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## AUSCHWITZ

**AUSCHWITZ (Oświęcim)**, Nazi Germany's largest concentration and extermination camp. The word "Auschwitz" has become a metaphor for the Holocaust in general, and the phrase "after Auschwitz" has come to signify the great historical rupture wrought by the murder of six million Jews.

These meanings often overshadow the particular and specific history of Auschwitz. Founded by German settlers and known to them as Auschwitz and to the Poles as Oświęcim, the town of Auschwitz/Oświęcim has existed since 1270 (see \*Oswiecim). Since World War II, however, the name Auschwitz refers to the concentration and annihilation camp the Germans established in spring 1940. This camp, which came to encompass a whole complex of sections and sub-camps, remained in operation until January 27, 1945, when the Red Army arrived.

The character and scope of the atrocities that took place in Auschwitz fully justify the identification of the camp as the symbolic center of the Holocaust. It was there that the single largest group of Jews was murdered: over one million men, women, and children; in total more than 90 percent of the 1.1 million Jews deported to the camp. To put this number in perspective: 750,000 Jews were murdered at the death camp of Treblinka; nearly 500,000 at Belzec; 200,000 at Sobibor; and 150,000 at Kulmhof (Chelmno). Jewish citizens from more European countries (at least 12) were deported to Auschwitz than to any other camp. Thus the history of Auschwitz also testifies to the pan-European character of the Holocaust. Then too the Germans killed more than 100,000 non-Jews at Auschwitz: 75,000 Poles (or some 50 percent of the 150,000 Poles deported to the camp), at least 18,000 Sinti and Roma (about 80 percent of the 23,000 imprisoned there), 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war (nearly 100 percent of those in the camp), and some 15,000 others (or 60 percent of that group). Auschwitz therefore testifies as well to the often forgotten Nazi aim to create a "New Order." This German plan called for the total annihilation of the Jews and the genocide of other groups, including selected population strata of the Slavs, undesirable Sinti and Roma, and the mentally ill and physically handicapped.

Finally, Auschwitz holds a key place in history because its technology and organization were so thoroughly "modern." With its central location in the European railway infrastructure, its business relationships with many large and small industries that relied on slave labor, its medical experiments conducted by highly qualified physicians working in collaboration with distinguished research institutions, and its large and efficient crematoria equipped with logically designed killing installations for those deemed "unfit for labor," Auschwitz stands for industrial civilization. In its use of gas chambers, it stands, too, for the deliberate nature of the genocide of which it became a center. People shot with rifles, or even machine guns, are killed with arms designed, manufactured, and purchased for use in combat. The use of these weapons to massacre civilians is an aberration. Like the gallows, the guillotine, and the electric chair, gas chambers are designed and built to kill non-combatants. Unlike these other means of execution, gas chambers permit many people to be executed, anonymously, at the same time. The 52 ovens built in the five crematoria of Auschwitz, with a total incineration capacity of 4,756 corpses per day, testify to the genocidal purpose of the Nazi state.

Located in the historical borderland between Germany and Poland, the town of Auschwitz was

established by Germans in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, became a Polish fief called Oświęcim in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, merged into the Hapsburg patrimony as part of Austrian Galicia in the First Polish Partition (1772), and, with the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1918), become part of the Polish Republic. After their conquest of Poland in 1939, the Germans annexed Oświęcim to the Reich, and called it Auschwitz once again. They designated eastern Upper Silesia, the region in which the town was located, a high-priority area for political, social, and economic development. For the Germans, Auschwitz signified a return to the pristine, lost past of medieval German achievement: it betokened opportunity and promise to new generations.

Reichsführer-SS Heinrich \*Himmler acquired responsibility for the redevelopment of eastern Upper Silesia, as well as of the other annexed territories (Wartheland, Danzig-West Prussia) in his role of Reich Commissioner for the Consolidation of the German Nation. Himmler initiated a policy of ethnic cleansing in the annexed territories, deporting Poles and Jews and bringing in ethnic Germans from the Baltic countries, the part of Poland annexed by the Soviet Union, and Romania. Population transfers proceeded smoothly in the predominantly rural areas of the Wartheland and Danzig-West Prussia, but proved more difficult in eastern Upper Silesia. This area was heavily industrialized, and its mainly Polish workers could not be deported without crippling production in the area. Aiming to intimidate the hostile population, Himmler decided (April 27, 1940) to transform a former Polish military base, located in the Zasole suburb of Auschwitz, into a concentration camp. He appointed SS-Captain Rudolf \*Hoess as its first Kommandant, and sent him off to Auschwitz to build the camp.

Hoess chose five SS men to assist him, obtained 15 SS men stationed in Cracow to serve as guards, and selected 30 German common criminals imprisoned in Sachsenhausen to be transferred to Auschwitz as prisoner functionaries and 40 Polish inmates from Dachau as a construction crew.

Refurbishing the former military base to fulfill its new function as a concentration camp to incarcerate recalcitrant Poles proved laborious. The army barracks were in poor condition, and Hoess had great difficulty obtaining barbed wire for fences and building materials for repairs and construction. Inmates were used as construction laborers, mainly in excavation works, transportation, demolishing nearby houses, leveling the roll-call area, paving roads, and as skilled workers. The first transport of 728 Polish prisoners arrived from Tarnow on June 14, followed by a transport of 313 on June 20. The reasons for their arrest varied: some of them had tried to cross the border, others were resistance organizers, political activists, member of the intelligentsia, and Jews. By July 6, the camp counted 1,282 inmates. Tadeusz Wiejowski escaped that day, and the SS punished all the inmates by forcing them to stand for roll call for 20 hours. One inmate, David Wongczewski, did not survive the ordeal. He was the first Auschwitz inmate to die. Significantly, Wongczewski was a Jew.

The camp grew rapidly throughout the summer; on September 22 prisoner number 5,000 was issued, and by year's end 7,879 inmates had been registered. Many were victims of random street roundups in Warsaw. Witold Pilecki, by contrast, had voluntarily joined a group of men seized during such a *Razzia*. A prominent resistor, Pilecki sought to set up a resistance organization within Auschwitz. One of his goals was to improve living conditions in the camp. This was necessary: within six months, almost 1,900 men had died from exhaustion, deprivation, beatings, and execution.

Populated primarily by Poles, whom the Germans considered disposable, Auschwitz was a particularly violent place even by concentration camp standards. If in the camps in the Reich proper the *Arbeit Macht Frei* ("work will set you free") motto inscribed above the gate of Dachau carried at least an echo of the idea that the camps were meant not only to paralyze opposition to the regime but also to bring the "politically misguided" or "asocials" back to the true German community, in Auschwitz this ideology did not apply – despite the fact that Hoess hoisted the same motto above a camp gate. Poles could never be part of the German community. With no restraint imposed by ideology, the judiciary, or public opinion, Auschwitz quickly became a closed universe in which inmates had no rights at all. Tadeusz Borowski described the total and unremitting domination to which he and his fellow inmates were subjected in intimate detail.

If the barrack walls were suddenly to fall away, many thousands of people, packed together, squeezed tightly in their bunks, would remain suspended in mid-air. Such a sight would be more gruesome than the medieval paintings of the last Judgment. For one of the ugliest sights to a man is that of another man sleeping on his tiny portion of the bunk, of the space which he must occupy, because he has a body – a body that has been exploited to the utmost: with a number tattooed on it to save on dog tags, with just enough sleep at night to work during the day, and just enough time to eat. And just enough food so it will not die wastefully. As for actual living there is only one place for it – a piece of bunk. The rest belongs to the camp, the Fatherland. But not even this small space, not the shirt you wear, nor the space you work with are your own. If you get sick, everything is taken away from you: your clothes, your camp, your "organized" scarf, your handkerchief. If you die – your gold teeth, already recorded in the camp inventory, are extracted. Your body is burned, and your ashes are used to fertilize fields, or fill in the ponds. Although in fact so much fat and bone is wasted in the burning, so much flesh, so much heat.

