

About Auschwitz Judith Lerner Crawley

These photographs were taken in Sept 2002 during a trip to Poland with my older brother George and our friend, Eda. We three lost family here during World War 11. My mother's pregnancy prompted my parents to flee Lodz, Poland on Aug 31, 1939, the eve of the German invasion of Poland. George was born 6 weeks later. They arrived in Canada in June 1941.

We visited some of the places and streets where our parents grew up, as well as Auschwitz Birkenau, the site of mass extermination which they narrowly avoided.

Part 1-1

In 1939, a cloud passed over the face of Europe, and when it dissipated, the Jews of Germany, Poland, Austria, France, Belgium, Holland, Greece, and all of Eastern Europe were decimated, along with Gypsies, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, mental patients, political prisoners such as communists and socialists, and millions of civilian bystanders to the war.

Jonathan Blumen, *Auschwitz Alphabet*, <http://www.spectacle.org/695/intro.html> (Jan 22, 2003)

Part 1-2

Established in 1940 by Nazi Germany as a **concentration camp** in Poland, **Auschwitz** became a "vast killing centre for the Nazi extermination of the Jews" of Europe in 1942¹; it was liberated by the Soviet Army on January 27, 1945.

A complex of camps, **Auschwitz I** was the central camp; **Auschwitz II**, also known as **Birkenau**, was the killing center; Auschwitz III: Monowitz, was the IG Farben labour camps, also known as BUNA. There were also 50 sub camps at factories, mines and other work sites.²

Auschwitz was the largest camp of mass extermination in the Nazi network of 27 concentration, forced-labour and death camps: 9 in Poland, 8 in Germany, 2 in France and 1 each in Austria, Belarus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Netherlands, Slovakia and Ukraine.³

From the first transport of Polish prisoners in June 1940 until the camp's liberation on January 1945, an estimated 1.3 million people had been shipped here and at least 1.1 million were murdered here.^{1,4}

Jews:	1,082,000 to 1,100,000 (mortality rate: 94.4%)
Poles:	70,000 to 75,000 (58.1%)
Gypsies:	21,000 Gypsies (93.%) percent
Soviet POWs:	15,000 (99.2 %)
Other nationalities:	5,000 prisoners ⁵

¹ Ralph Blumenthal, "Auschwitz Revisited: Polish Scholars Compile Version Left by Victims and Killers Alike," *New York Times*, Jan 28, 2001

² *20th Century History*, history1900s.about.com (February 4, 2003)

³ *The Last Expression: Art and Auschwitz*, lastexpression.northwestern.edu/auschwitz_fr_glossary.html (February 4, 2003)

⁴ *20th Century History*, history1900s.about.com/library/holocaust/blchart.htm (February 4, 2003)

⁵ Franciszek Piper, "Number of Victims of Auschwitz-Birkenau," *Yad Vashem Studies* 21 (1991), 98

Part 1-3

Above the entrance gate is the watchword: **Arbeit macht frei** "Work makes you free".

Thousands of prisoners were marched through the gate daily to work assignments, which often lasted 10 hours. From this location, one can see administration buildings and the site where the camp orchestra performed as prisoners marched to and from work outside the camp. Few who passed through this gate lived.

Part 1-4

"Prisoners were marked with 6 different coloured triangles... sewn onto their camp clothes together with their number..."

red: political

yellow: Jewish “a star made of a yellow triangle and the one corresponding to the reason of their arrest”

black: Gypsies and “prisoners regarded by Hitlerites as antisocial”

violet: Jehovahs’ Witnesses

pink: homosexuals

green: criminals

Auschwitz Birkenau Guide Book, State Museum in Oswiecim, 2002, p 13-14

1-5

The camp was established in deserted pre-war Polish army barracks, favorably located as regards train facilities, expansion and isolation from the rest of the world.

Eda: It’s like a provincial Dutch village, with nice alleys of trees, neat bricks buildings, well-kept grounds.

1-6

On Oct 7 1941, a camp was established in Auschwitz for Soviet POWs. About 10,000 men were registered... Most of them died of hunger, hard work and SS brutality. Many others were gassed or shot.... Those who refused to work were forced naked out of their blocks in the freezing weather and doused with water... many froze to death.

Within 5 months, by Mar 1942, some 9,000 had died. The remainder were transferred to the newly constructed Auschwitz II-Birkenau.

1-7

From 26 March to mid-August 1942, Blocks 1-10 were used as a camp for women prisoners. It was separated from the men’s camp by a high wall. About 17,000 women, Jewish and non-Jewish who had been deported from Germany and throughout German-occupied Europe were housed here...

