

# 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).



Soon after liberation, a Soviet physician examines Auschwitz camp survivors. Poland, February 18, 1945.

## 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.

Describes arrival at Auschwitz, selection, and separation from his family



# **Auschwitz 1940 – 1945**

## ***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.



National Archives - Film

**Liberation of Auschwitz**

**[View historical film footage](#)**

# Leo Schneiderman

## Describes arrival at Auschwitz, selection, and separation from his family

[1990 interview]

(Full transcript follows biography)

### Born Lodz, Poland

1921

The Germans invaded Poland in September 1939. Leo and his family were confined to a ghetto in Lodz. Leo was forced to work as a tailor in a uniform factory. The Lodz ghetto was liquidated in 1944, and Leo was deported to Auschwitz. He was then sent to the Gross-Rosen camp system for forced labor. As the Soviet army advanced, the prisoners were transferred to the Ebensee camp in Austria. The Ebensee camp was liberated in 1945.

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United States Holocaust Memorial Museum - Collections

### Full transcript

It was late at night that we arrived at Auschwitz. When we came in, the minute the gates opened up, we heard screams, barking of dogs, blows from...from those Kapos, those officials working for them, over the head. And then we got out of the train. And everything went so fast: left, right, right, left. Men separated from women. Children torn from the arms of mothers. The elderly chased like cattle. The sick, the disabled were handled like packs of garbage. They were thrown in a side together with broken suitcases, with boxes. My mother ran over to me and grabbed me by the shoulders, and she told me "Leibele, I'm not going to see you no more. Take care of your brother."