Living on a starvation diet, without warm clothes or shoes, with little sleep, no privacy, subject to an arbitrary regime imposed by the SS and prisoner functionaries such as the Kapos, and exhausted by 12 hours of hard labor, every inmate struggled to survive each day. Most of the work involved outdoor construction. In the fall and winter, exposure, exhaustion, and malnutrition led to quick physical decline. Inmates called a prisoner who began to slip a *Muselmann* (Muslim). A breathing corpse, unable to keep himself clean, indifferent to his surroundings, and only dreaming about food, a *Muselmann* became a burden on the lives of other inmates. Inhabiting a limbo between life and death, the *Muselmaenner* document the triumph of total power over human beings and the negation of dignity. All prisoners faced the prospect of becoming *Muselmaenner*. But those assigned to the penal company were likely to end that way. Established in August 1940, this especially punitive work detail comprised those who broke camp rules, all Catholic priests, and all Jews.

The high mortality at Auschwitz called for a crematorium to dispose of corpses. The former ammunition depot served. In summer 1940 the SS took delivery of one double-muffle oven manufactured by the Topf company in Erfurt. Its official incineration capacity of over 100 corpses per day proved insufficient, and in fall 1940 the Auschwitz SS ordered a second double-muffle oven. A third (summer 1941) brought the official daily cremation capacity to 340 corpses. Clearly, the SS perceived murder to be a growth industry in Auschwitz. While many of the dead were registered inmates, the camp also functioned (from November 1940) as an execution site of prisoners of the Gestapo office in Kattowitz, the provincial capital of Upper Silesia. These people were transported to Auschwitz for court-martial and summary execution in the courtyard of Block 11, the camp prison. They were not registered into the camp.

While death had become common and killing a daily occurrence, the SS initially remained somewhat squeamish about conducting the mass killings that characterized Auschwitz later that year. When the SS selected 573 invalid and chronically ill inmates for execution in July 1941 as part of the so-called 14f13 program, they did not kill them in Auschwitz but transported them by train to Sonnenstein asylum. There the victims were killed in carbon-monoxide gas chambers constructed in the T4 program initiated two years earlier to "eliminate" the insane, the handicapped, and others deemed "unworthy of life." This inefficient solution of shipping inmates to a mass murder facility prompted SS-Captain Dr. Friedrich Entress to experiment in cheap ways to kill by means of injection. After trying hydrogen and gasoline, Entress settled on phenol. From September 1941 to April 1943 this became the preferred way of killing *Muselmaenner* who refused to die quickly enough, or inmates who were to be liquidated on orders of the so-called Political Department, the camp Gestapo. The task to kill by injection usually fell to SS medics like the notorious SS-Sergeant Josef Klehr. Assuming the crucial role of executioner, Entress set an important precedent in Auschwitz. He and the other SS physicians working in the camp were central to the annihilation system at Auschwitz, selecting inmates for death and selecting new arrivals "unable to work" for immediate dispatch to the gas chambers. Entress and his colleagues, all of whom had sworn the Hippocratic Oath, condemned a million people, mostly Jews, to death.

In the fall of 1940 the camp acquired two economic functions: to provide prisoners to work in adjacent gravel pits owned and exploited by the SS company DEST, and to serve Himmler's policy of ethnic cleansing. Poles living in the rural areas immediately south of Auschwitz were targeted for deportation, and ethnic Germans from Romania were to move into the area. In order to provide practical support to help the new arrivals establish economically viable farms, Himmler made the concentration camp the center of a huge agricultural experiment estate. The camp claimed ever larger territories for its new role as a scientific farm. Himmler began to envision a different future for Auschwitz than he had originally intended. As a concentration camp, Auschwitz would be a temporary facility; as an agricultural estate it claimed permanence. Much labor was needed to create drainage canals to improve the land, build dikes along the Vistula, and clean the large fishponds. By August 1941, some 20,000 inmates had been admitted into the camp. Of these, 12,000 were still alive. Yet Himmler was pleased with Hoess' performance as Kommandant. In recognition of his achievements, the latter was promoted to SS-Major.

Originally a small compound surrounded by a double barbed wire fence, the camp had grown by the beginning of 1941 to include a 15-square-mile SS "Zone of Interests." Himmler needed an enormous influx of money and building materials to develop this zone and he therefore sought to generate income by attracting the huge chemical conglomerate, IG Farben, to Auschwitz. The terms of the bargain were that the camp would grow to 30,000 inmates to supply labor to construct Farben's synthetic rubber ("Buna") plant. A new satellite to the concentration camp, Birkenau, to be populated initially by 100,000 Soviet prisoners of war (a number increased to 125,000 in the fall of 1941), was to provide labor to transform the town of Auschwitz into a handsome, 60,000-German-strong city worthy of an IG Farben enterprise and exemplary of Himmler's ambitions in the East. In return, IG Farben was to finance and supply building materials for Himmler's Germanization project in the area. This included the expansion of the concentration camp and the construction of an idyllic village for the SS guards.

The designs for the new town showed that the German inhabitants of Auschwitz were to get the very best: beautiful houses, elegant shops, restaurants, cinemas, and hotels to house tourists. The slave workers to actualize these dreams received the worst. The German government did not feel obliged to treat the Soviet prisoners of war according to the Geneva Convention. Under direction of SS-Captain Karl Bischoff, the chief architect of the Auschwitz *Zentralbauleitung* (Central Construction Agency), the young Bauhaus-trained architect SS-Second Lieutenant Fritz Ertl designed an enormous compound subdivided into three large sections by barbed wire (named *Bauabschnitt* (Building Sector) I, II, and III, or BA I, BA II, and BA III), which were in turn divided up into smaller compounds (BA Ia–b, BA IIa–f, etc). Ertl's housing plan consisted of rows upon rows of the most primitive brick barracks. Heated by two tiny stoves and with no washing or toilet facilities of any kind, each barrack was designed to house 748 men on three tiers of shelves, four to each shelf of 2 × 2 meters. The living conditions of these barracks were infinitely worse than those of the barracks of concentration camps such as Dachau, Buchenwald, and Sachsenhausen, and considerably worse than the overcrowded barracks in the Auschwitz main camp. In the end, only 30 of these barracks were built in BA Ia and BA Ib, but the alternative, wooden horse stables designed and manufactured for the army which filled the compounds of BA II, was not much better. While these horse stables could be built quickly, they proved stiflingly hot in the summer and bitterly cold in the winter.

