

# AUSCHWITZ

Auschwitz was the largest camp established by the Germans. A complex of camps, Auschwitz included a concentration, extermination, and forced-labor camp. It was located 37 miles west of Krakow (Cracow), near the prewar German-Polish border in Eastern Upper Silesia, an area annexed to Germany in 1939. Three large camps established near the Polish town of Oswiecim constituted the Auschwitz camp complex: Auschwitz I, Auschwitz II (Birkenau), and Auschwitz III (Monowitz).

## AUSCHWITZ I

Auschwitz I, the main camp, was the first camp established near Oswiecim. Construction began in May 1940 in a suburb of Oswiecim, in an artillery barracks formerly used by the Polish army. The SS continuously expanded the physical contours of the camp with forced labor. The first prisoners were German criminal prisoners deported from the Sachsenhausen concentration camp in Germany and Polish political prisoners from Tarnow.

Although Auschwitz I was primarily a concentration camp, serving a penal function, it also had a gas chamber and crematorium. An improvised gas chamber was located in the basement of the prison, Block 11, and a larger, more permanent gas chamber was later constructed in the crematorium.

SS physicians carried out [medical experiments](#) in the hospital, Barrack (Block) 10. They conducted pseudoscientific research on infants, twins, and dwarfs, and performed forced sterilizations, castrations, and hypothermia experiments on adults.

Between the crematorium and the medical-experiments barrack stood the "Black Wall," where SS guards executed thousands of prisoners.

## AUSCHWITZ II

Construction of Auschwitz II, or Auschwitz-Birkenau, began in the vicinity of Brzezinka in October 1941. Of the three camps established near Oswiecim, the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp had the largest total prisoner population. It was divided into nine sections separated by electrified barbed-wire fences and, like Auschwitz I, was patrolled by SS guards and some dog handlers. The camp included sections for women, men, Roma (Gypsies), and families deported from the Theresienstadt ghetto.

Auschwitz-Birkenau played a central role in the German plan to exterminate the Jews of Europe. In September 1941, in Auschwitz I, the SS first tested Zyklon B

gas as an instrument of mass murder. The "success" of these experiments led to the adoption of Zyklon B for all the gas chambers in Auschwitz. At first, the SS gassed prisoners at two farmhouses that were converted into gas chambers. Provisional gas chamber I went into operation in January 1942 and was later dismantled. Provisional gas chamber II operated from June 1942 through the fall of 1944. The SS judged these facilities to be inadequate for the scale of gassing they planned at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Four large crematorium buildings were constructed between March and June 1943. 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.

## DEPORTATIONS TO AUSCHWITZ

Trains arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau almost daily with transports of Jews from virtually every country in Europe occupied by or allied to Germany. These transports arrived from 1942 to the end of summer 1944.

With the deportations from Hungary, the role of Auschwitz-Birkenau as an instrument in the German plan to murder the Jews of Europe achieved its highest effectiveness. In May 1944, deportations from Hungary began, the largest wave of deportations to Auschwitz. By July 1944, nearly 440,000 Hungarian Jews had been deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The SS sent most of them directly to death in the gas chambers.

New arrivals at Auschwitz-Birkenau underwent selection. The SS staff determined the majority to be unfit for forced labor and sent them immediately to the gas chambers, which were disguised as shower installations to mislead the victims. The belongings of those gassed were confiscated and sorted in the "Kanada" (Canada) warehouse for shipment back to Germany. Canada symbolized wealth to the prisoners.

At least 1.1 million Jews were killed in Auschwitz. Other victims included between 70,000 and 75,000 Poles, 21,000 Roma, and about 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war.

On October 7, 1944, several hundred prisoners assigned to Crematorium IV at Auschwitz-Birkenau rebelled after learning that they were going to be killed. During the uprising, the prisoners killed three guards and blew up the crematorium and adjacent gas chamber. The prisoners used explosives smuggled into the camp by Jewish women who had been assigned to forced labor in a nearby armaments factory. The Germans crushed the revolt and killed almost all of the prisoners involved in the rebellion. The Jewish women who had smuggled the explosives into the camp were publicly hanged.

Gassing operations continued, however, until November 1944, at which time the SS disabled the gas chambers that still functioned. The SS destroyed the remaining gassing installations as Soviet forces approached in January 1945.

