

# Auschwitz - Birkenau concentration camp (20<sup>th</sup> May 1940 - 27<sup>th</sup> January 1945)

Official website <http://auschwitz.org/en/>

Video 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz <http://goo.gl/5S1eyS>

"Auschwitz" documentary prepared for the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation <http://goo.gl/lnAWpt>

Historical Photos and documents on the official website <http://goo.gl/vgxlSo>

## 1. Introduction



*Auschwitz 2 (Birkenau) entrance*

Auschwitz was the largest of its kind built by the Nazi regime both as a concentration camp and death camp. It is located about 60 km (37 miles) west of Krakow, near the prewar German-Polish border in Upper Silesia, an area that Nazi Germany annexed in 1939 after invading and conquering Poland. On January 1940, Heinrich Himmler ordered the construction of a new camp near Oswiecim, and in May the main camp opened (Auschwitz 1). By the time of the liberation, Auschwitz had grown to include three large camps and 45 sub-camps. It was here at Auschwitz that approximately 1.1 million people were murdered (official information by [www.auschwitz.org](http://www.auschwitz.org)), most of whom were Jews. Auschwitz has become a symbol

of The Holocaust.

The camp consisted of Auschwitz I (the original camp), Auschwitz II–Birkenau (a combination of a concentration/extermination camp), Auschwitz III–Monowitz and 45 satellite camps.

The SS authorities established three main camps near the Polish city of Oswiecim: Auschwitz I in May 1940; Auschwitz II (also called Auschwitz-Birkenau) in early 1942; and Auschwitz III (also called Auschwitz-Monowitz) in October 1942.

In the first period, Poles were primarily sent here by the German occupation authorities: the elite of the Polish people, their political, civic, and spiritual leaders, cultural and scientific figures, and also members of the resistance movement, officers, and so on. They were regarded as a dangerous group of people for the Nazi regime. Beginning in 1942 the number of deported Jews from all over the Europe increased after the completion of Auschwitz 2, the 'extermination camp'.

Jews, Gypsies (Roma), homosexuals, criminals, and POW's were gathered, stuffed into cattle cars on trains, and sent to Auschwitz from all over Europe. To read more about the categories of prisoners:

<http://auschwitz.org/en/history/categories-of-prisoners/>

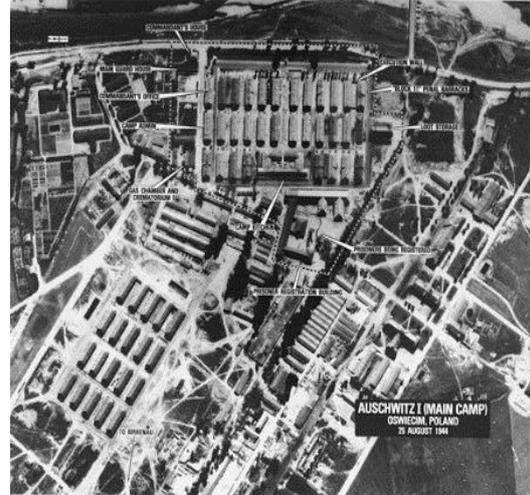
## 2. The camp history

### 2.-1. Auschwitz 1 or the main camp (1940-1945)

Auschwitz I was the original camp consisted of 30 buildings, opened on 20<sup>th</sup> May 1940. This camp housed prisoners (13,000-16,000 on average, 20,000 at peak times), most of them consisting of Polish political prisoners, Soviet POWs, German criminals and homosexuals. The first prisoners were 30 German criminal prisoners, intended to act as functionaries within the prison system. Then followed the first transport of 728 Polish prisoners (including 20 Jews). The inmate population grew quickly as the camp absorbed Poland's intelligentsia and dissidents, including the Polish underground resistance. Here was the location of medical experiments (Block 10), and the place of severe torture (Block 11). Between the crematorium and the medical-experiments barrack stood the "Black Wall." This was the place of execution by SS guards. Auschwitz I housed also the administration center of the whole camp complex. At the entrance of this main camp stood the notorious sign: "**Arbeit Macht Frei**" ("Work makes one free.") See the photo below



Entrance of the main camp



Aerial photo Auschwitz 1

### **2.-2. Auschwitz 2 or Birkenau (1942-1945)**

Auschwitz II was completed in early 1942 in Birkenau, about 3 km (1.9 miles) away from Auschwitz I. The first plan was to house 125 thousand prisoners of war. This changed in 1942 when the Nazi regime decided to annihilate the Jewish people. From then on the purpose of Birkenau as a combination labor camp / extermination camp was set.