The SS expected many deaths from endemic and epidemic disease in Birkenau, with its targeted population of 125,000 Soviet POWs, and in the main camp located in a suburb of Auschwitz called Zasole, where 30,000 Polish prisoners were to be interned. The existing crematorium capacity of 340 corpses per day was deemed insufficient. The SS commissioned (fall 1941) a very large, state-of-the-art crematorium that could manage 1,440 corpses per day. The initial design was worked out between Bischoff, Topf engineer Kurt Pruefer, and the architect Georg Werkmann, who was employed in SS headquarters in Berlin. The main features of their plan were a large incineration hall with five triple-muffle ovens above ground, and two large morgues below ground. The main access to the morgues was by means of a corpse-slide – a feature that had become standard in concentration camp underground morgues. It was to be built in the main camp, right

next to the existing crematorium, but to service Birkenau. This staggering cremation capacity was considered appropriate to cope with the anticipated "normal" mortality of the 155,000 slave laborers to be worked to death. Given the rapidity with which the 9,890 Soviet prisoners of war who had been brought to Auschwitz since October had died, the dimensions of the crematorium did not seem out of place: 1,255 Soviet prisoners of war died as the result of deprivation or killings by phenol injections or beatings in October; 3,726 in November; and 1,912 in December. The crematorium did not provide execution facilities. Nothing in the original conceptual sketches of the crematorium, nor in the worked-out blueprints which date from January 1942, suggests homicidal gas chambers, or their use in what the Nazis called the "Final Solution to the Jewish Problem." When large-scale mass murder of Jews began in the summer and fall of 1941 in the wake of Operation Barbarossa, the *Kommandantur* in Auschwitz was still fully focused on Himmler's project to develop the town and the region.

Step by step, however, the camp at Auschwitz became part of the Nazis' genocidal apparatus. The SS began to send Soviet POWs they considered "commissars" to be executed in Auschwitz in addition to POWs for forced labor. Initially these men were executed by rifle and machine gun in the DEST gravel pits. In August 1941, camp officials considered whether a more efficient and – for the SS – less disturbing manner of execution could be found. They settled on the use of a gas chamber.

Gas chambers had been used in animal pounds to kill stray dogs and cats since the 1880s. Persuaded that gassing would cause a quick and merciful death, the state of Nevada installed a gas chamber in 1924 to execute convicted criminals. By the end of the 1930s, eight American states had followed Nevada's example. Besides its allegedly humane procedure, gas chamber executions were popular with the prison authorities because they were effective (unlike failed hangings or failed electrocutions, there is no record of a failed gassing) and clean: no blood, and no sudden evacuations of the bowels or bladder.

Unlike in the United States, gas chambers did not gain a foothold in the Third Reich as a means to execute those convicted to death by regular courts. In prisons, guillotines chopped off the heads of the "legally" condemned and, from 1943 onwards, gallows were used for multiple executions. In the fall of 1939 German officials began to construct gas chambers in selected asylums to kill groups of mentally ill and handicapped patients (T4 program) and, from 1941 on, groups of selected concentration camp inmates (14f13 program) by bottled carbon monoxide. When the Auschwitz SS considered gas chambers as a tool of mass execution, they followed the precedent of the T4 chambers, but decided to use Zyklon B instead of carbon monoxide.

Zyklon B was the commercial name of a fumigation agent that had been developed by Drs. Bruno Tesch and Gerhard Peters at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute in Berlin with the support of IG Farben. The active ingredient of Zyklon B was hydrogen cyanide, which was mixed with an irritant tear gas to serve as a "warning," and which was soaked at a ratio of 1:2 in diatomaceous earth, a porous, highly absorbent material. The resulting mixture consisted of solid granules that could be packed in tins of 200, 500, 1,000, and 1,500 grams. When the tins were opened and the granules exposed to air, the hydrogen cyanide evaporated from the diatomaceous earth. Safe to transport, Zyklon B proved a very efficient agent for the fumigation of whole buildings, ships, and railroad cars without damaging the contents. An important characteristic of Zyklon B was that, upon opening the tin, the granules "degassed" for a 24-hour period – important when seeking to kill lice and other vermin, which can survive up to 14 hours in a highly toxic environment.

Zyklon B was patented by IG Farben, which assigned the patent and the production license to its (partial) subsidiary Degesch, the Deutsche Gesellschaft fuer Schaedlingsbekaempfung (German Society for the Destruction of Vermin). In turn, Degesch used two companies, the Dessauer Werke and the Kalin Werke at Kolin, for the production of the solution. The sale of Zyklon B was highly regulated both because of the nature of the product and the various special permissions needed to obtain the product in a time of rationing. To take the administrative pressure off Degesch, a pest control company created in 1923 by Dr. Tesch and a certain Paul Stabenow, known as Tesch and Stabenow (TeSta), was appointed to act as a general clearing-house for all Zyklon B orders east of the Elbe River. TeSta thus oversaw the purchase of Zyklon B for

Auschwitz.

Developed to kill lice and other insects, Zyklon B proved its versatility when the city of Vienna adopted it (1938) as the preferred means to kill pigeons, praising its "easy and inconspicuous practicality offering the possibility to conduct mass exterminations in the shortest possible time." In early September 1941, the Auschwitz SS expanded on the Vienna example and used Zyklon B on people. They packed 600 Soviet prisoners of war and 250 Polish inmates behind barred gates in the basement of Block 11 and, protected by gas masks, opened tins with Zyklon B in full view of the inmates and emptied a tin with pellets on the floor. Hoess claimed after the war that he had adopted Zyklon B because it ensured a quick and easy death for the victims. He lied. It took some of the Soviet prisoners more than a day of terrible agony to die.

The poison had been effective, but the SS had difficulty ventilating the basement of Block 11 after the killing, and this impeded the clean-up procedure. The SS therefore decided to move the killing operation to the crematorium, and they transformed the morgue adjacent to the room with the ovens into a Zyklon gas chamber. This morgue had already been used for some time for the execution of people convicted by the Gestapo summary court from Kattowitz, and so the precedent for killing people in the morgue had been established. As the morgue had a flat roof, it was easy to create holes in the roof that allowed camp personnel to drop Zyklon pellets into the gas chamber below. An existing ventilation system, created at the request of Gestapo executioners nauseated when shooting their prisoners in the foul-smelling morgue, ensured that the hydrogen cyanide could be removed easily after everyone had died. A gas chamber thus in place, the Auschwitz crematorium became a small but efficient "factory of death," with killing and incineration facilities under one roof. This killing installation, later called crematorium 1, was not meant to operate on a continuous basis, however. It was too visible. Located right next to the main camp, neither the building nor the arrival of victims to be killed inside its gas chambers were screened or hidden.

The creation of the new killing installation proves that murder had become important business in Auschwitz. But it does not establish whether, in the late summer of 1941, Himmler intended Auschwitz to have a central role in the murder of Jews. Two statements made by Hoess after the war suggest that Himmler had already designated Auschwitz as a death camp for Jews as early as June 1941 and that the killing experiments with Zyklon B were preparatory to their anticipated arrival. Hoess' statements are not supported by other evidence, however. Given what we know about the origins of the "Final Solution," it is clear that in the early summer of 1941 the Germans had not yet envisioned the total annihilation of the Jewish people. To be sure, wide-scale murder of Jews by *Einsatzgruppen* in the East had begun in July and become policy in August, but the Nazi leadership had not adopted those actions as a model for the fate of all of Europe's Jews. While Germans experimented in the late summer with gas vans to lighten the burden on killing squads, the concept of mass killing installations with stationary gas chambers evolved only in the late fall of 1941, after they had embraced the policy to kill all Jews. Thus, Hoess' postwar statements conflict with the history of the Final Solution.

They conflict, too, with the history of the Germans' designs for Auschwitz. Though planning for the large new crematorium with a daily incineration capacity of 1,440 corpses began in fall 1941, the drawings for this building do not show any accommodation for gas chambers, and the anticipated location of the new crematorium in a tight but very public place right next to the main camp is such that it would not physically accommodate the smooth arrival, selection, and killing of great numbers of Jews, nor provide camouflage. There is evidence, however, that crematorium 1 was used in early 1942 to kill small groups of Jews from Upper Silesia who had been sent to forced-labor camps run by the so-called Organization Schmelt.