### AUSCHWITZ III

Auschwitz III, also called Buna or Monowitz, was established in nearby Monowice to provide forced laborers for the Buna synthetic rubber works. The German conglomerate I.G. Farben established a factory in order to take advantage of cheap concentration camp labor and the nearby Silesian coalfields. It invested more than 700 million Reichsmarks (about 1.4 million U.S. dollars in 1942 terms) in Auschwitz III.

Prisoners selected for forced labor were registered and tattooed with identification numbers on their left arms in Auschwitz I. They were then assigned to forced labor in Auschwitz or in one of the many subcamps attached to Auschwitz III.

### AUSCHWITZ SUBCAMPS

The Germans forcibly expelled the entire local population from Oswiecim and from an area of 40 square miles around the camp. This area became known as the camp's "development zone" and was reserved for the camp's exclusive use. Most of the Auschwitz subcamps were established within this officially designated area, including Althammer, Blechhammer, Budy, Fuerstengrube, Gleiwitz, Rajsko, and Tschechowitz. Virtually all of the subcamps were attached to Auschwitz III.

Auschwitz inmates were employed on huge farms, including the experimental agricultural station at Rajsko. They were also forced to work in coal mines, in stone quarries, in fisheries, and especially in armaments industries such as the German Armament Works (established in 1941). Periodically, prisoners underwent selection. If the SS judged them too weak or sick to continue working, they were transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau and killed.

### THE LIBERATION OF AUSCHWITZ

In mid-January 1945, as Soviet forces approached the Auschwitz camp

complex, the SS began evacuating Auschwitz and its satellite camps. Nearly 60,000 prisoners were forced to march west from the Auschwitz camp system. Thousands had been killed in the camps in the days before these death marches began. Tens of thousands of prisoners, mostly Jews, were forced to march to the city of Wodzislaw in the western part of Upper Silesia. SS guards shot anyone who fell behind or could not continue. Prisoners also suffered from the cold weather, starvation, and exposure on these marches. More than 15,000 died during the death marches from Auschwitz.

Upon arrival in Wodzislaw, the prisoners were put on unheated freight trains and transported to concentration camps in Germany, particularly to Flossenbuerg, Sachsenhausen, Gross-Rosen, Buchenwald, and Dachau, and also to Mauthausen in Austria. The rail journey lasted for days. Without food, water, shelter, or blankets, many prisoners did not survive the transport.

In late January 1945, 4,000 prisoners were forced on a death march from Blechhammer, a subcamp of Auschwitz. About 1,000 prisoners died during the march to the Gross-Rosen concentration camp. After a brief delay, the remaining prisoners were moved to the Buchenwald camp in eastern Germany.

On January 27, 1945, the Soviet army entered Auschwitz and [liberated](#) more than 7,000 remaining prisoners, who were mostly ill and dying. It is estimated that at minimum 1.3 million people were deported to Auschwitz between 1940 and 1945; of these, at least 1.1 million were murdered.

## ROSA ROBOTA HEROINE OF AUSCHWITZ

Rosa Robota has gone down in Jewish Holocaust history as a heroine for her actions involving the smuggling of black powder (schwartzpulver) into Auschwitz. This product was made into explosives which were used during the famous Sonderkommando Revolt. Although this prisoner-uprising failed to stop the wheels of death at Auschwitz, Crematorium IV was successfully destroyed by the demolition. In addition, the prisoners in Auschwitz for a brief moment, showed the Germans they were capable of resistance - even in this most extreme of environments. The actions by Rosa were ones for which she gave up her life - for she was caught, interrogated, tortured and then executed by the SS in Auschwitz.

In November 1942 at age 21, Rosa (Polish name "Rojza") was "deported" from Ciechanow, Poland by rail and arrived at "Anus Mundi": Auschwitz. Her entire immediate family had also been deported to the concentration camps and had died in the gas chambers. After two years of survival in Auschwitz, Rosa was working in a clothing-supply section of the camp complex when she was approached by Noah Zabladowicz, a member of the Jewish underground

operating in the camp (Zabladowicz had known Rosa in her hometown). With Himmler's order to step-up the pace of the gassings in the summer of 1944, the rate that people being annihilated each day was astronomical: 46,000 in a 24 hour period on July 24 (the record for any of the camps). The burning pits were ablaze day and night because the crematoria in operation at the time could not keep up. These were the true nightmare days at Auschwitz: the Germans knew the war was lost, but the Fuhurer's desire as he himself predicted in 1939 to annihilate European Jewry was in full- swing.

