreed Germany's Jews had to wear the yellow star, something Polish Jews had been doing since the occupation in September 1939.

The first deportations from the Reich were made from Beuthen in Silesia (previously Poland) in February 1942 and Viennese Jews were sent east in July 1942. After the Royal Air Force attacked Hamburg in September 1942, the Gauleiter Karl Kaufmann suggested deporting Jews so bombed out Aryans could move into their houses. Hitler agreed German Jews could be sent to the Polish ghettos and Arthur Greiser, Nazi Gauleiter of the Warthegau area of Poland, was told to expect 60,000 Jews. The first trains left Germany in November and around 2,000 Jews from concentration camps across the Reich were soon also moving east to the overcrowded Lodz ghetto.

Czech and Slovakian Prisoners

Czechoslovakia had been forced to cede the Sudetenland area to Germany in October 1938, following the Munich Agreement. In March 1939 German troops occupied the rest

of the country, creating the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. The Slovakian government implemented all the anti-Semitic measures at once against the Protectorate's 90,000 Jews.

Political prisoners were moved to Auschwitz not long after it was opened. In the spring 1942 Eichmann's agent, *SS-Sturmbannführer* Dieter Wisliceny, asked Prime Minister Vojtech Tuka to provide 20,000 healthy male Jews for forced labour. The Slovaks did not want to leave the elderly, sick and young behind, so they offered 500 Reichsmarks a head so the Germans would take them. The roundups began straight away and the Slovakian Jews were mistreated and robbed in Poprad holding camp as they waited for the trains to take them to Auschwitz; the first transport left on 25 March. While the Slovak Council of Ministers halted the deportations in October 1942, they resumed two years later.

In November 1941 the Germans opened Theresienstadt ghetto in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. It was established in an eighteenth century Austrian fortress to hold well connected people: the intelligentsia, and World War I veterans from Bohemia, Germany, and Austria. It was supposed to be a 'model ghetto', but it was overcrowded and the prisoners were short of food. The people were promised transports would take them to better camps but they were taken to the likes of Auschwitz.

The deportations stopped briefly in 1943 while the camp was cleaned up, flower beds were planted and a children's playground was installed.

Regular deportations were made to Birkenau where deportees were allowed to stay in family groups and keep their luggage; they were not subjected to selections. The special status ended in March 1944 when the first groups were sent to the gas chambers. After the International Red Cross had inspected the camp on 23 June 1944, the remaining prisoners were gassed. Of the 140,000 Jews who passed through Theresienstadt camp, 35,000 died and 46,000 were deported to Auschwitz.

The Rest of Europe

The Nazis established transit camps whenever they occupied countries across Western Europe. Jews were identified in cities, towns and villages and then moved to the national transit camp, with the help of the local police force. They then waited for a train to take them east.

A transit camp was established in a series of apartment blocks in the Drancy district of Paris in 1941. Jews without French citizenship were rounded up first and 65,000 people had been sent to Auschwitz by the time the camp closed.

Holland had opened Westerbork camp before the war to house Jews who had escaped from Nazi Germany. The camp was taken over by the Germans following their occupation in May 1940 and the SS took control of it in July 1942. Around 104,000 Dutch Jews were deported, 60,000 of them to Auschwitz.

In Belgium a transit camp was opened at Mechelen (Malines), halfway between Antwerp and Brussels. Many Jews did not turn up when compulsory labour was announced in July 1942 so the police rounded them up and over 10,000 were deported. Another 15,000 Jews were sent to Auschwitz before the camp closed.

Greece had been under German occupation since 1941. A year later the Jewish community (the largest being in Salonika) were ordered to do forced labour or pay the authorities for their keep. In February 1943 the Germans moved the Greek Jews into a transit camp and over the next six months they were transported to Auschwitz and Treblinka.

The Gypsies

In December 1942 Himmler issued an order to send all 23,000 Reich gypsies to Birkenau where they were crowded together in sector BIIe. By February 1943, all the families were gathered together, away from other prisoners, and they wore a black triangle on their uniform. Three out of four gypsies died from disease by the time they had finished the new railway spur which ran into the centre of the camp. Once the Hungarian transports stopped coming, the gas chambers needed a new target and the camp administration decided to murder the rest.

In July, 1,400 fit gypsies were transferred to another concentration camp while many more were killed with a phenol injection. Then on the night of 2 August 1944 the guards surrounded the gypsy camp and herded the rest towards the crematoria. The gypsies knew their fate and they fought back with makeshift weapons in a one sided battle. Nearly 2,900 gypsies were gassed and their bodies were burnt in nearby pits. They were just a few of between a quarter and half a million gypsies who perished in the Holocaust.

Hungary's Jews

The Hungarians joined the Axis Tripartite Pact in October 1940. The following spring its troops joined the German invasion of Yugoslavia and then advanced deep into the Soviet Union in the summer. But in January 1943 the tables turned against the Axis when the Red Army smashed through the Hungarian forces, causing 150,000 casualties. The Hungarians had seen enough and they made a deal to change sides as soon as the Allies reached its borders. But the proposed switch would come too late for the nation's Jews.

In the spring of 1944 Hitler decided the time had come to exploit the Hungarians. Men of military age would be sent to the Eastern Front and anyone else fit enough to work would be sent to the Reich. The Jews would be deported to Auschwitz. German troops moved into Hungary on 19 March 1944 and a new regime was installed under Regent Miklós Horthy and Dome Sztéjay. The following day Adolf Eichmann arrived.



Those selected to die head to the gas chambers.

The Hungarian police were soon helping to round up the Jews. The fit were held in quarantine ready for transportation to Auschwitz and the rest were put into ghettos around Budapest. But while Germany only wanted the fit, Hungary wanted rid of all its Jews.

There was an unexpected development on 25 April when Eichmann offered Joel Brand of the Relief and Rescue Committee a lifeline for the Jews in return for 10,000 trucks. In a side deal with Rudolf Kasztner, Eichmann would also let a small number of Hungarian Jews leave for Germany at the price of \$1,000 dollars a head. Kasztner's committee had to choose who could leave and they sold some seats to the highest bidders, while the surplus cash paid for the committee's friends and families. A special train carrying 1,684 Jews left Budapest on 30 June 1944 and took them to Bergen-Belsen where they were allowed to stay in family groups. Most were eventually released in December 1944 and they headed for Switzerland.

But while the deals were being discussed, the preparations to deport the Jews, both in Hungary and in Auschwitz, were going ahead. Commandant Liebehenschel had streamlined the unloading process by laying a railway track through the infamous 'Gate of Death' into the centre of Birkenau and new ramps meant the prisoners could step off the train next to Crematoria II and III.