Established by SS-Major-General Albrecht Schmelt, this organization oversaw the forced labor of 50,000 Jews in Upper Silesia. In early 1942, Schmelt decided that Jews "unfit for work" should be killed, and he got Hoess to agree to do the dirty work for him. These murders were not part of the Europe-wide policy of concentration, deportation, and killing overseen by the Reich Security Main Office which brought more than 1.1 million Jews to Auschwitz between March 1942 and November 1944. It appears likely that when Hoess made his statement after the war, he conflated three

separate events: the development of the Zyklon gas chamber in the summer of 1941, the killing of the Schmelts Jews in early 1942, and the arrival and killing of Jews pursuant to the Nazis' policy of genocide in the summer of 1942.

Himmler, in short, did not designate Auschwitz as an annihilation camp for Jews in June 1941. It was only when Reichsmarschall Hermann Goering, who was in charge of the war economy, directed Soviet POWs from Auschwitz to German armament factories in January 1942 that Himmler began to consider how he could use the emerging "Final Solution" policy to promote his "Auschwitz Project." Committed to Auschwitz as the centerpiece of his racial utopia, he now turned to the use of Jewish slave laborers instead of Soviet POWs. At the Wannsee Conference in January 1942, Heydrich secured for Himmler the power he needed to negotiate with German and foreign civilian authorities for the transfer of Jews to his SS empire. SS headquarters informed Hoess immediately after the conference that transports of Jews would be sent to Auschwitz. The Soviet prisoner-of-war camp was officially dissolved on March 1. Of the 10,000 Soviet prisoners sent to Auschwitz, 945 survived and they merged into the general camp population that then counted 11,500 inmates.

The SS did not lack for trapped Jews to send. The Germans had incarcerated almost 9,000 Jews in occupied France since May 1941, most of them refugees. Section IV-B4 of the Reich Security Main Office, the Gestapo Bureau for Jewish Affairs headed by SS-Major Adolf Eichmann, saw these Jews as a source of slave labor for Auschwitz, and dispatched 1,112 in March. But France was far from Auschwitz; Slovakia was much nearer.

Established in the wake of the German occupation of the Czech lands in 1939, Slovakia was a German satellite state. The Slovak government had agreed to send 120,000 workers to the labor-strapped Reich, but they soon regretted their decision. When the Germans insisted in summer 1941, the Slovaks offered to send 20,000 young Jews. The Germans declined: they were not interested in bringing Jewish forced laborers into the Reich. But when the SS looked for a new supply of labor for Auschwitz in January 1942, they remembered the Slovak offer and negotiations began that ended in an agreement to ship 10,000 Jews to Auschwitz and 10,000 to Majdanek, another camp that was to have had Soviet POWs. Once again, the Slovak government had second thoughts: sending those who were young and fit to the camps would leave children and old people as a burden on the state. When the Slovak government then suggested that Himmler also take Jews unfit for labor, he dispatched SS Construction Chief SS-Brigadier General Hans Kammler to Auschwitz. Kammler toured Birkenau, identified a peasant cottage close to the northern boundary of the prisoner compound, and ordered the building department to transform it into a gas chamber. It was to be known as "The Little Red House," or "The Bunker." During that same visit, he also ordered that the large crematorium then in design for the main camp was to be erected in Birkenau close to the bunker. Kammler's command reflects the leadership's intent to hide the annihilation program. Upon his return to SS headquarters in Berlin, Kammler reported that Auschwitz would be prepared to receive Jews both fit and unfit for work. Berlin then concluded a deal with Bratislava to take all its Jews. The Slovak government paid 500 marks in cash for every Jew deported. They raised the funds by seizing Jewish property. Section IV-B4 of the Reich Security Main Office organized the transports.

The bunker was brought into operation on March 20. No Slovak transports had arrived yet. A small group of Schmelts Jews was brought to the bunker and killed. Prisoners buried the bodies nearby and were brought in turn to the infirmary, where they were killed by phenol injection.

The first transport with 999 female Slovak Jews arrived in Auschwitz on March 26. As all of these women were considered fit for labor, they were not subjected to a selection. Sent to a section of the main camp in Zasole separated from the rest by a barbed-wire fence, they were the first inmates of the women's camp. In the next five months, 17,000 women were imprisoned in that sub-camp, 5,000 of whom died. The surviving 12,000 women were brought to Birkenau in August and imprisoned in compound BA 1a. As the women's camp expanded, it needed more space, and in July 1943 a new sector, BA 1b, was added. The women's camp was run by Johanna Lagerfeld (until October 1942), Maria Mandel (October 1942–November 1944), and Elisabeth Volkerrath (November 1944–January 1945). In 1942, 28,000 women were admitted, of whom 5,000 were

alive at the end of the year; in 1943, 56,000, of whom 28,000 died; and in 1944 some 47,000 were admitted. Of the 131,000 women prisoners, 82,000 were Jews and 31,000 Poles.

All 9,000 Slovak Jews who arrived in March, April, and June 1942 were considered fit for labor and were admitted into the camp. But the SS put the bunker to use. Impatient with the slow death of some 1,200 ill inmates in the medical isolation ward in Birkenau, the SS transported some 1,000 selected by a medical officer and brought them to the bunker. From then (May 4) on, inmates selected for death were killed by phenol injection and, if a gas chamber was available, by gas. More transports of Jews from the local area were brought to Auschwitz that May and, without selection, some 5,200 people were killed in the bunker. While the murder of Jews was still secret, information about Auschwitz leaked out on July 1 when an article in the *Polish Fortnightly Review*, an English-language newspaper published by the Polish government-in-exile, mentioned it as a particularly violent concentration camp where inmates were gassed. Events had gone far beyond the scope of this news: the article referred to the experiments of fall 1941.

As the bunker created to cope with the deportation of the Slovakian Jews was already in full use before any Slovakian transport with "unfit" Jews had arrived, the SS converted a second peasant house into a killing installation. It was known as the "Little White House," or bunker 2. The "Little Red House" was now renamed bunker 1.

The first transport of Jews from Slovakia that included children and the elderly arrived on July 4, 1942. Unloading the train on a makeshift platform between Auschwitz and Birkenau, SS men separated the men from the women and children and an SS doctor selected 264 able-bodied men and 108 women for work. The elderly, children, mothers with children, and pregnant women were loaded onto trucks and brought to bunker 1, where they were killed. As before, prisoners were forced to empty the bunker and bury the bodies. Unlike their predecessors, who had been killed after each "action," the prisoners who did the work on July 4 were not murdered. Imprisoned in a special barrack in Birkenau, they lived totally isolated from the rest of the inmates. Assigned the designation *Sonderkommando* (Special Squad), they became the specialists assigned to operate the killing machine. And as the killing machine became more sophisticated, their tasks increased. By the time the crematoria came into operation, it was they who gave instructions to the victims in the undressing room, maintained order and led them to the gas chamber, dragged out the corpses, checked body orifices for valuable objects, extracted gold teeth and cut women's hair, brought the corpses to the incineration rooms, and cremated the bodies – day in, day out. After three months of work, the *Sonderkommandos* were murdered and a new special squad was assigned. Their first task was to cremate the remains of their predecessors. In Auschwitz, in survivor (and chemist and author) Primo Levi's view, the National Socialists' most demonic crime was the conception and organization of the *Sonderkommando*.