Noah explained to Rosa that an uprising was to be staged and there were plans to blow up the crematoria and gas chambers in collaboration with outside partisans. Since Rosa had friends working in the Union Munitions Plant (Weichsel-Union-Metalwerke) located within the Auschwitz complex, she was asked to help obtain the schwartzpulver.

Rosa established about 20 contacts with women in the plant who were willing to cooperate. These women smuggled the schwartzpulver into the camp week after week by hiding it inside a trap-door in their dresses. The pockets could be "tripped" and the contents "dumped" if it appeared that the secret would be discovered. There was great risk because prisoners were sometimes searched when returning into the camps from the factories. The explosives, which looked like small wheels, were delivered to the underground. They were then assembled by a Russian POW munitions expert named Timofei Borodin who used sardine tins to make the final product. The completed devices were then hidden about the camp.

At one point, tragedy occurred - a few of the girls were caught and hanged. Somehow, the authorities did not extract adequate information from these heroines and the operation continued.

One of the many hiding places of the completed explosive devices was with the Sonderkommando, the special Jewish slave detail who handled and processed the corpses from the gas chambers day and night. The explosives were hidden in the carts & lorries used by this "special commando" to haul the corpses. Unfortunately, before the revolt could occur as a concerted effort, the Sonderkommando staged their own uprising with the explosives they had - for they had found out they were about to be gassed in their own turn (members of the this work group were normally selected out and gassed about every 3 months). Subsequently, on October 7, 1944, Crematorium IV was suddenly blown up and an unplanned haphazard revolt began. Four SS men (some records say 5) were killed and several wounded. In the panic and pandemonium, around 600 of the Sonderkommando were able to break through the wires and escape. Unfortunately, all who escaped were caught and shot - with the usual

German efficiency and the ever-present cooperation of the people living in the surrounding area. A special Gestapo team was called in to investigate the revolt. The explosives were traced back to the Union plant and several suspects were rounded up. Using typical techniques of torture and "persuasion" under the auspices of the "Political Dept" (operated by the Gestapo), the names of Rosa and 3 other women were extracted. The names of the other women were: Regina Safirsztain (Sapirstein), Ella Gartner (Gertner) and Estucia Wajcblum (Esther Weisblum).

Using connections and at great risk, Noah Zabladowicz was able to visit Rosa in her prison-cell which was called "The Bunker" by those in the camp. He wanted to say farewell to his comrade - for he knew her fate was sealed, as did Rosa, herself. Noah also feared that Rosa had possibly "cracked" under the torture. He had to know if she had or was going to confess anything she knew. His worries were unfounded - Rosa had withstood horrible tortures and cruelty at the hands of her interrogators, but she had told them nothing.

As she lay on the dark floor, half-dead already, she could not even speak at first. When she finally gathered her strength, she told Noah what the torturers had done to her. Noah could hardly comprehend how Rosa had endured the horrendous torture - but she had not betrayed her comrades. She asked that the underground continue its work even in the face of such terrible consequences that she had endured - including the realization that she would be executed the next day. At 23 years old, Rosa and her 3 comrades were hanged before the camp population. Her last message was a note scratched on a piece of paper she managed to smuggle from her cell: "Hazak V' Amatz" : Be Strong & Brave.

After Rosa's death, the remaining crematoria continued to operate at full capacity. However, realizing defeat, the Germans began to hide the evidence of genocide at Auschwitz. On October 26, only weeks after Rosa's execution, Himmler himself ordered the dismantling of the remaining crematoria. The Russian advance into Germany was well underway and on January 20, 1945, the SS themselves set off demolition charges to finish-off the partially dismantled Crematoria II & III. Six days later, Crematorium V was likewise blown up. On the following day, the Russian Army liberated Auschwitz. There, the Russians found 1000's abandoned by the SS: 1200 survivors in the main camp, 5,800 in Birkenau and around 700 in Monowitz. Those remaining were primarily people who had been unable to walk the hurried death marches of Auschwitz prisoners west into the concentration camps of Germany's interior: Bergen-Belson, Buchenwald, Ravensbruck, etc. In these death marches, thousands of potential survivors of Auschwitz died with liberation only days away.

Of the millions killed Auschwitz, only a few "prisoners" have been immortalized. Rosa Robota will be remembered as one of the few who did not give up in the face of the utter "extremity" - but chose resistance.

## NOTES ON THE REVOLT IN BIRKENAU

Define the Sondercommando – Their life span once they arrived in the camp was 4 months

### Auschwitz Revolt

By September 1944, Auschwitz-Birkenau was the only remaining Nazi killing center still in operation. The Operation Reinhard camps -- Treblinka, Sobibór, and Belzec -- had been closed down. Chelmno, originally closed in 1943, reopened for a brief period in spring-summer 1944. At the end of July 1944, Majdanek was liberated by Soviet troops.

