

AUSCHWITZ

Located in Poland, 60 kilometres west of Krakow, Auschwitz was the largest of the Nazi concentration camps. It served both as a forced labour camp and as a centre for the mass murder of Jews.

In April 1940, the head of the SS and German police, Heinrich Himmler, ordered the establishment of a large concentration camp near the town of Oswiecim, Poland. Local Jews, alongside German prisoners from Sachsenhausen, constructed the camp on the site of an abandoned army barracks before the first transports of prisoners arrived in June of that year. Inmates were required to construct a sign for the camp's main entrance, which read: "Arbeit Macht Frei" (Work sets you free). Initially, the majority of the 11,000 prisoners were Polish and German.

In March 1941, Himmler ordered the building of a second, much larger camp, which was located three kilometres from the original camp. Auschwitz II — or Birkenau — was the most populated camp of the Auschwitz complex. As with Auschwitz I, inmates at Birkenau lived under extremely cruel and inhuman conditions. In March 1942, a women's section was established, holding more than 6,000 female prisoners. At this time, the prisoners in Birkenau were mostly Jews, Poles and Germans.

Auschwitz came to be known as the harshest of the Nazi concentration camps. In one of the main camp's buildings, Block 11, a special bunker was built for the most severe punishments. Next to that building stood the "Death Wall," where executions regularly took place.

The gas chambers and crematorium at Auschwitz-Birkenau operated between October 1941 and November 1944 before being dismantled and eventually destroyed by SS officers as they retreated from advancing Allied forces. Prior to this, in October 1944, *Sonderkommando* prisoners working in the gas chambers and crematorium staged a revolt, which partially destroyed one of the gas chambers.

In 1942, a third camp was built in nearby Monowitz, called Auschwitz III (Buna-Monowitz). Auschwitz III and its 45 sub-camps were principally forced labour camps, where primarily Jewish inmates worked as slave labourers for German industrial firms.

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Prisoners arrived at the camps by train, and many people died on the journey. When the trains stopped at the railway platform in Birkenau, the passengers were forced to exit the railway cars, leaving their belongings behind. Men and women were formed into two separate lines, which advanced quickly towards SS officers who were conducting the *selektion*. The newly arrived prisoners were ordered in the direction of the gas chambers, or to another line designated for forced labour.

Those sent to the gas chambers were killed the same day, and their bodies burned in the crematorium. The belongings left in the railway cars were gathered and sorted in a warehouse called "Kanada." It was given this name because Canada was a symbol of wealth and abundance to the prisoners. The confiscated items were in turn sent to Germany.

Prisoners not sent to the gas chambers were stripped of their clothing, showered, their hair was shaved, and they were given a striped uniform. Inmates were not referred to by name, but by their numbers, which were tattooed on their forearms. After being processed into the camp, new arrivals were sent to quarantine to prevent the spread of infectious diseases in the camp. While conditions in the entire camp were dreadful, conditions in quarantine were especially gruelling. Many prisoners did not survive more than a few weeks at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Because many of the new arrivals were never formally registered, and the SS destroyed much of the evidence in the final days of the war, it is difficult to calculate the exact number of victims. However, of the approximately 1.5 million recorded prisoners deported to the Auschwitz concentration camp complex, an estimated 200,000 people survived. Of those who perished, Jews constituted the single largest group—1.1 million.