These procedural steps – selection on arrival and the establishment of the *Sonderkommando* – moved the annihilation of Jews at Auschwitz from "incidental" practice (the murder of the Schmelz Jews from Upper Silesia) into what one could call "continuing" practice. But it had not yet become policy. The bunkers were still a particular solution to a situation created by the collision of Slovak unwillingness to provide for old and very young Jews and German greed for labor and money.

The turning point in the history of Auschwitz as an annihilation camp came when Himmler acquired responsibility (around mid-July 1942) for German settlement in Russia. He had coveted that authority for more than a year, and he turned his attention to the vast possibilities this promised. His Auschwitz Project was no longer of interest to him. The camp could be used for the systematic killing of Jews. Practice became policy. Transports from ever-farther destinations arrived in Auschwitz on a daily basis. Regular trains began to arrive from France in June, from Holland in July, and from Belgium and Yugoslavia in August. Throughout the summer an average of 1,000 deportees arrived every day at the so-called *Judenrampe* located between the main camp and Birkenau. A quick selection by a cadre of SS physicians found most of them "unfit for work." Loaded on trucks and brought to bunkers 1 and 2, they were forced to undress and were killed.

Himmler visited the camp on July 17 and 18. There were various items on his agenda. Discussions with Albert Speer, the newly appointed minister for armaments and war production,

had led to an agreement to employ 25,000 inmates at Auschwitz and four other camps to produce carbines. Himmler ordered the expansion of Birkenau to accommodate 200,000 inmates and instructed Eichmann to fill the camp with Jews able to work. He then checked on the construction progress and toured the grounds. At Birkenau, he watched the selection of a transport of 2,000 Dutch Jews at the *Judenrampe*, the killing in Bunker 2 of 449 of them considered unfit for work, and the burial of the corpses. According to Hoess, "Himmler very carefully observed the whole process of annihilation.... He did not complain about anything." Himmler also visited IG Farben. The next day he returned to the camp, and told Hoess that Auschwitz would become a major destination for Europe's Jews. "Eichmann's program will continue," he announced, "and will be accelerated every month from now on. See to it that you move ahead with the completion of Birkenau. The gypsies are to be exterminated. With the same relentlessness you will exterminate those Jews who are unable to work." To bolster Hoess' motivation, Himmler promoted him to SS-Lieutenant-Colonel.

The architects at Auschwitz got to work. So did Kurt Pruefer at Topf and Sons. In addition to building the large crematorium, commissioned in late 1941 for the main camp, they were to add its mirror image in Birkenau. These were to be known as crematoria 2 and 3, while the crematorium in the main camp was now called crematorium 1. The original design, sketched in October 1941 and drafted in great detail in early 1942, did not show gas chambers. Now the design team moved to include homicidal gas chambers. Walther Dejaco transformed the basement plan, adding new stairs that allowed for easy access below and removing the corpse-slide. He changed the larger of the two underground morgues into an undressing room and the smaller, which already was planned to have a powerful ventilation system in its wall and ceiling, into a gas chamber which could hold up to 2,000 victims at one time. He reversed the swing of the chamber door to open outwards, not inwards, to allow access to the room after a gassing. He also equipped each gas chamber with four so-called gas columns – hollowed-out, wire mesh columns with a kind of basket in the center that could be lowered down into the gas chamber or hoisted up through an opening in the ceiling. This simple mechanism not only allowed for the easy introduction of Zyklon pellets into the crowded room but also for the quick removal of the still degassing pellets when all the victims had died 20 minutes later. Once the pellets were removed and the ventilators turned on, the gas was cleared from the room in half an hour, allowing for corpse cremation in the 15 large ovens to begin without delay. In this manner, one "load" of victims could be killed and cremated in a 24-hour period. This streamlined murder system facilitated a regular daily schedule of arrivals, selections, and killings.

Efficient as crematoria 2 and 3 were, they were also large, expensive, and unwieldy. Underground gas chambers created many problems that required complex solutions: the mechanical ventilation system, the gas columns, and an elevator to move the corpses to the incineration ovens on the main floor. The camp administration's experience with the bunkers had shown that primitive gas chambers could work very efficiently and that combining simple above-ground gas chambers without mechanical ventilation and with an adjacent undressing room and an incineration facility provided a simple, functional killing installation. Following these principles, the camp architects and Pruefer developed a design for a crematorium with an incineration capacity of 768 corpses per day, an undressing room that also could function as a morgue, and three homicidal gas chambers in a lower annex. This design, euphemistically referred to in the architects' meeting minutes as "Bath Installations for Special Actions," became crematoria 4 and 5, built near the bunkers.

Killing hundreds of thousands of people created problems the Auschwitz administrators did not anticipate. Decomposing corpses in mass graves near the bunkers began to pollute the ground water. Kommandant Hoess and architect Dejaco traveled (September 16) to the annihilation camp at Chelmo to examine open-air incinerators constructed by SS-Colonel Paul Blobel. Back in Auschwitz, Dejaco built copies near the bunkers. Beginning September 21, 1,400 inmates began to exhume the bodies from the mass graves and burn the corpses. It was a wretched and dangerous job. With bare hands, standing knee-deep in decomposing flesh, the prisoners emptied the pits. The bodies of those killed thereafter were burned on these pyres immediately after gassing. By November a total of 107,000 corpses had been incinerated in this manner, including all 1,400 inmates who had done the work, killed on the job or upon completion of the work. Primitive as this method of corpse disposal may have been, it did not limit the rate of murder: in

1942, some 200,000 Jews were killed in Auschwitz.

The Germans sent most Jews to their death upon arrival. But not all. They continued to admit worker Jews into the camp. By December 1942, the inmate population had grown to 30,000 and, four months later, to 50,000, the majority of whom were Jews. Auschwitz had become the largest camp in the SS concentration camp system, and the only one that had a large Jewish inmate population. According to an order of Himmler, the other camps in the Reich had been made "Jew-free."

If Jews comprised the great majority of the inmates, they also sat at the bottom of the camp pyramid of privilege. Auschwitz had been an extraordinarily violent camp from the outset, and that violence intensified over time. What Polish inmates had suffered in the first two years was a pale foreshadowing of the fate of Jewish inmates. Most Polish prisoners could be reasonably sure that their families were alive. Most Jews arrived with their families, were torn from them during selection, and knew that their loved ones had been killed in the gas chambers. They also knew, for certain, that they had been given only a reprieve from death, and that every day could be their last. In addition to this crushing emotional burden, the living and working conditions of Jewish inmates were even harsher than those of Polish inmates. If a significant proportion of Polish inmates had been fated to become the nameless and emaciated *Muselmaenner*, amongst the Jews they were the majority. According to Primo Levi, they were "an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labor in silence, the divine spark dead in them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living: one hesitates to call their death death."

The SS did not expect any of the Jews to survive. On September 26, 1942, the chief of the SS Economic Administrative Office, SS-Lieutenant General Oswald Pohl, instructed Hoess that the belongings of the deportees were not to be stored in view of a possible release, as was the practice in "normal" concentration camps. Hoess was to ship currency, valuables, and precious metals to SS headquarters in Berlin; rags and unusable clothes to the Reich Ministry of Economy for use as raw materials in industrial production; and all usable garments, shoes, blankets, bed linens, quilts, and household utensils to the Ethnic German Liaison Office (VOMI) for distribution among ethnic German settlers. The yield was enormous. In an interim report Pohl submitted to Himmler on February 6, 1943, he noted that 824 boxcars of goods had left Auschwitz: 569 to the Reich Ministry of Economy, 211 to VOMI, and 44 to other concentration camps, various other Nazi organizations, and the IG Farben works at the other end of town.