Otto Moll had been put in charge of the four crematoria and he had quadrupled the size of the *Sonderkommando* to nearly 900. New elevators had been installed in Crematoria II and III so the bodies could be moved faster while the changing rooms and gas chambers had been repainted. Plans to re-open Crematorium V failed because the furnaces failed to heat up sufficiently so a trolley track was laid to carry corpses to five open air pits. Moll also reopened the Little White House gas chamber and renamed it Bunker 2/V.

Despite the new measures, Liebehenschel was seen to be inefficient and considered to be lacking the true spirit of the SS. Rudolf Höss returned on 9 May a few days before Special Operation Hungary (*Sonderaktion Ungarn*) began.

The message about acquiring trucks was passed to the Jewish Agency in Palestine who in turn handed it to the British. They and the Americans refused to be blackmailed and they let the Soviet Premier, Josef Stalin, know about the proposal on 9 June. Even if the Allies had agreed, it would have been too late to save the majority of Hungary's Jews because the first train reached Birkenau on 15 May.

The first trains brought fit Hungarian Jews and they were held in quarantine before they were transferred to the Reich. But the trains that followed carried the old, the young and the sick. The SS made their selections on the ramp and most were escorted the short distance to the gas chambers. Women were allowed to stay with their children, to avoid

upsetting the crowds, unaware they had chosen to go to their deaths.

Three or four trains, each carrying over one thousand Hungarian Jews, arrived every day. The gas chambers were worked around the clock and hundreds of people had to sit and wait in the trees surrounding the crematoria, undressing in the open to speed up the operation. While the numbers considerably reduced through June and July, nearly 440,000 Hungarian Jews were transported to Auschwitz in less than eight weeks; 320,000 were murdered. The frenzied killing meant Topf and Sons' employees had to repair Crematorium II, while Crematorium IV was permanently damaged. Even so, Crematoria III and V continued to kill at an alarming rate.

On 9 July Regent Horthy stepped in to stop the deportations but eight days later the Nazi-backed Hungarian Arrow Cross militia seized power. Höss left Auschwitz, his work done, and headed back to Berlin. Meanwhile, Eichmann wanted to continue deporting the rest of Hungary's Jews but trains were difficult to acquire and only a few more transports were sent.

With the Red Army getting closer, Eichmann made one last attempt to fulfil his plan to eliminate the Hungarian Jews. He gave the order to march them to Vienna, through rain and snow with no food. Himmler put a stop to the marches as soon as he heard about them and he told Eichmann it was time to hold onto the Jews. Only he did not do it, he wanted to use them as hostages.

Women and Children

While Auschwitz concentration camp began as a male only prison, a train full of German female criminals arrived in Auschwitz from Ravensbrück concentration camp on 26 March 1942. A second train brought Slovakian female Jews to the camp on the same day. They were held in blocks 1 through 10 until the women's sector opened in Birkenau in August 1942. Large numbers of women were also held in the Theresienstadt and gypsy camps.

Several hundred thousand Jewish women were sent straight to the gas chambers on arrival, including the elderly, the sick, the pregnant and mothers of young children. Around 131,000 women prisoners were registered in Auschwitz, 30 per cent of the total.



Female prisoners line up ready to be marched to their work site.

Women were made to work and while some laboured like the men, others worked in the camp hospitals, kitchens and showers. Some were employed in clothing workshops and the Kanada storehouses. They were worked hard by the female SS-Aufseherin guards who were aided by women kapos and stuben.

Initially, pregnant women were murdered on arrival. Others, later on, were forced to terminate their pregnancy. After the summer of 1943, they were allowed to let their pregnancy run full term but Jewish new-born babies were drowned in buckets of water until October 1944. Stanislaw Leszczynska was a mid-wife and while her team did what they could to save new born babies, very few survived; those that did were tattooed on their thighs or buttocks.

Teenage boys started to arrive in the camp soon after it opened and 300 boys were soon being trained in the bricklaying school. Youngsters were sent on the five week course at regular intervals and then put to work around the camp. While they had better living conditions, their work was physically tough and there were many accidents. Many teenage girls were employed in the Kanada warehouses. Only 200 teenagers were liberated in January 1945.

Some children were allowed to live so the SS doctors could experiment on them. To begin with, younger children were housed in the same barracks as their parents but after the autumn of 1943 boys and girls were moved to blocks 31 and 32 in sector BIa. Sick children were put in block 16. The rooms were decorated and furnished and the children were given better food, blankets and heating in the winter. Many still died from malnutrition and disease and the survivors faced the doctor's experiments and operations.

The gypsy camp had a kindergarten, the nursery was in block 29, and pre-school children lived in block 31 and amused themselves in the adjacent playground. The barracks were whitewashed and decorated, but Dr Mengele was never far away, selecting children, particularly Roma twins, for his experiments. The children from Theresienstadt camp were also allowed to stay with their families in sector BIb and the kindergarten had the same numbering and layout as the gypsy camp. The youngsters were taken to the gas chambers with their parents when the sub-camps were liquidated.

Freddy Hirsch is remembered for collecting money and food on behalf of the Jews in Theresienstadt ghetto. The Nazis soon moved him inside the ghetto where he worked to make life better for the children. He was deported to Auschwitz in September 1943 and continued his work by organizing a pre-school and a school. Hirsch committed suicide when the guards began liquidating the Theresienstadt camp in March 1944.

In July 1944 Dr Josef Mengele set up two blocks in sector BIa for his hereditary experiments. Infant twins and their mothers were housed in block 22; young twins, aged

two to sixteen, were put in block 1.

In August 1944 children deported from the Warsaw ghetto started arriving. They were initially housed in block 16 of the women's camp but three months later they were moved to the recently liquidated gypsy camp.

Released Prisoners

It is difficult to believe that several thousand prisoners were released on the recommendation of the Political Department director in the early days of Auschwitz. Silesians who signed the *Volksliste* and committed to joining the German armed forces were allowed to go. Over 9,000 prisoners who were assessed as re-educated after weeks of hard labour were also released.

But the camp wanted prisoners to look fit and healthy before they returned home. Men were held in quarantine on the second floor of block 11 in Auschwitz I while women were held in a separate barracks near the women's sub-camp gate in Birkenau. They were usually excused work and roll calls and once they had put on weight and had recovered from their injuries, a doctor signed them off as fit to leave. They in turn had to sign to agree not to talk about their experiences and had to report regularly to a Gestapo office.

Some prisoners were released because they volunteered for military units. In March 1942 *SS-Obersturmbannführer* Heinz Grafe established the Zeppelin Company to recruit Soviet prisoners who would work as saboteurs on the Eastern Front. An SS team trained men from the Caucasian republics on the second floor of block 12 and in Birkenau's school building. Around 400 men had been sent to the Eastern front when the facility closed in March 1943. In the autumn of 1944 around 200 German criminals were transferred to *Waffen-SS* units.

Chapter 9

Life in the Camps

The original purpose of Auschwitz was to re-educate prisoners through hard work and punishments and the early prisoners built their own prison. With the addition of Birkenau, the camps were turned into a collection point for labour from across Nazi-occupied Europe.

