



Auschwitz II-Birkenau gate from inside the camp, 2007. When car loads of Jews, Poles, Roma's and Soviets arrived here by train, little did they know many would never leave the concentration camp alive.

Auschwitz: a haunting glimpse into the horrors of World War II

By Gerald Tracey

News Editor

Researched from various websites and during a personal visit in June, 2023. On January 27, 1945, Soviet soldiers entered the gates of Auschwitz concentration camp complex in south-west Poland. The site had been evacuated by the Nazis just days earlier. Thus ended the largest mass murder in a single location in human history.

Auschwitz-Birkenau, Poland – On a beautiful, sunny day in June, the birds can be heard singing sweetly in this peaceful little community located about 75 kms from Krakow. However, it was anything but peaceful 75 years ago during World War II and first-time visitors to the former German Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camp quickly realize this after they enter the gates and for the next several hours relive some of the horrors of the holocaust.

The train tracks leading to the massive entryway into Auschwitz, which transported Jews, Poles, Russians, members of the Roma (gypsy) community and others who had run afoul of the Nazi regime to what for many was their death, are still in place. The barracks which housed prisoners in callously overcrowded conditions, some without any water or heating despite the cold Polish winters, stand hauntingly empty, lined uniformly in German-style precision. The crematoria, now empty, are a perpetual reminder of when they were in continuous operation. The piles of shoes bear testimony to the callous killing which occurred in this countryside enclave so close to Krakow, yet housing a horror most could never imagine before the "final solution" was implemented.

Everyone has heard about Auschwitz and the more than one million who were murdered there during the second World War by the Nazis. However, to fully comprehend the mass brutality and the methodical killing of innocent human beings of all ages is only understood by a visit into the camp. Society has no idea what they are about to see behind the gates, but decades after liberation, the camp stands as a symbol of horror, brutality and the threat a totalitarian regime can inflict on its

citizens and others.

Auschwitz was established by the Germans in 1940, in the suburbs of Oswiecim, a Polish city annexed to the Third Reich by the Nazis. Its name was changed to Auschwitz, which also became the name of Konzentrationslager Auschwitz.

The initial reason for the establishment of the camp was the fact mass arrests of Poles were increasing beyond the capacity of existing "local" prisons. The first transport of Poles reached KL Auschwitz from Tarnów prison on June 14, 1940. Initially, Auschwitz was to be one more concentration camp of the type the Nazis had been setting up since the early 1930s. It functioned in this role throughout its existence, even when, beginning in 1942, it also became the largest of the extermination centers where the "Endlösung der Judenfrage" (the final solution to the Jewish question -- the Nazi plan to murder European Jews) was carried out.

Division of the Camp

The camp had several distinct components. The first and oldest was the so-called "main camp," later also known as "Auschwitz I" (the number of prisoners fluctuated around 15,000, sometimes rising above 20,000), which was established on the grounds and in the buildings of pre-war Polish barracks.

The second part was the Birkenau camp (which held over 90,000 prisoners in 1944), also known as "Auschwitz II" and which was the largest part of the Auschwitz complex. The Nazis began building it in 1941 on the site of the village of Brzezinka, three kilometers from Oswiecim. The Polish civilian population was evicted, their houses confiscated and demolished. The greater part of the apparatus of mass extermination was built in Birkenau and the majority of the victims were murdered here.

More than 40 sub-camps, exploiting the prisoners as slave labourers, were founded, mainly at various sorts of German industrial plants and farms, between 1942 and 1944. The largest of them was called Buna (Monowitz, with 10,000 prisoners) and was opened by the camp administration in 1942 on the grounds of the Buna-Werke synthetic rubber and fuel plant six kilometers from

the Auschwitz camp. On November 1943, the Buna sub-camp became the seat of the commandant of the third part of the camp, Auschwitz III, to which some other Auschwitz sub-camps were subordinated.

Interessengebiet

The Germans isolated all the camps and sub-camps from the outside world and surrounded them with barbed wire fencing. All contact with the outside world was forbidden. However, the area administered by the commandant and patrolled by the SS camp garrison went beyond the grounds enclosed by barbed wire. It included an additional area of approximately 40 square kilometers (the so-called "Interessengebiet" - the interest zone), which lay around the Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II-Birkenau camps.