It was here where the dreaded selections were carried out on the ramp and where the camouflaged gas chambers lay in waiting. Of the three camps the Auschwitz-Birkenau had the largest total prisoner population. It was divided into more than a dozen sections separated by electrified barbed-wire fences. The sections for women, men, a family camp for Roma (Gypsies) were included at the huge campsite of 1.7ha with more than 300 buildings. <The majority of the victims of Auschwitz Concentration Camp died here in Birkenau. The majority, more than nine out of every ten, were Jews.> (Official website)

### **2.-3. Auschwitz 3 or Monowitz-Buna, Oct 1942-1945**

Auschwitz III (or "Buna-Monowitz"), opened in October 1942, and was built as a "housing camp" for the forced laborers at the Buna synthetic rubber factory in Monowitz, about 7 kilometres (4.3 miles) east of Auschwitz I. The 45 other sub-camps also housed prisoners that were used for forced labor. Initially the laborers had to walk 7 km from Auschwitz 1 to the plant each day, meaning they had to rise at 3:00 am, and many arrived exhausted and unable to work.

This was the first concentration camp to be financed and built by private industry. In total about 35,000 inmates worked at the plant. 25,000 died as a result of malnutrition, disease, and the physically impossible workload. Their life expectancy as labourers was said to be an average of about three months.

#### **Sub-Camps of Auschwitz Concentration Camp**

More than 40 Auschwitz sub-camps, exploiting the prisoners as slave laborers, were founded, mainly at various sorts of German industrial plants and farms, between 1942 and 1944

<http://auschwitz.org/en/history/auschwitz-sub-camps/>

### 3. Deportation, arrival, selection and the 'final solution'

#### 3-1. Deportation

Trains arrived frequently from all over Europe. There is no exact information about the total number of deportees. Many of them went directly to the gas chamber after the infamous selection. At the end of the war many records were destroyed by the SS. That's why there are different historical estimates on this subject. (see also 9. Number of victims)

The most probable estimate is as follows; in total approximately **111 million Jews** were deported from countries including: Hungary (426,000); Poland (300,000); France:(69,000); Netherlands (60,000); Greece: (55,000); Bohemia and Moravia: (46,000); Slovakia: (27,000); Belgium: (25,000); Yugoslavia: (10,000); Italy: (7,500); Norway: (690); other (including concentration camps): 34,000.

(Source: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum <http://goo.gl/u7gbhs>)

There were approximately **200,000 other victims** of deporting to Auschwitz: non Jewish Poles (140,000–150,000), Roma and Sinti (Gypsies) (23,000), Soviet POWs (15,000), and 25,000 others (Soviet civilians, Lithuanians, Czechs, French, Yugoslavs, Germans, Austrians, and Italians).

(Source:auschwitz.org <http://goo.gl/xbu8rB>)

#### 3-2. Arrival and selection:

The trains stopped at Auschwitz II: Birkenau. The newcomers were told to leave all their belongings and were then forced to gather upon the railway platform, known as "the ramp." Families were quickly and brutally split up and each individual underwent the selection into one of two lines. Most women, children (less than 1.2 m high were considered to be children), older men, and those who looked unfit or unhealthy were sent to the left. Most young men and those who looked strong enough to do hard labor were sent to the right.

The left line meant immediate death – even without registering who or how many they were- at the gas chambers. The right meant that they would become a prisoner of the camp. Whole groups of



*Arrival in Auschwitz in May or June 1944*

deportees from kindergarten or school went immediately to gas chamber with their teacher(s). Most of the prisoners would later die from starvation, exposure, forced hard labor, and/or torture.



After the selection, a group of Auschwitz prisoners gathered up all the belongings left in the train cars. They sorted them into huge piles. Enormous amounts of these items including clothing, eye-glasses, medicine, shoes, books, pictures, jewelry, and prayer shawls were stored in the warehouse in the camp and would periodically be bundled and shipped back to Germany.