The Uniform

Prisoners were issued denim uniforms with vertical blue and light grey stripes. Men wore a jacket, an undershirt, trousers and a cap. Women wore a tunic, a blouse and skirt or a dress and a headscarf. Prisoners wore uncomfortable clogs, some solid wood and others with cloth or leather uppers; a few were given old leather shoes to wear. Sometimes thicker jackets were issued in the winter but they still were poor protection from the cold. Clothes were rarely cleaned and they were usually infested with fleas and lice.

After September 1941 prisoners were allowed to wear underclothes and sweaters sent by their families. The following year the shortage of uniforms was made up by reusing uniforms from dead Soviet prisoners of war. By early 1943 even they had been used up and the camp recycled clothes and shoes from the Kanada warehouses. They were defaced with large triangles of striped cloth or by painting stripes of red oil paint on the back. The guards always made sure the prisoners working with civilian workers or outside the camp wore full stripes.

Prisoners had their camp number sewn to their uniform so the guards could refer to them. All but German prisoners had a letter denoting their nationality marked on their cloth triangles while Soviet prisoners had the letters SU painted on their clothes.



The prison uniform.



Prisoners were identified by a number and coloured triangle.

A triangle of coloured cloth, known as a '*winkel*', was stitched underneath the prisoner's number and it denoted their crime; a second number and triangle were sewn onto the trouser leg. These identification marks meant the guards knew all they needed to know about a prisoner at a glance.

Political prisoners had a red triangle; those accused of homosexual crimes had a pink triangle and Jehovah's Witnesses had a purple triangle. Emigrants had a blue triangle, while anti-socials, tramps, alcoholics, prostitutes, pimps, work-shy and gypsies were marked with a black triangle. A second triangle could be added for those accused of two crimes. Jews were given an extra yellow triangle which created a Star of David; a band of yellow fabric was used later on.

In May 1941 Himmler directed that those who refused to work would be subjected to hard labour and they would wear a letter E on their uniform. Prisoners from Upper Silesia were sent to Auschwitz for up to fifty-six days and they were initially housed in block 1, then block 11 and finally in block 25. A male re-education camp was opened in Monowitz early in 1943 while 1,800 women accused of refusing work were housed in barracks 11, 12 and 15 in Birkenau's sector BIa.

Criminals were given a green triangle and repeat offenders had their uniform marked with the letters 'BV'. Those arrested on suspicion of intending to carry out repeat offences were marked with the letters 'PSV'. Members of the penal unit had a black dot painted next to their triangle.

The Daily Routine

Life in the camp involved long working days and plenty of chores, leaving no time to relax or socialize. Camp life was an endless grind of work and punishment which mentally and physically exhausted the prisoners until they were too weak to work. And then they were murdered.

The camp day began at 4.30am in the spring and summer and 5:30am in the autumn and winter. A bell signalled it was time to tidy the barracks, wash, and go to the toilet. The prisoners then queued for the coffee or herbal tea, which was all there was for breakfast if they had eaten all the bread they had been given the night before.

During the early days of Auschwitz the toilets were just open ditches. Prisoners had to use them at set times and were often forced to go to the toilet on command. Urinals and toilets were eventually installed in each block but there were never enough. Men and women prisoners had to relieve themselves in ditches during the building of Birkenau and kapos often delighted in pushing people into the open cesspit. Separate toilet barracks were built but, yet again, there were never enough.

A second bell sounded the start of the working day. Kommandos working outside the wire were marched out of the gate, past the camp orchestra. They then had to sing the camp song and the first verse went: *“And so I was in the Auschwitz camp, not for a month, a day, and a year. In spite of sport and compulsion, still the merry song rang out. And I thought with joy and cheer, about my love so far away.”* Those employed inside the wire began work while anyone unassigned assembled on the parade ground for the morning roll call. Those who had died in the night were laid out in rows next to the living.

The number of prisoners in the camps fluctuated enormously, mainly due to arrivals, transfers and deaths. The prisoners had to wait in lines while they were counted but the numbers were often wrong and the prisoners had to wait, in all weathers, while they were checked. Hangings or floggings were sometimes carried out as a warning. The weak sometimes collapsed and lay where they fell as they waited while the SS doctors used a roll call to select the weak and ill for the gas chamber.

After the roll call the prisoners were allocated to new kommandos. An SS guard was assisted by a kapo, lead workers and clerks who made sure everyone worked *‘im laufschrift’* or ‘on the double’; the word *‘dalli’* was often heard – it meant ‘hurry up’. The working day lasted ten to eleven hours in the spring and summer and nine to ten hours in the autumn and winter.



A kommando sorts baggage in Kanada.

Lunch consisted of a weak vegetable soup with millet, rye flour or flavouring added and prisoners thought themselves lucky if they found a lump of meat or fat. The midday break was often shorter than the prescribed hour and the midday roll call was soon abolished so prisoners could get back to work quicker.

Everyone had to work at double time, demolishing, carrying, digging and building with their bare hands. There was no safety equipment or protective clothing and prisoners were abused and beaten, sometimes to death. Only in 1942 did the SS become interested in keeping prisoners with skills alive because they were hard to replace.

To begin with kommandos demolished buildings in the area to provide the raw materials for the camp. They were then allocated to farms, extending the camp and building the IG Farben chemical plant. Bad kommandos carried out demolition work, dug foundations and drainage ditches, cleaned fish ponds, or transported building materials by hand. The work was tough and the chances of survival were low. Good kommandos had jobs inside offices, warehouses, kitchen, hospitals or the showers. Skilled workers who spoke German had the best chance of good work because they were employed in the offices, kitchens and canteens, the laundries and showers, and the hospitals. Prisoners often tried to bribe the kapos to get themselves transferred onto good kommandos.

Everything from materials and food to luggage and corpses had to be moved around the camps by wagons and while a few were pulled by horses, most were pushed or dragged by prisoners. Kommandos unloaded the Jewish transports, collected the luggage and sorted it in the Kanada warehouses. The *Sonderkommando* dealt with the gassing and cremation process and they were murdered at regular intervals so they could not talk about their experiences.

The kommandos returned to the camp before dusk, carrying those who had been injured or killed during the day. They assembled for the evening roll call alongside the corpses and then queued for their food. Supper was another bowl of coffee or herbal tea and everyone received a chunk of black bread and either a sausage, a lump of cheese or a knob of margarine or marmalade. Half the bread was supposed to be saved for breakfast but most ate it straight away, worried it might be stolen in the night.

When the evening roll call ended the prisoners had a little free time until a bell signalled it was time to return to barracks. Those who had been injured tried to get first aid while the sick tried to get admitted to hospital. Some mixed with friends from other blocks while others took the opportunity to rest and talk to those around them.