The local population, the Poles and Jews living near the newly-founded camp, were evicted in 1940-1941. Approximately 1,000 of their homes were demolished. Other buildings were assigned to officers and non-commissioned officers from the camp SS garrison, who sometimes came here with their whole families. The pre-war industrial facilities in the zone, taken over by Germans, were expanded in some cases and, in others, demolished to make way for new plants associated with the military requirements of the Third Reich. The camp administration used the zone around the camp for auxiliary camp technical support, workshops, storage, offices, and barracks for the SS.

Living Conditions

When Auschwitz Concentration Camp opened in the former Polish army barracks in June 1940, 20 brick buildings were adapted, of which six were two-storeys and 14 were single-storey. At the end of 1940, prisoners began adding second stories to the single-storey blocks. The following spring, they started erecting eight new blocks. This work reached completion in the first half of 1942. The result was a complex of 28 two-storey blocks, the overwhelming majority of which were used to house prisoners. The blocks were designed to hold about 700 prisoners each after the second storeys were added, but in practice they housed up to 1,200.

During the first several months, the prisoners' rooms had neither beds nor any other furniture. Prisoners slept on straw-stuffed mattresses laid on the floor. After reveille in the morning, they piled the mattresses in a corner of the room. The rooms were so overcrowded prisoners could sleep only on their sides, in three rows. Three-tiered bunks began appearing gradually in the rooms from February 1941. Theoretically designed for three prisoners, they in fact accommodated more. Aside from the beds, the furniture in each block included a dozen or more wooden wardrobes, several tables, and several score stools. Coal-fired tile stoves provided the heating.

In the first months, the prisoners drew water from two wells and relieved themselves in a provisional outdoor latrine. After the rebuilding of the camp, each building had lavatories, usually on the ground floor, containing 22 toilets, urinals, and washbasins with trough-type drains and 42 spigots installed above them. The fact prisoners from the upstairs and downstairs had to use a single lavatory meant access was strictly

limited.

In Birkenau, the conditions were even worse. Two types of barracks, brick and wooden, housed prisoners. The brick barracks stood in the oldest part of the camp. Inside each of them were 60 brick partitions with three tiers, making a total of 180 sleeping places, referred to as "bunks," designed to accommodate four prisoners. The SS therefore envisioned a capacity of over 700 prisoners per block. At first, the buildings had earthen floors. Over time, these were covered with a layer of bricks lying flat, or with a thin layer of poured concrete. The barracks were unheated in the winter. Two iron stoves were indeed installed, but these were insufficient to heat the entire space. Nor were there any sanitary facilities in the barracks. Only in 1944 were sinks and toilets installed in a small area inside each block. There wasn't any electric lighting at the beginning.

Wooden stable-type barracks were also used. These barracks had no windows. Instead, there was a row of skylights on either side at the top. A chimney duct, which heated the

interior in the winter, ran almost the entire length of the barracks. The interior was divided into 18 stalls, intended originally for 52 horses. The two stalls nearest the door were reserved for prisoner functionaries, and containers for excrement stood in the two stalls at the far end. Three-tier wooden beds or three-tier wooden bunks intended for 15 prisoners to sleep, in were installed in the other stalls, for a total capacity of more than 400 prisoners per barracks.

During the first year or so, water in sector BI was available only in the kitchen barracks, and prisoners had no access to it. Unable to wash, they went around dirty. They had to perform their bodily functions in unscreened outside privies. The barracks were frequently damp, and lice and rats were an enormous problem for the prisoners. It is therefore hardly strange epidemics of contagious diseases erupted frequently. Sanitary conditions improved to a certain degree in 1943, when each part of the camp was outfitted with a bathhouse and equipment for disinfecting clothing and linen.

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The commandant's and administration building, Auschwitz I.



A visit to Auschwitz concentration camp can leave chilling memories. As the quote at the entrance stated, those who don't learn from history are condemned to repeat it.



Walking through Auschwitz many of the buildings remain in their original state, offering a haunting perspective of what life was like there during its time as a concentration camp.



The courtyard between blocks 10 and 11, known as the "death wall" served as an execution area, including for Poles in the General Government area who had been sentenced to death by a criminal court. An estimated 4,500 Polish political prisoners were executed at the death wall, including members of the camp resistance. An additional 10,000 Poles were brought to the camp to be executed without being registered. About 1,000 Soviet prisoners of war died by execution, although this is a rough estimate. A Polish government-in-exile report stated that 11,274 prisoners and 6,314 prisoners of war had been executed.



Certain prisoners, at first non-Jewish Germans but later Jews and non-Jewish Poles, were assigned positions of authority as Funktionshäftlinge (functionaries), which gave them access to better housing and food.