These mass murders and massive distribution of goods could not be kept secret. The Polish resistance well knew that Auschwitz had become a central site for the annihilation of Jews. In March 1943, a secret radio station operated by the Polish resistance broadcast that 65,000 Poles, 26,000 Soviet prisoners of war, and more than 520,000 Jews had been killed in the camp. The figures were inflated, but the basic message was correct: Jews had become the main victim group in the camp.

The broadcast did not mention the Roma and Sinti, perhaps because they were recent arrivals. Just a month earlier, the SS had established the so-called gypsy camp in section BA IIe of Birkenau in response to a Reich Security Main Office decree (January 1943) that all German Roma and Sinti were to be deported to Auschwitz. In total, 32 transports arrived from Germany, four from Bohemia and Moravia, three from Poland, one from Yugoslavia, and four mixed transports, bringing 23,000 Roma and Sinti to the camp. No selections took place upon arrival. The Roma and Sinti families remained intact, housed together in the so-called gypsy camp. Some 10,000 died from illness, deprivation, and individual murders. Another 2,700 sick with typhoid were gassed in two actions in 1943. At least 3,000 Roma and Sinti were gassed when the Germans liquidated the gypsy camp in 1944. More than 4,000 of the remaining 7,000 Roma and Sinti merged with the general camp population and at least 2,500 were transferred to Buchenwald and Ravensbrueck. Few survived.

In the late winter and early spring of 1943, when the killing reached 800 people per day, the first of the new crematoria in Birkenau came into operation. In their final form, all the crematoria

provided for murder and corpse disposal. People walked in, and exited the building as smoke through the chimneys and ashes that were dumped in the nearby Vistula River. Between entrance and exit the Germans built a logical sequence that included undressing rooms, gas chambers of different sizes, places to cut women victims' hair for industrial use and to extract gold tooth crowns from men and women, and fuel-efficient ovens that allowed for high-rate multiple corpse incinerations. The official total incineration capacity of the four large crematoria in Birkenau was 4,416 corpses per day. In 30 adjacent storehouses, nicknamed "Canada" for the wealth they contained, inmates sorted and packaged arrivals' belongings. All usable items were shipped back to the Reich for the use of less fortunate Germans. Most importantly, the new crematoria offered the SS the opportunity to kill anonymously. The SS doctors who undertook the selection of the victims could tell themselves that, as all Jews who arrived at Auschwitz were a priori condemned, they actually saved the lives of those whom they chose as slave laborers. The SS medics who introduced the Zyklon B into the gas chambers never saw their victims. In the case of crematoria 2 and 3, they just opened some vents that emerged from the grass, emptied a can of Zyklon into the hole, and closed the top. The dying below was invisible to them and everyone else. Jewish *Sonderkommandos* cleaned the gas chambers after the killing and incinerated the corpses: Germans were not involved.

Oddly enough, upon their completion, the crematoria appeared superfluous. The Holocaust itself had peaked when all four crematoria were ready for use in the summer of 1943. The genocide had begun in 1941, and the Germans had killed some 1.1 million Jews that year. In 1942 they murdered another 2.7 million Jews, of whom less than 10 percent died in Auschwitz. The year the crematoria of Auschwitz came into operation the number of victims dropped to 500,000, half of whom were killed in Auschwitz. All the Jews whom the Germans had been able to catch easily had been trapped. In June and July 1943 average daily transports brought 275 Jews into the camp. The crematoria could easily keep up, despite the fact that crematoria 2 and 4 were out of commission because of technical difficulties. This lull gave the Germans the opportunity to liquidate the nearby Sosnowiec Ghetto in August. It was in Sosnowiec that, two years earlier, the Oświęcim Jewish community had been imprisoned to make space for German settlers and IG Farben personnel. The camp numbered 74,000 inmates that month, or one-third of the total prisoner population of the entire German concentration camp system. In the fall and winter the number of arrivals dropped again to some 250 people per day.

Almost all transports were still subjected to selection. A train of 5,006 Jews of all ages from Theresienstadt on September 9 was a notable exception. The Theresienstadt Jews were allowed to keep their clothes and hair, and they were quartered in section B IIb of Birkenau, the so-called Czech family camp. This unusual event occurred again on December 16, when 2,491 Jews arrived from Terezin, and on December 20 with another transport of 2,471 Jews. Everyone was registered into the camp. In the context of Auschwitz, this seemed to be a stable situation, so stable that the well-known educator Freddy Hirsch established a children's program in Block 31. But nothing in Auschwitz was secure. On March 7, all those who had come on the first transport were forced to write postcards to their family and friends in Theresienstadt. Then they were killed. The Germans had waited six months to murder them because the Red Cross had visited Theresienstadt and the SS wanted to be able to prove to that charitable organization that inmates shipped from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz were alive and well. They could have saved themselves the trouble: the Red Cross never asked what happened to deported Jews.

As killing abated in the fall of 1943, the regime in the camp became less violent. An SS judge, Konrad Morgen, initiated an investigation into corruption and theft of valuables in the camp, and he focused on the head of the camp Gestapo, SS-Second Lieutenant Maximilian Grabner. Morgen ordered Grabner's arrest in October for corruption and for having exceeded the boundaries of his authority in killing at least 2,000 prisoners "beyond the general guidelines." Morgen did not bring a case against Hoess, but he was sufficiently implicated to be relieved of his duties as Kommandant in November 1943 and transferred to Berlin. His successor was SS-Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Liebehenschel, a manager in SS headquarters who had never worked in a concentration camp. In an attempt to improve the situation for the inmates, Liebehenschel abolished the selection of the *Muselmaenner* and somewhat lightened the regime in the main camp. He also reorganized the

camps administratively. Auschwitz, Birkenau, and Monowitz became separate camps, known as Auschwitz I, II, and III. Liebehenschel took control of Auschwitz I and appointed SS-Major Friedrich Hartjenstein as Kommandant of Auschwitz II. SS-Captain Heinrich Schwartz took charge of Auschwitz III.

The major project of the Auschwitz SS at this time was to foster an increasingly lucrative collaboration between German industry in Upper Silesia and the camp. They established three satellite camps in 1942 to provide slave labor to the IG Farben synthetic rubber and fuel plant in Monowitz, the coal mines in nearby Jawischowitz, and German industry in Chelmek; in 1943, five more satellite camps were set up; and in 1944, another 19. In 1942, 4,600 prisoners (of 24,000) worked for outside firms; in 1943 the number had increased to 15,000 (of 88,000); and in 1944 some 37,000 (of 105,000). When the camp was evacuated in early 1945, more than half the prisoners provided slave labor outside of the camp. The rest worked in the construction and maintenance of the camp, in SS-owned companies, and in the amelioration of the 15-square-mile estate around the camp. All of it – the outside firms, SS-owned companies, mines, factories, construction, and fieldwork – was lethal. Prisoners worked long hours on starvation diets, with insufficient clothing in the winter, no safety protections, and subject to brutal treatment by supervisors and guards. Regular selections ensured that any prisoner who could not keep the pace was sent to the gas chambers.