Although German was the official camp language, the prisoners came from across Europe and a variety of languages would have been heard. A lot of Polish was heard in the early days; there was a mixture of Russian languages and dialects when the Soviet

prisoners arrived; and French, Slovak, Hungarian and many other languages when the Jews came from across Europe.



Around 770 people were locked inside each block every night, squeezed into tiny bunks.

With so many languages mixing together, new words, including swear words and criminal slang, were invented so the prisoners could communicate with each other. New sayings were also introduced for example, 'gone on the wire' meant someone had committed suicide on the electrified fence while 'gone out the chimney' meant someone had been sent to the gas chamber.

Everyone returned to their block when the first bell sounded and the lights went out when the second bell sounded at 9pm. Prisoners slept on straw mattresses on the floor until work started on three-tiered wooden bunks in February 1941 to increase the capacity of the blocks. Numbers were further increased by forcing the prisoners to double up. The block elders were allocated their own room with a single bed and basic furniture.

The brick barracks in Birkenau were divided into sixty brick boxes. Wooden boards created three levels, making 180 berths. The wooden barracks had a similar number of timber bunks. More and more prisoners were squeezed into each block and bunks would sometimes collapse under the weight of bodies.

Sundays were supposed to be free but the prisoners were usually kept busy. They had to clean their barracks, get a shave, as well as clean and repair their clothes. An untidy barracks meant punishment for everyone in the block while an unshaven or unkempt prisoner ran the risk of a beating.

Some prisoners were allowed to write and receive letters once a month; later it would be increased to twice a month. Jews, Soviet POWs and members of the penal company were not allowed to send or receive letters. The prisoners had to buy letter forms from the canteen or on the black market. They had to be written in German and include the statement 'I am healthy and I feel fine'. They were heavily censored. Incoming letters were also censored and parcels were often stolen by their stuben.

In December 1940 Archbishop Adam Sapieha of Krakow asked Höss if the prisoners could receive food parcels but the first ones did not arrive until October 1942. When the Jewish transports started to arrive in 1942, food found in their luggage was distributed amongst the rest of the camp. While International Red Cross parcels began arriving in 1943, many went straight to the SS kitchens. Dr Maurice Rossel visited Auschwitz in September 1944 and while the camp administration convinced him the parcels were being distributed, he was not allowed to speak to the prisoners to check.

Polish prisoners could have money sent to them and it was held on account so they could buy items from the canteen. While the queues were long, there was little on offer and the favourite items were cigarettes, letter forms and postage stamps. The canteen was originally in block 24, it then moved to the new laundry's wooden block and ended up in block 25. Starting in 1943 German companies offered cash bonuses for 'exceptionally

willing workers' but they were usually confiscated by the kapos.

There was a vigorous black market of food, tobacco, writing material, medicine and clothing. Prisoners often gathered between block 21 and the shower barracks in Auschwitz to exchange goods, while the toilets and washrooms were the favourite areas to trade in Birkenau.

The word 'organizing' referred to the bartering of contraband and the best wheelers and dealers were known as the 'big shots'. Items were either sent in parcels, bought from the canteen, stolen from the stores or exchanged with civilian workers. There was a huge increase in trade when the Jewish transports began arriving in 1942 as items taken from their luggage found their way onto the black market.

There were occasional concerts by the camp orchestra. Boxing and wrestling competitions were sometimes organized by block elders with food as prizes. Occasional football matches were held on Auschwitz's roll-call square and open spaces in Birkenau. Josef Stahorski banned matches in Monowitz because the Polish kept beating the Germans.

Health and Hygiene

Despite the unhygienic conditions, prisoners had to keep clean and shaved or they were punished. Prisoners washed at two wells in Auschwitz until wash rooms were installed in each of the barracks. Even then around 700 prisoners had to fight to use the limited number of basins in the allotted time.

The only water in the early days of Birkenau could be found in the kitchen barracks and prisoners were often forced to wash in puddles.

Hard work and beatings physically and mentally exhausted the prisoners. The starvation diet caused many prisoners to suffer from diarrhoea and the only cure was to fast or eat charred bread. The kapos often refused to let the prisoners visit the toilet, adding to their misery.

The poor diet and lack of food meant prisoners were constantly hungry and they soon developed the symptoms of malnutrition. A lack of vitamins meant the body could not fight infections and minor injuries turned into painful inflammations. Infections would spread and prisoners had to lance swellings to ease the pain. The poor diet also caused Noma, an infection of the mouth which led to tissue loss around the jaw.



Woman prisoners try to keep warm; those at the bottom are laid on the heating flue.

Many prisoners were reduced to skin and bone as their muscles wasted away. Initially they felt the cold and would cover up as they hunted for food. They then became indifferent about everything and shuffled about aimlessly or squatted and stared into space; a condition called *Muselmänner*. The SS sent the afflicted to the gas chambers.

The insanitary conditions led to an outbreak of typhus in the spring of 1942. The number of recorded deaths doubled and several guards died. Even the head doctor, SS-*Hauptsturmführer* Siegfried Schwela, died and his replacement, Eduard Wirths, allowed prisoners who were doctors to help.

Those suffering the symptoms were immediately gassed while the barracks were fumigated. A rigid regime of showering and the disinfection of clothing was introduced. Wirths contained another outbreak the following spring by fumigating the blocks and confining everyone to camp.

The first sick bay had been opened in Auschwitz in June 1940 and it had soon expanded into four blocks. Two sick bays were opened in Birkenau, the men's in sector BIIf camp and the women's in sector BIa. The larger sub-camps also had rooms for the sick.

Blocks 7 and 8 in Birkenau's sector BIb were set aside for seriously ill prisoners between March 1942 and July 1943. But the sick bays were not places for healing, they were little more than a waiting room for the gas chambers. The SS doctors did nothing to help the sick and injured while the prisoner orderlies had limited medicine and equipment. Patients were left to die on dirty straw mats and kapos murdered patients if there were no spare bunks, to make way for more sick prisoners.

In August 1941 the decision was taken to execute all sick prisoners, and doctors selected them during roll calls or when they were waiting for the showers. Patients were also made to strip and walk past a doctor; he put the medical charts of those doomed to die to one side.

The condemned were lined up in block 20's ground floor corridor. They were taken one by one behind a curtain and an assistant pulled back their arms as they sat on a stool. An SS orderly then plunged a syringe full of either phenol, hydrogen peroxide, ether or petroleum into their heart and they died almost instantly. This method of execution was used until the gas chambers started operating.

Punishment

The camp rules were based on Theodor Eicke's rules for Dachau concentration camp. Prisoners had no access to the list so it was easy to break a rule, and while the infractions

were minor the punishments were painful or deadly. A German prisoner drew up posters displaying the fifteen main rules in pictures and they were pinned up in the barracks to get over the language barrier. While prisoners officially had the right to complain, they would have been beaten if they did so.