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Nevertheless, the capacity of these facilities in proportion to the number of prisoners limited the possibilities for making use of them. In sector

BI, for instance, there were four barracks with sinks for washing (90 spigots per barracks), four toilet barracks (a sewer with a concrete lid that had 58 toilet openings in it),

and two barracks containing toilets and sinks—for a sector containing 62 barracks housing prisoners. The prisoners also had limited opportunities for bathing. Additionally, they had to undress in their own barracks before doing so and, regardless of the weather, walk naked to the bathhouse. For many prisoners, this led to sickness and death.

The Final Solution

"Jews are a race that must be totally exterminated."

Hans Frank 1944 Governor/General in Nazi occupied Poland.

In January 1942, the Nazi party decided to roll out the "Final Solution". Camps dedicated solely to the extermination of Jews had been created before, but this was formalized by SS Lieutenant General Reinhard Heydrich in a speech at the Wannsee Conference. The extermination camp Auschwitz II (or Auschwitz-Birkenau) was opened in the same year.

With its section separated by barbed-wire fences, Auschwitz II had the largest prisoner population of any of the main three camps. In January 1942, the first chamber using lethal Zyklon B gas was built on the camp. This building was judged inadequate for killing on the scale the Nazis wanted, and four more chambers were built. These were used for systematic genocide right up until November 1944, two months before the camp was liberated.

It was also the site of the disturbing medical experimentation on Jewish and Roma prisoners, including castration, sterilization and testing how they were affected by contagious disease. The infamous "Angel of Death", SS captain Dr. Josef Mengele, was one of the physicians practicing here. His particular interest was experimenting on twins.

According to numbers provided by the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, Auschwitz was the site of the most deaths (1.1 million) of any of the six dedicated extermination camps.



A freight car inside Auschwitz II-Birkenau, near the gatehouse, used to transport deportees.



Block 10 was a barrack at the Auschwitz concentration camp where men and women were used as experimental subjects for Nazi doctors. The experiments in Block 10 ranged from testing bodily reactions to relatively benign substances and sterilization.



The only source of heat in the barracks were small stoves.

Precise numbers are still debated but according to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, the German SS systematically killed at least 960,000 of the 1.1 to 1.3 million Jews deported to the camp. Other victims included approximately 74,000 Poles, 21,000 Roma (Gypsies), 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war, and at least 10,000 from other nationalities. More people died at Auschwitz than at any other Nazi concentration camp and probably than at any death camp in history.

Auschwitz was the site of at least one out of every six deaths during the Holocaust. The only camp with comparable figures was Treblinka in north-east Poland, where about 850,000 are thought to have died.

The third camp, Auschwitz III, was opened in October 1942. It was predominantly used as a base for imprisoned labourers working for

the German chemical company IG Farben. According to the Auschwitz-Birkenau memorial museum, an estimated 10,000 labourers are thought to have died there. Once they were judged incapable of work, most were killed with a phenol injection to the heart.

The SS began to evacuate the camp in mid-January 1945. About 60,000 prisoners were forced to march 30 miles westwards where they could board trains to other concentration camps. It is estimated 15,000 died during the journey, with the Nazis killing anyone who fell behind.

The Soviet troops arriving at the camp on January 27 found grisly evidence of the Holocaust. About 7,000 starving prisoners were found alive in the camp. Millions of items of clothing that once belonged to men, women and children were discovered along with 6,350 kg of human hair.

The Auschwitz museum holds more than 100,000 pairs of shoes, 12,000 kitchen utensils, 3,800 suitcases, and 350 striped garments.

More than 7,000 Nazi personnel are thought to have served at Auschwitz but just a few hundred have been prosecuted for the crimes committed there.

Today, Auschwitz remains standing as a memorial, as a reminder, as a glimpse at the horror of the "Final Solution" and as a haunting slice of history which seems hard to even imagine under clear blue skies in a peaceful countryside on a beautiful June day. Yet the memory of what happened there cannot be forgotten and it serves as a call to humanity to never allow this to occur again.

"Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it." George Santayana



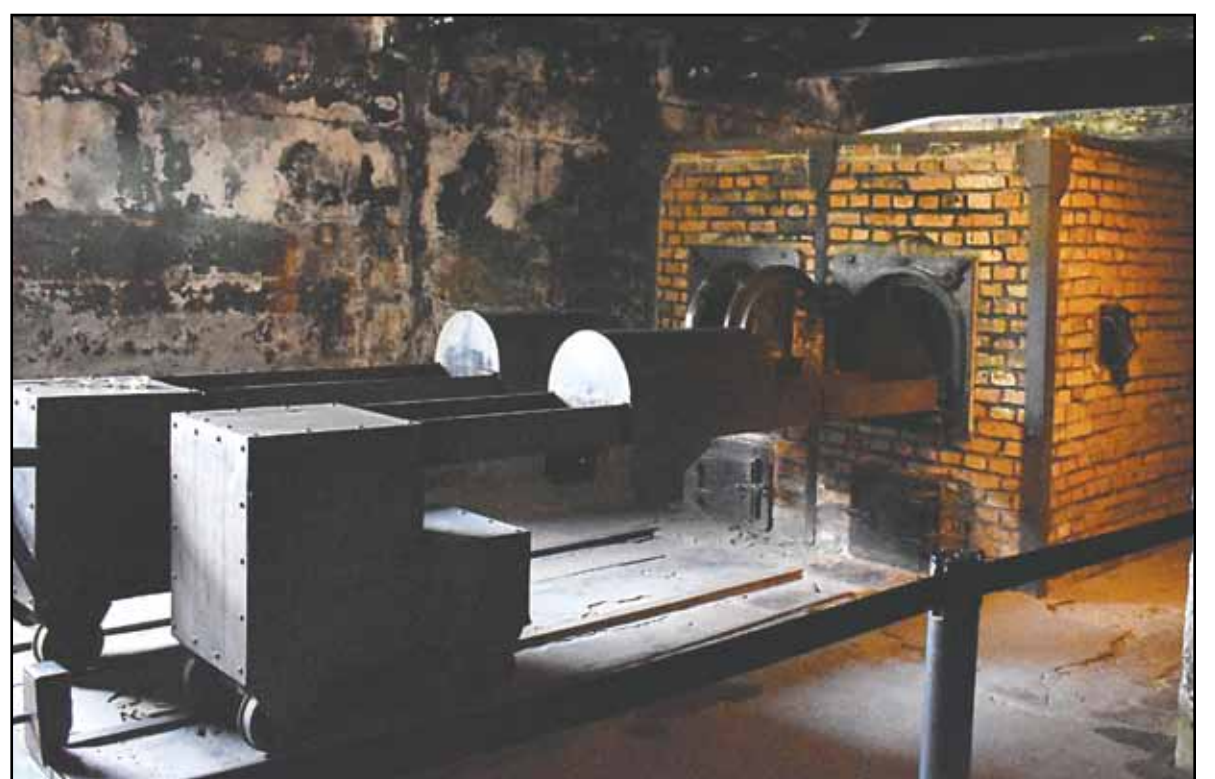
The end of the railway line inside Auschwitz II with a memorial of Israeli flags and flowers.



Jewish women and children from Hungary walking toward the gas chamber, Auschwitz II in June 1944. They had no idea of what was about to happen to them.



Construction of crematorium I began at Auschwitz I at the end of June or beginning of July 1940. Initially intended not for mass murder but for prisoners who had been executed or had otherwise died in the camp, the crematorium was in operation from August 1940 until July 1943, by which time the crematoria at Auschwitz II had taken over. By May 1942 three ovens had been installed in crematorium I, which together could burn 340 bodies in 24 hours.



One of the five crematoria. Bodies were transported here from the gas chambers for cremation.



Barracks at Auschwitz II.



Entrance to Crematorium III at the concentration camp at Auschwitz II (Birkenau).



A tiny sample of the thousands of pairs of shoes taken from victims.

Photos:
Gerald Tracey



BRONISŁAWA ADAMCZYK
34290

Polska/Polish, ur./born 03.03.1891
deportowana/deported 05.02.1943, zginęła/died 13.03.1943



STANISŁAW OSTROWSKI
5940

Polska/Polish, ur./born 09.08.1907
deportowany/deported 08.10.1940, zginęły/died 14.06.1942

Thousands of photos of prisoners at Auschwitz line the walls in several of the buildings open to the public. These are two Polish prisoners.



Prostheses and other items taken from disabled prisoners.



Part of the prison block.

In honour of Remembrance Day
the Combined Choirs of Christ Church Cathedral Ottawa sing

FAURÉ'S REQUIEM

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Holy Trinity Anglican Church
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Thoughts, Gratitude & Respect on Remembrance Day

Today we honour the selfless service and memories of those in uniform who gave their lives for the greater good of our nation. We salute their patriotism, courage, character, hard work, loyalty and dedication, and we will always remember the sacrifice they made to protect the way of life we cherish.

Saluting Our Servicemembers

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