*Shoes from inmates*

#### 3-3. 'The final solution' - mass murder by Zyklon B

**Construction of gas chamber:** The first gas chamber was constructed in Auschwitz 1, crematorium 1 in 1941, about 800 Soviet POW's and Polish prisoners were 'tested' in September. After that 'success' four gas chambers (crematorium 2-5) followed, from March to June in 1943, and two more ('Red house' and 'White house'), former farmers houses converted into a gassing facility.

In total 7 chambers existed but most of the victims were killed using the gas chambers in Auschwitz 2. Each had three components: a disrobing area, a large gas chamber, and crematorium ovens. The SS continued gassing operations at Auschwitz-Birkenau until November 1944.

**800 died in 32 minutes:** The people selected in the left line, were told they would first have a shower for disinfection and asked to take off their clothes. Completely naked, these men, women, and children were then ushered into a large room that looked like a big shower room. (There were even fake shower-heads on the walls). When the doors shut, Zyklon-B pellets were poured into the large room through an opening in the roof or through a window. The pellets would turn into poison gas once they were exposed to air.

The gas killed quickly, but it was not instantaneous. For example, reports mentioned that 800 people could be killed in 32 minutes. Victims, finally realizing that this was not a shower room, clambered over each other, trying to find a pocket of breathable air. Once everyone was dead, special Jewish prisoners selected for this horrible task (Sonderkommandos) would remove the bodies. The bodies would be searched for gold and then placed into the crematoria. Each of these gas chambers could murder about 6,000 people a day. (Description from:

<http://history1900s.about.com/od/holocaust/a/auschwitz.htm>)

#### 4. Life in the camp: Arbeit Macht Frei (Work sets you free)

**Complete dehumanizing process:** People who had been sent to the right at the selection went through a dehumanizing process. All of their belongings were taken from them and their hair was shorn completely off. They were given striped prison outfits and a pair of shoes. They were then registered, had their arms tattooed with a number, and transferred to one of Auschwitz's camps for forced labor. They were thrown into the cruel, hard, unfair, horrific world of camp life. Within their first week at Auschwitz, most new prisoners had discovered the fate of their loved ones that had been sent to the left.

**Dr. Viktor Frankl**, a Viennese Psychiatrist, deported from Theresian Stadt to Auschwitz in October 1944, depicts this process in his famous book: **Man's Search for Meaning (1959)**.

It's deeply moving to read that despite the situation far beyond the limit of normal human beings, there was still evidence of the human soul and spirit: having a choice on how to react in this situation. And "There were enough, often of a heroic nature." (p65)

How was the life in the camp? Here is a brief summary. (Mostly from Wikipedia)

**The day began** at 4:30 am (an hour later in winter) with morning roll call, which lasted hours. The prisoners were ordered to line up outdoors in rows of five and had to stay there until 7:00 am. The SS officers arrived at 7 o'clock. Meanwhile the guards would force the prisoners to squat for an hour with their hands above their heads or levy punishments such as beatings or detention for infractions such as having a missing button or an improperly cleaned food bowl. At this morning roll call there were people dying. After roll call, the *Kommando*, or work details, walked to their place of work, wearing striped camp fatigues, no underwear and ill-fitting wooden shoes without socks.

**Kapos** were responsible for the prisoners' behavior while they worked. The working day lasted 12 hours during the summer. Most of the work was heavy, physical work; at outdoor construction sites, gravel pits, and lumber yards. There was no rest time allowed. On Sunday they were required to clean the barracks and take their weekly shower.

**Living condition:** The prisoners' room was so overcrowded that they could sleep only on their sides. They lied in long rows of wooden bunks on straw, unable to stretch out completely, lying in and on their clothes and shoes to prevent them from being stolen. There was no heating system, there were icicles hanging from the ceiling inside of the room. In Auschwitz II-Birkenau, Only in 1944 were sinks and toilets installed in a small area inside each block. The barracks were frequently damp, and lice and rats were an enormous problem for the prisoners. It is therefore that 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. But the prisoners also had limited opportunities for bathing. They had to undress in their own barracks and walk naked to the bathhouse. For many prisoners, this led to sickness and death.

**Food:** Prisoners received a hot drink in the morning, with no breakfast, a thin meatless vegetable soup at noon, and in the evening a small ration of moldy bread. Most prisoners saved some of the bread for

the following morning. The daily food would not be above 700kcal, therefore most of the prisoners were constantly on the border of starvation.