The prisoners had to keep themselves, their clothes and their barracks clean. They were not allowed to talk or smoke during roll call and they had to stand still in straight lines while they were counted. They had to stand to attention and remove and replace their cap in the correct manner during roll call or in front of a guard. The order '*mützen ab*' meant caps off while '*mützen auf*' meant caps on. They would be punished for possessing contraband, for stealing, for trying to get warm or for going to the toilet without permission. They would be punished for reporting late for work, for working too slow or for avoiding work.



The pole hanging post; the whipping stool and the gallows.

Guards, kapos and stuben were supposed to submit reports on infractions so penalties could be authorized by the commandant or the camp director. But paperwork was usually ignored and prisoners were beaten or punished on the spot.

Prisoners were often made to do physical exercises, nicknamed 'sport', including lots of squats or remaining in the squat position with their arms outstretched for prolonged periods, sometimes while holding a heavy item. They would be beaten when they failed at the task. Some were rolled along the ground, spun round repeatedly, or made to punch each other.

While kapos and stuben beat the prisoners with their sticks, official floggings were carried out during the roll call. The camp director approved the number of strokes while a doctor gave permission for the prisoner to be beaten. They were forced to drop their trousers, bend over a bench and stretch their arms out. The prisoner counted out the lashes in German as they were hit with a stick or bullwhip; the count restarted if they made a mistake.

SS-Oberscharführer Wilhelm Boger invented a variation of flogging. A prisoner's hands and ankles were all tied together, leaving him immobilized in the crouching position. A pole was pushed between the knees and the arms and the trussed up prisoner was suspended upside down on a wooden stand. He would swing backwards and forwards as he was beaten, to the amusement of the guards.

Another simple, yet agonizing, punishment was pole hanging. A prisoner's hands were tied behind their back and they were lifted off the ground so their body weight dislocated their shoulders. The punishment lasted a minimum of one hour and was often repeated. There were dedicated posts in block 11's courtyard and prisoners were also suspended from the rafters in the attic of block 3 and then in block 11. In Birkenau camp prisoners were often left dangling from a bunk as an example to others.

Four small punishment cells were built in the basement of block 11 in 1942. Other punishment cells were built in block 3 of BIb sub-camp in Birkenau and between blocks 9 and 10 in Monowitz sub-camp. Four prisoners had to crawl inside and then remain standing up all night, crowded together and fighting for air from the tiny vent. They still had to work after a night in the cell.

Anyone accused of a major infraction would be sentenced to the penal company. The company was formed in August 1940 under Otto Moll and while some prisoners dug ditches, others pushed a huge steel roller, levelling the parade ground and roads. Ernst Krankemann sat astride the roller, whipping and shouting at the crew.

The company attempted to escape in June 1942 and while nine got away, fourteen

were shot and 320 were gassed in the Little Red House as a warning to the rest of the prisoners. A women's penal company was formed at Budy sub-camp in June 1942 and the prisoners spent their time digging ditches and cleaning fish ponds. The company was relocated to Birkenau in the spring of 1943.

Chapter 10

Escapes, Resistance and Liberation

Escape attempts were few and far between and they were rarely successful. But a few prisoners did manage to get out of the camps and make it to freedom. Most then made it their goal to make sure the world knew what was happening inside Auschwitz-Birkenau. Resistance groups were also formed, both inside and outside the camps, and although they were unable to do much about the way the camps were run, they never gave up hope. Escapees and resistance organizers could expect no mercy if they were caught.

Escaping from the Camps

Over 800 men and women tried to escape from Auschwitz and Birkenau camps but less than 150 made it out; the rest were tortured to reveal their accomplices and then executed. Escaping was a possibility in the early days of Auschwitz because the camp only had a barbed wire fence and the locals were sympathetic to the Polish prisoners. Some tried to run from their work details but most were shot before they got far. Tadeusz Wiejowski was the first man to escape on 6 July 1940; he gave his guards the slip, ran into town and jumped on a train. The Germans responded by threatening that in future they would imprison the escapee's family and execute his roommates.

Escapees had to work hard to obtain civilian clothing, identification armbands and passes. They also had to obtain wigs to disguise their shaved heads. Once beyond the wire and out of the sight of the guards they had to hide before the alarm sounded. The guard cordon would search the area for three days and then notify police stations in the surrounding area. Only then could the escapee continue his journey.

The bodies of dead escapees were left by the camp gate next to a sign announcing '*Hurrah, Hurrah, I'm back!*' Those brought back alive were made to stand by the camp gate or march around the camp, sometimes banging a drum. They had a placard with the same words hung around their neck and some were forced to shout out the phrase at roll call.

The escapee was then taken to block 11 and tortured to find out who had helped him.

Prisoners from their block were taken to the starvation cells in the cellars to deter others. Some escapees were then sent to the penal company, while others were executed in front of the Death Wall.

One example of the starvation cell being put to use occurred when a family man, Franciszek Gajowniczek, was one of ten men chosen to die after an escape in July 1941. Brother Maksymilian Kolbe, a Franciscan friar from Warsaw, volunteered to take his place in the starvation cell. After two weeks of being locked away he was murdered by lethal injection. Brother Maksymilian was canonized by Polish Pope John Paul II in 1982.

In June 1942 the penal company prisoners labouring on the *Königs Graben* (King's Ditch) decided to attempt a mass escape. While nine escaped, thirteen were shot by the guards and around 340 were executed as a reprisal.

One daring escape took place on 20 June 1942. Kazik Piechowski was working in a warehouse and Genek Bendera was a mechanic in the SS garage when they decided to collaborate in an escape attempt. Josef Lempart and Stanislaw Jaster helped them push a cart out of the gate, knowing their hated kapo would be blamed for letting them out.

Piechowski broke into a warehouse, so they could change into SS uniforms and arm themselves. Bendera then stole a car from the SS garage and they drove to the gate. They nearly panicked as the guard waited for them to stop but Piechowski waved and the guard raised the barrier, thinking they were on important business. Only their kapo was sent to the starvation cell in block 11, as they had hoped.



Only a few guards were needed to watch Birkenau's electric fence.

In November 1943 Jerzy Tabeau and Roman Cieliczko escaped from Birkenau's sector BIIe. They short-circuited the electric fence and the lights, cut a way through the wire, ran under fire and then swam the River Vistula. The Government Delegation for Poland in Krakow sent Tabeau's report about the camp to the West and in November 1944 it was included in a file published in Washington DC.

Edward Galinski and Mala Zimetbaum were in love and in June 1944 he disguised himself as a guard and led her out of Birkenau camp using a stolen pass. Unfortunately, they were arrested by a border guard patrol and returned to Auschwitz where they were tortured for a month in block 11. Galinski was hanged and Zimetbaum committed suicide before her execution. A month later Jerzy Bielecki and Cyla Stawiska escaped in a similar manner and they got away. Bielecki went to fight in a partisan unit while Stawiska hid until the end of the war; they did not meet again until 1983.