For the prisoners at Auschwitz, liberation seemed close at hand. The Soviet army had moved deep into German-occupied Poland, and U.S. planes had begun bombing the I.G. Farben synthetic oil and rubber factory located near Auschwitz III, less than five miles from Birkenau. In Warsaw, the Polish Home Army had risen up in revolt against German occupation forces. Within the Auschwitz complex, the resistance movement -- composed of Jews and non-Jews alike -- made plans to launch its own uprising.

For months, young Jewish women, like Ester Wajcblum, Ella Gärtner, and Regina Safirsztain, had been smuggling small amounts of gunpowder (schwartzpulver) from the Weichsel-Union-Metallwerke, a munitions factory within the Auschwitz complex, to men and women in the camp's resistance movement, like Róza Robota, a young Jewish woman who worked in the clothing detail at Birkenau. Under constant guard, the women in the factory took small amounts of the gunpowder, wrapped it in bits of cloth or paper, hid it on their bodies, and then passed it along the smuggling chain. Once she received the gunpowder, Róza Robota then passed it to her co-conspirators in the Sonderkommando, the special squad of prisoners forced to work in the camp's crematoria. Using this gunpowder, the leaders of the Sonderkommando planned to destroy the gas chambers and crematoria, and launch the uprising.

On October 7, 1944, having learned that the SS was going to liquidate much of the squad, the members of the Sonderkommando at Crematorium IV rose in revolt. Setting fire to the crematorium, they attacked the SS guards with hammers, axes, and stones. Seeing the flames rising over the building as a signal for the camp uprising, those of the Sonderkommando at Crematorium II went into action, killing a Kapo and several SS men. Several hundred prisoners escaped from Birkenau, almost all of whom were caught and killed by the SS. Later that day, an additional 200 prisoners who took part in the revolt were executed.

In their investigation of the incident, the SS traced the gunpowder to the "Union" factory and arrested Ester Wajcblum, Ella Gärtner, and Regina Safirsztain. Róża Robota was arrested shortly thereafter. Though brutally tortured, the four women refused to name their comrades. On January 6, 1945, they were hanged in front of the assembled prisoners from the munitions factory.

Prior to their deaths, Ester Wajcblum and Róża Robota smuggled messages to their comrades in the underground. To a friend, Ester Wajcblum wrote: "I know what is in store for me, but I go readily to the gallows. I only ask you to take care of my sister Hanka. Please don't leave her, so that I may die easier." Róża Robota's final message to her comrades in the underground was, "Hazak v'ematz," "Be strong and have courage."

### Bombing Auschwitz

- 1.) American reconnaissance photo of Auschwitz
- 2.) American letter explaining why the camps could Not be bombed.
- 3.) Prepare map of Operation Frantic

What options were open to the Allies, especially the Americans to slow down the Holocaust?

Fact #1 – By 8/42, well-documented evidence of a German Campaign to annihilate the Jews of Europe was in the hands of the American and British governments. It was submitted to Gerbard Reigner of the WJ Congress and included photos, sworn affidavits of German eye-witnesses, dates, sites, etc.

Once again: What could the U.S. have done?

- 1.) Tracks to the destruction camps could have been bombed.
- 2.) The camps themselves could have been bombed.
- 3.) Funds could have been provided to furnish Jewish resistance movements with a means of acquiring apartments, adopting parents, weapons, food, bribing enemy soldiers and policemen
- 4.) An appeal could have been made on Radio FreeEurope to help Jews, give them refuge, food, etc. (This would have been especially important in Western Europe.) The voice of America carried great moral authority during the War years.
- 5.) Pressure could have been put upon the Pope to Denounce mistreatment of Jews and to warn participants in Final Solution of grave Divine Retribution.

- 6.) Neutral states could have given assurances that Jewish Refugees would be able to leave those states at the end of the war.
- 7.) Jewish refugees could have been admitted to the US.
- 8.) Pressure could have been put upon Britain to negotiate with Eichman to stall for time concerning Hungarian Jews.
- 9.) False US papers could have been distributed among Jews in Occupied or collaborating states.
- 10.) Stiff warnings of post-war punishments could have been issued to a larger number of Germans and collaborators than in fact was the case.