**Resistance movement:** despite these terrible living conditions, it's incredible to note that resistance movements were organized. The first began at the second half of 1940. An international organization, Auschwitz Combat Group, was created in 1943. The aim: to help prisoners survive, to organize escapes, and to prepare for an eventual uprising within the camp.

\*Read more <http://goo.gl/oyNLC7>

Witold Pilecki, called "**volunteer for Auschwitz**", was a famous resistance leader, and the founder of the first movement. He let himself be captured in Warsaw in September 1940, in order to reach Auschwitz and founded the clandestine organization.

So was the "*Birkenau revolt*", the uprising of the *Sonderkommando* units (a group of Jewish prisoners who were forced to work burning the corps of gassed people in the crematorium) on October 1944. They killed three SS guards but the rebellion was suppressed by nightfall.

\*Read more <http://goo.gl/sJG72w>

## 5. Punishments and executions

**Block 11** of Auschwitz I was the prison within the prison, where violators of the numerous rules were punished: stealing food, not working correctly or not wearing the regular-clothing, attempting to escape or commit suicide, and so on. People were living under the constant terror of receiving punishments and executions.

The most frequent punishment was *flogging*. Many were executed at the '*Black wall*' by shooting, subjected to hanging (called *the post*) with their hands behind their backs for hours, thus dislocating their shoulder joints. Some prisoners were made to spend the nights in *standing cells* of just about 1.5 m<sup>2</sup> (16 sqft), that held four men. There were also "*dark cells*", which had only a very tiny window and a solid door. Prisoners were placed here till all the oxygen in the cell was used up; sometimes the SS lit a candle in the cell to use up the oxygen more quickly. Prisoners sentenced to death for attempting to escape were confined in this cell and given neither food nor water until they were dead.

\*Read more <http://goo.gl/kdB9ZX>

**St. Kolbe:** a Franciscan brother (who had worked in Nagasaki, Japan from 1930 to 1936), was deported in 1941 to Auschwitz. On July 29, 1941, when ten prisoners were selected – completely arbitrary – to sentence by starvation in reprisal for an escape he voluntarily chose death in place of a stranger, who was the father of a family.

\*Read more <http://goo.gl/0o9UKr>

**Children in Auschwitz:** according to the homepage of the Auschwitz museum "On the basis of the partially preserved camp records and estimates, it has been established that there were approximately 232 thousand children and young people up to the age of 18 among the 1.3 million or more people deported to the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp." Where they came from: <http://goo.gl/oUC16h>

Children who survived the selection had the same fate as adults; working as forced labor under extremely severe conditions, suffering from hunger and cold. (Except those who stayed in the family camp.) They were also victim of the horrible medical experiments.

### A testimony of a survivor

"Countless times, I was dying, freezing with fear, pain, stress of selection, watching the torment and agony of my fellow female prisoners, my neighbors from overcrowded bunks, who shared the same fate in this indescribable, endless horror, where every minute was a century and an imploring question: will there be another one? Once during a long standing roll call, when the sun was shining and they were not beating us, a pathetic thought flashed across my mind, that they will finally burn me in this fire from the crematorium behind the wires and I will never experience the kiss of love like those that I had been reading about in books in the ghetto in Warsaw before the Auschwitz era... At the age of fourteen, one has those important, supposedly deathbed, ideas and worries", said Halina Birenbaum, Israeli poet born in Warsaw, deported to Auschwitz at the age of 14.

(Source: <http://auschwitz.org/en>)

\*Read more testimonials of survivor: <http://goo.gl/Q5XHxi>

## 6. Medical experiments

**Block 10** at Auschwitz I was the place of terrible criminal medical experiments led by several doctors: sterilizations, testing new drugs 'research' on infants, twins, and dwarfs.

**Sterilization experiments:** from about March 1941 to about January 1945, SS doctors carried out this by means of X-rays on thousands of female prisoners. Prof. Dr. Carl Clauberg injected chemicals into women's uteruses in an effort to 'glue them shut'.

**Testing new drugs:** Bayer, then a subsidiary of IG Farben (which had a factory in Auschwitz 3 and sub camps), 'bought' prisoners to use as research subjects for testing new drugs. The prisoners were vaccinated and/or exposed to toxins to study the effects of the drugs.