Resistance Activities

To begin with the locals and civilian workers smuggled food, medicine and clothing to the prisoners. Messages written on tiny scraps of paper, hidden inside objects and dropped at agreed locations were also forwarded to relatives. Some even assisted escapees, despite the risk of imprisonment. But over time individual resistance activities became organized into groups, including the Peasant Battalion, the Polish Socialist Party and the Union of Armed Struggle (*Związek Walki Zbrojnej*, ZWZ). The ZWZ was renamed the Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*, AK) in February 1942.

A 100-strong Home Army partisan unit and several other smaller resistance groups operated in the Auschwitz area. While the prisoners hoped the underground would one day attack the camp, they had few weapons and little ammunition. All they could do was try to smuggle items into and out of the camps. The partisans occasionally damaged the rail link to the camp but the Germans always repaired it quickly. Research tells us that over 1,000 people helped the resistance in some way and while nearly 200 were arrested, around a third of them were executed.

Over fifty resistance members were shot in front of the Death Wall in 1943 including Jan Karcz, a Polish cavalry officer who had led an underground group in the Birkenau penal company before bribing his way into the isolation barracks.

Austrian Hermann Langbein and Pole Jozef Cyrankiewicz formed Combat Group Auschwitz (*Kampfgruppe Auschwitz*) in May 1943. The following year Cyrankiewicz helped to form the Auschwitz Military Council and went on to become the Home Army military commander in the Auschwitz area. He would be premier of Communist Poland for twenty-one years between 1947 and 1972.

While the Home Army was unable to attack Auschwitz, it did stage an uprising in Warsaw in August and September 1944. Thousands of civilians were transferred to Pruszkow camp so they did not hamper the military operation to liquidate the ghetto. Over 13,000 eventually ended up in Birkenau and the majority were sent to labour camps across the Reich.

Prisoner Reports

The Nazi persecution of the Jews had been reported since it began in 1933. People across the Reich knew the Jews were being deported to the East and they also knew they were not coming back. Their goods were being sold, their houses were being rented out and their businesses were being taken over. The Nazis' extermination policy had been known about since 1941 and the Polish government in exile in London had heard about Auschwitz in May of that year. But while rumours of atrocities in the East were talked about in private, the Nazis' harsh regime of security, penalties and propaganda made sure nobody dared discuss them in public.

Several reports on conditions in Auschwitz were written by escapees and sent to the West. Witold Pilecki had helped found the resistance movement called the Secret Polish Army (*Tajna Armia Polska*, TAP). In September 1940 he decided he wanted to find out the truth about conditions inside Auschwitz. He saw to it that he was arrested in Warsaw and imprisoned under the name Tomasz Serafinski. Once inside, he organized the Union of Military Organizations (*Zwizek Organizacji Wojskowej*, ZOW) and then joined the Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*, AK) when the Polish military and political groups amalgamated in 1942 under Lieutenant-Colonel Juliusz Gilewicz and Kazimierz Rawicz. Pilecki was fortunate enough to escape with two other prisoners and pass on information about the camp.

Pavel Stenkin escaped to Soviet occupied territory in the spring of 1942 and his evidence about the camp's conditions reached the Allies in June. A month later a list of twenty-two concentration camps in Poland was circulated. Then in December the British Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, read a statement to Parliament condemning Nazi atrocities. The Polish resistance mentioned Auschwitz in March 1943 while the London *Times* newspaper published an article about the camp in June. Agent Wanda's report reached London in January 1944 with information about the gas chambers and crematoria and it explained how thousands of people a day, including women and children, were being gassed. Although the report estimated around 650,000 Jews had already been murdered, little was done about it.

It was November 1944 before a full report of the camps, called the '*Auschwitz*

Protocols' was published. The document was compiled from reports by a number of escaped prisoners, including Pole Jerzy Tabeau who escaped in November 1943, Slovakian Jews Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler who got away in April 1944, and Czeslaw Mordowicz, a Polish Jew, and Arnost Rosin, a Slovakian Jew, who reached Slovakia in May 1944. *The New York Times* followed up the release with a detailed report and at last the world knew about Auschwitz-Birkenau's part in the Holocaust.

Liberation, Freedom and Sentencing

The Nazis did their best to hide all evidence of the Holocaust by evacuating and destroying many of the camps ahead of the Soviet advance. Meanwhile, the main perpetrators were hunted down while the guards faded into obscurity. Once the war was over the survivors had to come to terms with losing their families and friends as well as being shunned by society.

Evacuating the Camps

The Soviet Army launched Operation Bagration on 22 June 1944 and their troops crossed the pre-war Polish border at the end of the month. By the end of August, the Wehrmacht's Army Group Centre had been thrown back a huge distance, while Army Group North was in danger of being cut off. The Red Army advances raised concerns in Auschwitz-Birkenau and the staff began burning the prisoner files in the crematoria waste incinerators.

But still the deportations continued from Greece, and the last groups of Jews to reach Auschwitz came from the Lodz ghetto and Slovakia in September and October 1944. The last train brought 2,000 Jews from Theresienstadt on 30 October. The dismantling of Crematorium IV, which had been damaged in the recent mutiny, began around the same time. The following month equipment was removed from Crematoria II and III, and taken to Germany, while the buildings were prepared for demolition.

The Vistula-Oder offensive began on 12 January and Soviet troops entered an abandoned Warsaw five days later. With the end in sight, the SS staff sent essential records to Berlin while the rest of the camp's paperwork was burnt. The gassings stopped and extra guards arrived to help the staff evacuate the camp. On the night of 17 January 58,000 prisoners were marched out of the sub-camps and Monowitz camp. Many of those who were too weak to move were murdered.



The final victims were shot just before the Red Army reached the camps.

Many of the prisoners were taken west but around 20,000 were transferred to Auschwitz-Birkenau before they joined the general exodus. The only saving grace was that the *Sonderkommando* managed to join the march instead of being killed, as was planned. Many survived the war and were able to tell their horrific stories.

They could hear the Soviet artillery rumbling in the distance as they marched away, knowing they were too far away to save them. Many boarded trains at Wodzislaw-Slaski and Gliwice while others continued their journey on foot. The guards were only supposed to take those capable of work, but many of the exhausted, sick and children found themselves in the columns. Those who could not keep up were shot and their bodies left by the roadside.

In freezing weather they had to walk for weeks in wooden clogs lined with newspapers, often sleeping in the open, wearing only their prison uniforms. They had little food or water and were not even allowed to melt snow to drink. They were then squeezed into open rail trucks and deported to Germany. Over 10,000 died from exhaustion, the cold, from hunger and from the guards' brutality.

Around 20,000 ended up in Bergen-Belsen where camp commandant Josef Kramer (an Auschwitz veteran) could not cope with the massive influx of prisoners. A lack of food, water and hygiene meant many died of typhoid before the camp was liberated by British troops on 15 April 1945.