How do we react to this? What does it say about our Government then?  
Reflections on the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Liberation of Auschwitz  
Rabbi Fred Guttman

January 27, 2005 marked the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz Death Camp. Trying to assess the meaning of what is undoubtedly one of the worst atrocities ever perpetrated by some human beings against others is indeed difficult. For the Jewish people, the symbolism of what Auschwitz represents has been inscribed in our hearts and on our souls.

The Jewish philosopher Emil Fackenheim speaks of "The Commanding Voice of Auschwitz." If divine revelation was given to the Jewish people on Mt. Sinai some 3,280 years ago, then 60 years ago a different type of revelation occurred. The revelation at Mt. Sinai was a revelation of goodness and Godliness, whereas the revelation to the Jewish people at Auschwitz was indeed one of great evil deriving from incomprehensible acts of inhumanity.

In January of 1942, the decision was made to exterminate the Jews of Europe. The ultimate goal of the Nazis at that time was to exterminate 11 million people. By the end of the war, six million of our brothers and sisters had been murdered, of these a million and a half were children. It is estimated that 300,000 Roma or gypsies were also the victims of mass genocide.

The Nazis decided that six death camps would be created in Poland. The largest of these death camps was to be Auschwitz. Estimates are that 1,500,000 people, most of whom Jews, died at Auschwitz.

Auschwitz was designed so that two transports per day, each with 6,000 Jews, would be "processed." These 12,000 Jews would have their heads shaved, clothing collected and stored, be gassed and cremated all within a 24 hour period. Within 24 hours, all traces of their bodily existence were obliterated from the face of the earth.

When the trains arrived, a "selection" was held and less than 10% were chosen to be slave laborers. Life for the slave laborers was often unbearable and many would die of overwork, starvation and disease.

In 1944 when the Jews of Hungary were deported to Auschwitz, the death factory was unable to absorb the mass numbers. It was estimated that in the spring of 1944, 46,000 Jews were killed in one day. Those who could not be "accommodated" by the gas chambers and crematorium were shot and burned in mass pits on the grounds of Birkenau, the death camp complex of Auschwitz.

The allies were made aware of the atrocities of the Holocaust as early as August of 1942. They knew the specifics of Auschwitz in early 1944. Repeated efforts by the Jewish community to request that the tracks to Auschwitz be bombed were denied. In November 1944, the Assistant Secretary of War, John J. McCloy, wrote that the allies lacked the ability to bomb the targets in the area of Auschwitz. In 1965, documents were declassified which proved that in May through September of 1944, months before McCloy wrote the letter, the allies had actually carried out bombing runs in the area of Auschwitz. In other words, in November 1944 the American government lied to the worldwide and to the Jewish community.

In short, the allies let the Jewish community down and from this there is a tremendous lesson for us as Jews. Tragically in our own time, we are witnessing the emergence of increased Anti-Semitism in the world, particularly in Europe. The Holocaust teaches us that as Hillel, a renowned scholar from the time of Jesus, said, "If I am not for myself, then who shall be?"

And yet, there is a second part to Hillel's statement which reads, "But if I am only for myself, what am I?" The Nobel Laureate and Auschwitz survivor, Elie Wiesel, in his speech at the United Nations Commemoration of the atrocity of Auschwitz, asserted that the world had yet to learn the lesson of Auschwitz. He cited several instances of genocide which have taken place since 1945. Interestingly, he also mentioned the current conflict in Sudan as an example of how the world continues to remain silent and shuts both its eyes and its ears to these crimes against humanity.

For us as Jews, the lesson is we must continue our efforts not only to protect our own people, but to protect any people who are faced with genocide. We must continue our efforts to ensure the well being of Jews everywhere in the world and in particular to ensure the security and well being of the State of Israel as a haven for oppressed Jews.

In addition however, we as Jews have a responsibility to raise our voices and increase our efforts on behalf of those who are suffering the same sort of crimes in which we have been victims. We are told many times in the Torah to treat the stranger nicely because, "You were strangers in Egypt." In our own time, the message to us is that our voices for peace and social justice for those who are persecuted, oppressed, abused and downtrodden must be raised. Even though our liberation from Egypt has occurred and even though the holocaust has ended and the State of Israel has been created, the completion of liberation for the

Jewish people will only occur when bias, bigotry and racism of all sorts are eliminated. At that time, atrocities such as what occurred to our people at Auschwitz will no longer occur and will be consigned to the annals of history. Then, truly as the biblical prophet said, "On that day, God shall be one, and God's name shall be one."