**Experiments on twins:** Josef Mengele, known as the "Angel of death", was the central figure of these experiments. From 1943 to 1944 he conducted the experiments to show the similarities and differences in the genetics of twins, as well as to see if the human body can be unnaturally manipulated. The victims totaled nearly 1,500 sets of twins and only 200 individuals survived. These crimes were tried after the war known as the "Doctors' Trial," which led to the development of the Nuremberg Code of medical ethics.

\*Read more <http://goo.gl/2RCLgk>

## 7. Death march and liberation

### Evacuation and death marches

In November 1944, the Soviet Red Army was approaching through Poland. Gassing operation was then ceased by the order of Himmler. The crematoria were (partially) dismantled and transformed to hide the evidence of extermination of Jews. The Sonderkommando were ordered to remove other evidence of the killings, including the mass graves. The evidence of the killings were removed, and written records were destroyed by the SS in the final week before the camp's liberation. Many buildings were also burned or demolished.

Thousands had been killed in the camps in the days before these death marches began.

On January 17, 58,000 Auschwitz detainees were evacuated under guard, largely on foot; tens of thousands of them were forced to march west towards Wodzisław Śląski and thousands – at least 3,000 – died. About 20,000 prisoners made it to Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany, where they were liberated by the British in April 1945. At arrival in Gliwice and Wodzislaw, the destinations of the march, the prisoners were transported by unheated trains to other concentration camps in Germany: Flossenbürg, Sachsenhausen, Gross-Rosen, Buchenwald, Dachau, and also to Mauthausen in Austria. The rail journey they endured for days without food, water, blankets was extremely difficult, and many of people did not survive. On January 23, they set fire to "Kanada II," the complex of storage barracks holding property plundered from the victims of extermination.

### Liberation

The Red Army arrived at the camp on January 27, finding around 7,500 prisoners (those left behind because of their weakness or sickness unable to walk) and about 600 corpses. The army found not only human being but also enormous amount of items, all the belongings of deportees : 370,000 men's suits, 837,000 women's garments, and 7.7 tonnes (8.5 short tons) of human hair (source: wikipedia)



*Children on the day of the liberation*

Short video at the moment of liberation in Auschwitz : <http://goo.gl/pshzmzQ>

## 8. After the liberation

In 1948 the Bavarian government established housing for refugees on the site, and this remained for many years. In 1965 the memorial museum with two reconstructed barracks opened the door thanks to the effort by the ex-prisoners to preserve the memories and history of this place. The 30 barracks are indicated with the concrete foundations. There are also four chapels, one for each of the religions ex-prisoners believed. Virtual tour <http://panorama.auschwitz.org/>

## 9. Research on the number of victims



*Hungarian Jewish children and woman on the way to the gas chamber*

The exact number of victims at Auschwitz is difficult to fix with certainty, as it is mentioned.

Early in 1942, after visiting the camp Himmler ordered "all mass graves to be opened and the corpses burned." In addition the ashes were to be disposed of in such a way that it would be impossible at some future time to calculate the number of corpses burned.

The Soviet government stated shortly after the liberation that four million people had been killed at the site, This is now regarded as greatly exaggerated. Lots of research about the number of victims was done and still estimations vary. Today the official figures of 1.3 million deportees of which 1.1 million were killed are adopted by the Auschwitz museum.

### Last words

*"Let us recall what are the results of breaking nations' right to self-determination, inviolability of borders, contempt of human life and passive attitude in face of evil.*

*From this very place we denounce all manifestations of hatred, anti-Semitism and xenophobia. An Auschwitz survivor, Primo Levi, pointed out that "those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it".*

*It is our obligation: of Europe and indeed of the whole world to remember for the sake of the ones who suffered here, for your sake, Ladies and Gentlemen, who have survived a camp gehenna. It is equally our obligation to remember for our own sake and for the sake of our future."*

By Bronislaw Comorowski, a former prisoner, his words at the end of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. Source: <http://goo.gl/kO87yL> (in the file to download at the end of the screen)

## Source and links

Book <Man's Search for Meaning> (1959). by Viktor Frankl

Official website of the camp Auschwitz <http://auschwitz.org/en/>

USHMM - United States Holocaust Memorial Museum <http://www.ushmm.org>

USHMM - on Auschwitz <http://goo.gl/23Euh8> <http://goo.gl/hH7tYm>

Wikipedia- Auschwitz concentration camp <http://goo.gl/wZG3o6>

<http://history1900s.about.com/od/holocaust/a/auschwitz.htm>

<http://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/auschwitz>