Meanwhile, small groups of SS remained behind and made the *Sonderkommando* clear crushed bones from the incineration ditches and level them with ash. They then grassed over the areas to hide evidence of the outdoor cremations. The prisoners were then shot.

Crematoria II and III and their underground rooms were blown up on January 20 while Crematoria V was destroyed six days later. The Auschwitz crematorium was turned into an air raid shelter while the chimney was removed and the gas hatches were blocked up. Kanada's sheds were set on fire on 23 January and while only six remained undamaged, the number of items discovered inside indicated the scale of murder in Birkenau. They included 370,000 men's suits, 837,000 women's coats and dresses and 7.7 tons of human hair.

On Saturday 27 January 1945, the 60th Army of the First Ukrainian Front approached Auschwitz from two directions. Troops from 100th Division liberated Monowitz sub-camp to the east and then pushed into the town. By the afternoon they had captured the railway station and were approaching Birkenau. Meanwhile, 322nd Division crossed the Sola River and entered Auschwitz camp soon afterwards. Over 230 Red Army soldiers were killed fighting in the area.

While *SS-Obergruppenführer* Ernst Schmauser had ordered the execution of the prisoners left behind, the Soviet troops were moving too fast and the guards fled when news that the Red Army had taken Krakow reached the camp. They found just over 1,000 prisoners in Auschwitz, over 5,800 in Birkenau and around 600 in the Monowitz camp; another 500 were found in the smaller camps. Around 600 recently murdered prisoners were also found in the sub-camps.

The prisoners were grateful to meet their liberators, but they were also nervous around them, and a surreal calm fell across the camp. The Soviet troops had seen many terrible things during the battles across Poland and the camp was just another story. The true horror of Auschwitz was far from obvious as most of the evidence had been removed, burnt, buried or blown up. The Soviets eventually reported Auschwitz camp as the ultimate capitalist factory which had worked prisoners to death. They also stated that the prisoners were just some of many 'victims of Fascism'. Their views were unchallenged until the fall of Communism.

The Guilty on Trial

Once the war was over, the SS guards knew they risked arrest and prosecution for their work in the camps. Members of a British Army Jewish Brigade, led by Brigadier Ernest Benjamin, disguised themselves as military police and went in search of the perpetrators. They were seeking revenge and their victims were summarily executed.

Rudolf Höss was captured and then released and the British had to trick his wife into telling them where he had hidden in March 1946. He wrote his memoirs in prison, providing a useful, if very biased, account of how the camps were run. American lawyer Whitney Harris described him as 'a normal person, like a grocery clerk', during his trial in Nuremberg. He was extradited to Poland and in April 1947 Höss was taken to Auschwitz to be executed. The first attempt had to be postponed because a large mob had gathered, so he was hung the following morning next to the gas chamber and close to the villa where he had lived while he ran the camp; a re-construction of the gallows is on the site.

Arthur Liebehenschel was tried in Poland and executed in January 1948. Richard Baer went into hiding until he was captured in 1960. He then refused to testify and died in prison in June 1963. Joseph Kramer was tried and hanged in December 1945. Fritz Hartjenstein was twice sentenced by the British, first to life imprisonment and then to death. He was then extradited to France and died in prison in October 1954.

While around 7,500 SS guards and staff worked at Auschwitz and Birkenau, only 750 were punished. The Soviets, the Americans and the British had differences in opinion over their crimes and there was a lack of determination to prosecute them, especially under Cold War conditions. The Polish courts tried 673 guards after the war while another

twenty-two were tried in Frankfurt in the mid-1960s; only seventeen were convicted and only six were given life imprisonment.

The new state of Israel was also tracking down Nazi perpetrators. Mossad, the Israeli intelligence agency, found Adolf Eichmann in Argentina; he was taken to Israel, tried and executed in 1962. Dr Mengele had also been arrested but released. He escaped to Argentina where, despite Mossad's efforts, he was never found. He drowned while swimming in 1979 and his remains were identified in 1992. Individuals and organizations also became involved in tracking down concentration camp guards; they still do today even though few are still alive.

A Difficult Freedom

The Auschwitz prisoners were scattered across Europe by the time the war in Europe came to an end on 8 May 1945 and their ordeal was far from over. They spent weeks walking across a war-torn continent, without maps, sleeping rough and scavenging for food. Anti-Semitism still existed in the Communist controlled Eastern Europe countries. While Soviet Army troops were known to rape women, Jews were either shunned or hated.

And it got worse. Many ex-prisoners found the houses they had lived in and the businesses they had run before the war were now occupied by people from the Soviet Union. After months or years fighting for survival in a concentration camp, they owned nothing. Most soon discovered that their families, relatives and friends had perished in the Holocaust, leaving them with a terrible sense of loss and loneliness. They also discovered they were not wanted in their home country and many emigrated to the United States or to the British mandate of Palestine, part of which would soon become the new state of Israel in May 1948. Many Jews never received what was due to them and the struggle still continues for the dwindling number of survivors.

But the freed prisoners who were treated the worst, were the few surviving Soviet prisoners. The Soviet regime called them 'betrayers of the motherland'. They were imprisoned in harsh conditions in the Siberian gulags and the few survivors were not released until Stalin died in 1953.

The Number of Victims

The first rough estimate of the number of deaths in Auschwitz-Birkenau was calculated by multiplying the camps' killing capacity by the length of time they were open; it came in at four million people. Rudolf Höss was accused of murdering 3.5 million people, but he contested "*No... Only 2.5 million; the rest died from disease and starvation.*"



A grandmother leads her grandchildren away from their parents. They are all heading for the gas chamber.

In the 1980s/90s Franciszek Piper, the camp museum historian, discovered that 1.3 million had been deported to Auschwitz (1.1 million Jews, 145,000 Poles, 23,000 Roma gypsies, 15,000 Soviets, 20,000 others). Around 1.1 million had died in Auschwitz. One million of them were Jews, the majority were gassed on arrival. They came from all across Europe: 430,000 Hungarian, 300,000 Polish, 69,000 French, 60,000 Dutch, 55,000 Greek, 46,000 from Bohemia and Moravia, 26,000 Slovaks, 25,000 Belgians, 23,000 from Germany and Austria, 10,000 Yugoslavians, 7,500 Italians and 690 Norwegians.

But such huge numbers are mere statistics; every death, either from starvation, illness, beating, torture or gassing, was a personal tragedy for the individual, for their family and their friends. Collectively they were the victims of the Holocaust.

Chapter 11

Visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau

The best place to stay to visit Auschwitz-Birkenau is the city of Krakow, in south-west Poland. John Paul II International Airport is seven miles west of the city and the flight time is two hours from London and a little longer from other UK airports. While flight schedules change every year, there are plenty of flights to the airport, particularly during the summer months, because Krakow is a popular destination in its own right. It is one of the most beautiful cities in Europe and is a popular place to visit for a short city break. You can either take the train, a bus or a taxi from the airport to the city. You can then either walk, take the tram or take a taxi to your hotel.