Prisoners were not dispatched as slave laborers alone. They were also given to physicians as guinea pigs. Doctors experimented on concentration camp inmates from the beginning of the war. In Dachau, recent medical graduates of the SS medical academy in Graz were offered inmates for surgery practice. In the same camp, Dr. Claus Carl Schilling injected inmates with live malaria cells, assuming they would develop resistance to it. Hundreds died. Testing the survival chances of airmen who had to bail out of planes at high altitude, or sailors on the open sea, physicians put Dachau inmates into low-pressure low-oxygen chambers, submerged them for long periods in ice-cold water, or gave them seawater to drink. They died horrible deaths. "Research" in Auschwitz concentrated on mass sterilization of able-bodied Jews without impairing their ability to work. One professor of medicine, Dr. Carl Clauberg, subjected women inmates to massive doses of x-rays in Block 10 of the main camp, which killed many.

The most assiduous and notorious medical "researcher," Jozef \*Mengele, arrived in Auschwitz on May 30, 1943. His interests grew out of his work at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute in Berlin, where he had served as research assistant to Otmar von Verschuer, a pioneer in the study of inherited diseases through research with twins. Mengele well knew that comparative autopsies on twins would provide ideal study conditions, but twins rarely died simultaneously and at a convenient location for the researcher. Auschwitz offered him an opportunity to do what was impossible elsewhere. He set up a block for twins in the gypsy camp where he conducted brazenly diabolical "experiments." Interested in eye color, he injected dye into the eyes of his human subjects. Curious about the course of infectious disease and resistance to it, he inoculated inmates with infectious agents. Fecundity, sterility, and gender fascinated Mengele. He conducted sex change operations, castrating boys to transform them into girls; he burned the uteri of girls to sterilize them, and he forced incestuous impregnations. One twin served as the control while the other underwent medicalized torture. If one twin died during surgery, the other was killed by phenol injection and comparative autopsies were performed. Mengele's zeal to identify twins on arriving transports prompted him to volunteer regularly to conduct selections. He became the face of the SS physician conducting selections on the arrivals ramp.

For Jews continued to arrive. By the end of 1943 the Germans closed down the death camps built specifically for annihilation: Chelmno, Sobibor, Belzec, and Treblinka. Auschwitz remained to mop up the remnants of the Jewish communities of Poland, Italy, France, the Netherlands, and the rest of occupied Europe. In 1944 another 600,000 Jews were killed in Auschwitz, most of them Hungarians. By that time, information about the role of Auschwitz as an annihilation center was available as the result of the successful escape of two young Slovak Jews, Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler. With a lot of planning and even more luck, Vrba and Wetzler managed to slip out of Auschwitz on April 10, 1944. They had been imprisoned for two years and they fled to Slovakia in the hope of warning the Jews of Hungary, the last large community of Jews. The Jewish

underground debriefed them and their information yielded the first substantial report on the use of Auschwitz as a death factory. But it did not reach the Hungarians in time.

As the camp prepared for new heights of murderous activity, SS headquarters transferred Liebehenschel to Lublin. He was considered too soft on the inmates of the main camp and not tough enough to conduct the planned Hungarian Action. Hartjenstein was also relieved of his duties in Birkenau. He was blamed for delays in the construction of the railway spur into the camp. Knowing that in the midst of the Hungarian Action a new Kommandant would not have time to ease into the job, Himmler dispatched Hoess to Auschwitz to run both the main camp and Birkenau. Hoess appointed SS-Master Sergeant Otto Moll as head of the crematoria. Under Moll's direction, crematoria 4 and 5 were brought back into operation, as was bunker 2, closed down since the spring of 1943. The number of *Sonderkommando* was increased to 1,000.

In the months of May and June almost 7,000 Hungarian Jews arrived in Auschwitz every day, and nearly all were killed on arrival. The crematoria could not keep up, and once again large pyres disposed of many corpses. Most able-bodied deportees were registered and admitted to the camp, but at least 30,000 of them were not tattooed with an identification number. These "transit Jews" were temporarily held in Auschwitz to be shipped to other camps as slave laborers. Hitler had decided earlier that year to allow Jews into the officially "Jew-free" but labor-strapped Reich – but only as slave workers in concentration camps.

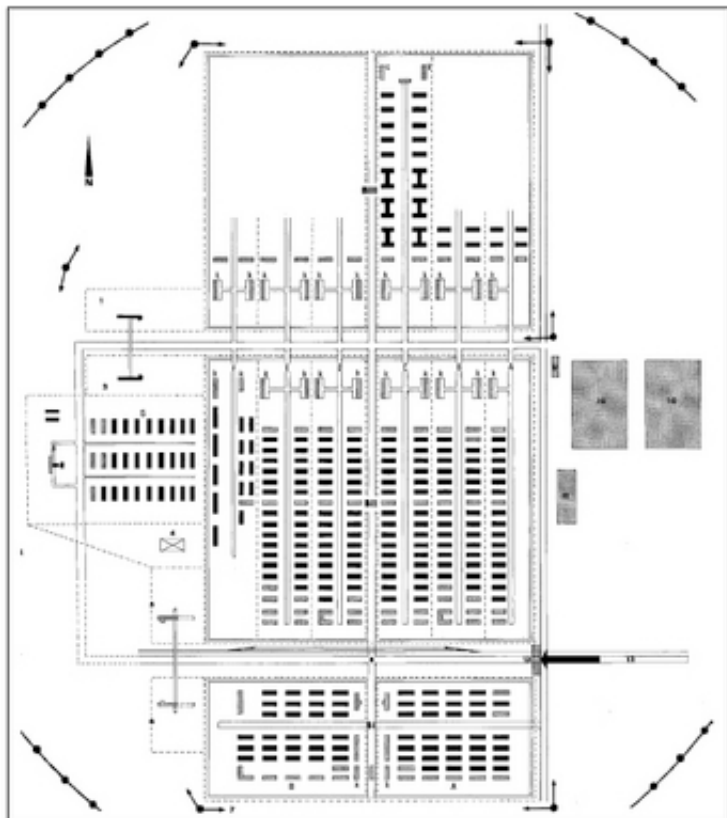
Hungarian transit Jews were not the only ones sent to the Reich. The SS combed the camps for other able-bodied Jews. Most of the inmates were already deployed, but the Czech family camp in Birkenau held many able-bodied men and women who had arrived on the December transports from Theresienstadt and had survived. Some 3,000 of them were now prepared for transport to other concentration camps. The remaining 3,000 women and children who were considered of no use to the German economy were brought to the crematoria on July 10. The Czech family camp was closed.

The Vrba-Wetzler report reached Switzerland as the murders continued unabated, and by the middle of June various copies were in circulation. By the beginning of July, the British and American governments had summaries of the Vrba-Wetzler report which stated explicitly: "authors set number of Jews gassed and burned in B[irkenau] between April 1942 and April 1944 at from 1.5 to 1.75 million." The *New York Times* had already run a substantial story on Auschwitz under the heading "Inquiry Confirms Nazi Death Camps," subtitled "1,715,000 Jews Said to Have Been Put to Death by the Germans Up to April 15."

By the time the *New York Times* had published the news, the king of Sweden, the Pope, and the chairman of the Red Cross had approached the Hungarian regent Miklos Horthy. He realized Germany had lost the war and he had credible information about the fate of Hungarian citizens in Auschwitz. Unable to claim ignorance, he fired the main supporters of the deportations in the government. Within days, the Hungarian government assured ambassadors of neutral countries that the *Aktionen* would cease. And the trains stopped, leaving 260,000 Jews who had been destined for Auschwitz in limbo in Budapest. According to a report by the German plenipotentiary in Hungary, a total of 437,402 Jews had been taken "to their destination" – Auschwitz.