Krakow has a medieval city centre which is surrounded by Communist era buildings. Most of the hotels are within walking distance of the city centre where you will find plenty of restaurants and bars surrounded by elegant buildings. There is lots of choice and something for all tastes in the way of entertainment, food and drink.

The city has the largest medieval market place in Europe, the Rynek Glowny, with its huge market hall, clock tower and St. Mary's Basilica. On the south side of the city is the magnificent Royal Castle and Wawel Cathedral, both worth a visit in their own right.

Basic English is spoken nearly everywhere and younger people usually have an excellent command of the language. You will find that a few words of Polish raise a smile. But the Polish language is difficult to read and understand and you will have to get used to reading Polish street names if you use a street map to navigate the city.

You can easily walk around the centre of the city and elderly trams run regularly around the perimeter of the old town. You buy your ticket at the stop and validate it by getting it stamped in the machine on board. You can spend a day or two visiting the general sights of the city and there are other World War II related sites to visit, in particular sites related to Steven Spielberg's 1993 film, *Schindler's List*.



Krakow's clock tower in the Market Place.

There is the Gestapo museum in 'Silesian House' (Dom Śląski) in the north-west Krowodrza district. In the south Kazimierz district you have the Jewish quarter, with restaurants offering traditional food, the synagogue and the museum of Jewish life. Then south of the river Vistula, in the Podgórze district, is the ghetto area associated with many scenes from *Schindler's List*. You will find the Eagle Chemist museum (Apteka pod Orlem) on the Ghetto Heroes Square (Placu Bohaterow Getta) and plaques on many buildings (with English interpretations), stating what happened there. The area has changed little in the seventy years since the end of the War.

You can visit the nearby Schindler's factory museum which covers the well-known story of the entrepreneur and the not so well known story of the city under the Nazis. Close by is the site of the Plasnow concentration camp and the Liban quarries where parts of the film were made; you can even see the house of camp commandant Amon Goeth. If you are feeling energetic you can climb the ancient Krakusa Hill and enjoy some spectacular views of the city. All this and more about the city's difficult time under the Nazis is described in the companion book, *Schindler's Krakow*.

The town of Oświęcim, the Polish name for the town known the world over as Auschwitz, is forty miles west of Krakow and there are several ways to get to there. The city has made a big effort to accommodate tourism for the camps and you can book onto organized tours at all the large hotels. You can also book at tourist information points and other outlets around the city. You choose your day, pay your money and meet your coach at the meeting place at the agreed time.

Taxis are another option (use a licensed taxi) and they are very cheap in comparison to the UK. We made the hour trip and the driver waited while we made a 90 minute visit to Auschwitz and a 60 minute visit at Birkenau; we were then returned to the city. The charge was the equivalent of £40 for nearly five hours of the driver's time, paid in instalments on route. The driver gave us lots of useful information about the camps during the drive to the camps and then entertained us with stories about Polish culture during the drive back. You could also hire a car in advance and drive yourself.

Plan a lot of time to visit Auschwitz (at least 90 minutes and probably more) it is a very busy place. You have two options and it depends on how you travel to the site. If you make your own way you can try to arrive before 10 am. You can then enter before the guided tours begin and explore the camp on your own at your own pace, bearing in mind it gets busier as the hours pass. You will be surprised how compact the area is but there are a lot more exhibits in the brick barrack blocks. That aside, it is not a place to rush. The subject matter will not let you.



The trollies for pushing corpses into the furnaces inside Crematorium I.

The second option is to queue up after 10 am and book onto one of the many guided tours which set off at staged intervals. The guides work to a strict timetable and the general plan is to keep the large number of people moving at a steady pace to avoid overcrowding in the rooms. All the blocks are still standing and many are filled with exhibits and information panels about the camps and the Holocaust in general. There is a logical tour mapped out for you to see all of the main camp and while the twenty buildings of the camp extension to the north are still standing, they are not included in the tour.

Birkenau camp is one mile to the north-west of Auschwitz camp, across the railway which brought so many to be murdered or worked to death in the camps. The Judenrampe, or Jew's Ramp siding, where the trains originally stopped, is next to the main railway line and two cattle trucks remind us how the Jews arrived at the camp.

A short distance away is Birkenau camp and the single railway line leads to the Gate of Death, which beckons you as you approach. The camp is very different from Auschwitz camp in several ways. For one it is much bigger and much more open, because the wooden huts are gone. A backdrop of trees and open fields to the sides give it an open feel, compared to the claustrophobic atmosphere you experience in Auschwitz. But the electric fence is still there and the guard towers have a menacing feel about them.

There are many ways of visiting the camp but this is one suggestion. Walk along the railway track and the ramps where the selections were made. To the left and right are the sub-camps, each surrounded by internal fences and separated by gates. The brick huts built by the Soviet prisoners are still standing in sub-camp BI, to the left of the tracks. While only the hut foundations and the brick chimney stacks remain, it does mean you get a feeling for the massive scale of the camp.

At the far end of the railway are the remains of Crematoria II and III which were blown up by the guards. You can see the rubble of the crematorium hall and the two underground rooms. Steps lead down into the dressing room and the gas chamber was at right angles. The ruins look so harmless and yet their purpose was so evil. A number of memorials are nearby and groups of young people from Israel are often seen in the area, listening to their teachers, holding memorial services and singing hymns (known as Zemirot).



The doomed undressed in this underground changing room before turning right into the gas chamber at the end. The tangle of concrete we can see is all that remains of Crematorium II's furnace hall.

Turning right (north) we come to the site of the Kanada warehouses. There is now a huge empty space where 2,000 prisoners sorted the contents of thousands of suitcases. The central shower block is next, an ordinary brick building you can walk through and imagine the humility suffered by the prisoners as they showered.

Beyond that are the foundations of Crematoria IV and V, both ground level structures which were blown up just before the camp was liberated. The visitor is also reminded that the *Sonderkommando* had to burn corpses in nearby pits when the crematoria could not cope. Display boards also remind us that Jews had to sit and wait in the adjacent wood when the gas chambers were busy.

Head back east towards another imposing brick building in the distance and you have BII to your right and the partially built BIII (Mexico) to your left. Close to the camp administration block are several restored timber barracks. There is a horrible feeling of doom as you step inside and see first-hand how cramped the prisoners were in their bunks. Then it is back to the main gate.



One of the many memorials next to the gas chambers.

Notes

Chapter 2

[1](#) Soviet soldiers wanted to take the sign when they liberated the camp in January 1945 but Eugeniusz Nosal bribed them with vodka so they left it. In December 2009 the sign was stolen and cut up under orders from a Swedish neo-Nazi. It was quickly recovered, repaired and a replica is now above the gate.