The suspension of deportations also brought some relief in the offices of the American and British air forces. Requests to bomb the railway lines that carried the transports had been made from early June onwards. The generals dragged their feet. The American military believed it to be "impracticable," and British Bomber Command pleaded that it was "out of bounds of possibility" because of the distance and the fact that the British bombed at night. When Hungarian deportations stopped, the generals and their civilian superiors in the American War Department and the British Air Ministry felt they were no longer under any obligation to do anything (see \*Auschwitz, Bombing Controversy).

Hoess' tour of duty at Auschwitz now came to an end. The Hungarian transports had ceased in mid-July and Hoess handed over a camp of 100,000 inmates to SS-Major Richard Baer at the end of the month. Over a third of the camp population, 37,000 inmates, slaved for German companies, with IG Farben as the largest employer.



- |                         |  |   |
|-------------------------|--|---|
| 1. Crematory 4          | 10. Military Camp, SS Hospital           | BIA. Men's Isolation Camp                     |
| 2. Crematory 3          | 11. Water Supply                         | BIB. Family Camp for Jews from Czechoslovakia |
| 3. Disinfection Station | 12. Road to Auschwitz                    | BIC. Camp for Hungarian Women                 |
| 4. Crematory Station    | 13. Main Entrance                        | BID. Main Men's Camp                          |
| 5. Crematory 2          | K. Kitchens                              | BIE. Family Camp for Ukrainians               |
| 6. Crematory 1          | Administration and Service Facilities    | BIF. Hospital Camp for Jews                   |
| 7. Guard Posts          | Barbed Wire Fence                        | BIG. Storage Camp ("Kanada")                  |
| 8. Railway Station      | BIA. Women's Isolation Camp and Hospital | BII. Block no. 4                              |
| 9. Headquarters         | BIB. Women's Forced Labor Camp           | BII c. Block no. 5                            |

**Plan of the Birkenau camp.**

The last large group to arrive at Auschwitz came from Lodz, which had survived, a remnant of itself, as a labor camp until August 1944. Baer oversaw the murder of nearly 65,000 Lodz Jews in a few short weeks.

Shortly thereafter, a number of Jewish and gentile prisoners began to prepare a general uprising in the camp. Perhaps they knew that Germany had lost the war and they believed their tormenters would kill every inmate before surrender. Or perhaps, given the enormous mortality rate at Auschwitz, it was only then that the inmates were able to develop a resistance organization committed to uprising. One of the resisters, 23-year-old Rosa Robota, recruited women working in the Union Munitions Plant, a factory operating within the camp, to smuggle gunpowder off the premises. Robota passed the explosives to Borodin, a Russian technician, who carried it to the *Sonderkommando* of the crematorium. But the planned general uprising went awry. The *Sonderkommando* heard that the slave workers of crematoria 4 and 5 were going to be gassed, and they revolted sooner than anticipated, on October 7. They killed three SS men, wounded 12, blew up crematorium 4, and attempted to break out. Some made it as far as a barn in nearby Rajsko. But none escaped, and in total 451 members of the *Sonderkommando* were killed. In the subsequent investigation, the camp Gestapo identified Rosa Robota and three other Jewish women, Regina Sapirstein, Ala Gartner, and Esther Weisblum. After weeks of torture, they were publicly hanged in the women's camp on January 6, 1945.

Himmler, too, knew Germany had lost the war, but he believed that, were it not for the image of the camps in the foreign press, he could have an honorable future in Germany after military collapse. The Red Army had liberated Majdanek on July 23 and by the end of August articles published by the Allies provided horrifying accounts by journalists who had visited the camp. "I have just seen the most terrible place on the face of the earth – the German concentration camp

at Maidanek, which was a veritable River Rouge for the production of death," wrote journalist Bill Lawrence in his article on "Nazi Mass Killing Laid Bare in Camp," which ran on the front page of the *New York Times* of August 30. *Time* published a full-page article called "Murder, Inc." A joint Soviet-Polish forensic commission issued a report in October that described a "huge death factory" at Majdanek. Himmler considered all of this "a public relations" disaster and was determined that it would not continue. As he had "solved" the "Jewish Question" as far as it had been in his power to do, he ordered the SS to cease gassings in Auschwitz and to dismantle the gas chambers in the crematoria. Inmates continued to die, but from shootings, starvation, and disease.

The Red Army began its winter offensive on January 10, 1945. The SS prepared to evacuate the remaining prisoners at Auschwitz. When the Red Army reached the outskirts of Cracow on January 17, the SS held a last roll call. They counted 15,317 male prisoners and 26,577 female prisoners in Auschwitz and Birkenau and 33,023 male and 2,095 female prisoners in Monowitz and the 23 other satellite camps. The total came to a little over 67,000. A day later the death march began. Everyone well enough to walk out of the camp was forced to leave. The SS kept a brutal pace. Prisoners who fell behind were shot. The 52,000 survivors arrived in Loslau, some 45 miles (70 km.) west of Auschwitz, and then were transported in open freight cars to camps in the west. Many froze to death. An SS squad in Auschwitz blew up the last remaining crematorium, number 5, on January 26. The next day, units of the 28<sup>th</sup> and 106<sup>th</sup> Corps of the First Ukrainian Front liberated the Auschwitz camps. They found 600 sick inmates in Monowitz, the slave labor camp attached to the IG Farben Buna works; 1,200 in the Auschwitz main camp; and 5,800 in Birkenau. The Soviets also found the blown-up remains of the four crematoria in Birkenau and a large compound with 32 burned storage houses. The four huts that were not utterly destroyed were filled with 5,525 pairs of women's shoes; 38,000 pairs of men's shoes; 348,820 men's suits; 836,255 women's garments; 13,964 carpets; 69,848 dishes; huge quantities of toothbrushes, shaving brushes, glasses, crutches, false teeth; and seven tons of hair.

With more than 1.1 million victims, of whom one million were Jews, Auschwitz had become the most lethal death camp of all by the end of the war. But Auschwitz was also the camp with the greatest number of survivors. Only a few people survived Belzec, and a couple of hundred people survived Sobibor and Treblinka. Those camps were annihilation centers. Auschwitz had other functions and ultimately served as an enormous slave labor pool. Many more inmates thus survived Auschwitz than any of the other death camps. Of the 1.1 million Jews deported to Auschwitz, some 100,000 Jews left the camp alive, either in 1944 as transit Jews, or in the death march of 1945. Many of those survivors died or were shot on the long way to the west, or during their imprisonment in spring 1945 in concentration camps like Buchenwald and Bergen-Belsen. Yet tens of thousands saw liberation and testified about their ordeal after the war. Some 100,000 Gentiles, 75,000 of whom were Poles, survived Auschwitz and they too bore witness to the camp as an annihilation center for Jews. These testimonies, and the testimony given by Hoess in Nuremberg and during his own trial in Warsaw, ensured that Auschwitz would figure prominently in the memory of the Holocaust.

The survival of significant parts of the camp also has ensured the continued importance of Auschwitz in the collective memory of the Western world. Visitors to Treblinka, Belzec, and Sobibor, where 1.5 million Jews were murdered, will see nothing of the original arrangement. In Auschwitz, by contrast, much remains, due largely to the preservation efforts of the State Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau, established in 1947 when the Polish Parliament adopted the law "Commemorating the Martyrdom of the Polish Nation and other Nations in Oświęcim."

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