2-1

Wall of Death

Sand was scattered in front of the Wall of Death to suck up the blood of the victims who were naked and barefooted. The bleeding bodies were taken to the crematorium on a truck. Puddles of blood remained on the camp road after the hearse had gone through.

Shootings did not only take place at the black wall. If a prisoner was not working fast enough, if an SS-guard interpreted a prisoner's glance as rebellious or if an SS-man or officer was bored, prisoners could be shot. If the daily production target was not reached, inmates were shot. Officially, they were all shot "on the run."

Shooting was not efficient for mass extermination: The high costs for munition, the noise which was heard all over, the psychic stress of SS-guards made the SS decide to use poison which was injected to prisoners.

20th Century History, <http://history1900s.about.com/> (Feb 3, 2003)

2-2

Block No. 11, known by the prisoners as "the death block," served as the central camp jail and a branch of the Katowice Gestapo summary court.

The first experiments with Zyklon B occurred in September 1941 in the cellar, killing 850.

The Execution Wall (Wall of Death) in the painting by prisoner Wladylaw Siwek is visible outside the window in the courtyard enclosed by high walls.

2-3

The corpses of prisoners shot while trying to escape were often displayed here as a warning to others.

2-4

Escape was extremely rare at Auschwitz, but was not unknown.

The most famous case was that of Mala Zimetbaum and her Polish lover, Edek Galinski. She was a Lauferin, or runner, in the camp, able to move about on errands and carry messages. Both had been members of anti Nazi undergrounds, he in Poland, she in Belgium. He obtained an SS uniform, she "organized" a pass, and they left the camp together in the guise of an SS man transporting a prisoner.

Many Auschwitz survivors remember them, for they inspired everyone with tremendous hope, but the accounts differ on details as to the distance they got before being arrested and returned to the camp. Some survivors remember them getting as far as Krakow. Back in Auschwitz, both were tortured and then led to the gallows for public execution. Mala slashed her wrist with a razor blade she had concealed, was beaten to the ground and loaded onto the crematorium truck without ever being hanged. Across the camp, Edek leaped into the noose and kicked away the bench before the death sentence was read; the SS rescued and re-hanged him.

There were 600 other cases of escape from Auschwitz. Almost 400 were captured. When an escape was detected, all prisoners in the camp stood at attention for hours on end, while the fugitive was hunted outside the camp; once captured, the escapee was tortured, then paraded around the camp with a sign saying "Hurrah, I'm back," and then was hanged in front of the rest of the camp. *Auschwitz Alphabet*, Friedrich, pp. 58-60. spectacle.org/695/escape.html (Jan 30, 2003)

2-5

This is where the camp Gestapo was located. Prisoners suspected of involvement in the camp's underground resistance movement or of preparing to escape were interrogated here. Many prisoners died as a result of being beaten or tortured.

The first commandant of Auschwitz, SS-Obersturmbannführer Rudolf Höss... was hanged here on 16 April 1947.

3-1

Auschwitz II - Birkenau: the killing center

Train tracks lead into and through the length of the camp beneath the SS watchtower, the main entrance to Auschwitz II Birkenau, about 3 kilometres from Auschwitz 1.

Building of this extermination camp began in October 1941. This much bigger camp included 250 wooden and stone barracks, 2 makeshift gas chambers in converted farm houses, cremation pyres and pits, and 4 huge gas chambers complete with crematoria that could - according to SS notes - burn 4,756 bodies every day. Electric lifts raised the bodies to the ovens¹

The highest occupancy of Birkenau was about 100,000 inmates in 1943.²

On November 2, 1944, the gassings stopped and shortly thereafter, the SS dismantled the remaining crematoria to destroy the most conspicuous evidence of their crimes.³

¹ *Poland*, Australia: Lonely Planet, 4th ed, May 2002, p 342.

² Kazimierz Smolen, *Auschwitz Birkenau Guide Book*, State Museum in Oswiecim, 2002, p 22

³ *The Last Expression: Art and Auschwitz*, <http://lastexpression.northwestern.edu> (Feb 4 2003).

3-2

In the distance is the SS watch tower at the entrance. Few buildings remain.

3-3

Booth where the SS men responsible for conducting the roll call and collecting reports on the number of prisoners took shelter during inclement weather.

Roll call and public gallows area.

Inmates were forced to stand at attention for hours at least twice a day while they were counted. This was carried out no matter what the weather and was often accompanied by beatings and punishments.

3-4

Wooden stables meant for 52 horses “accommodated” 1000 prisoners. Brick barracks, usually without foundations or floors, directly on the swampy ground, housed women prisoners: an average of 8 would sleep on each level.

3-5

The photograph taken secretly in 1944 and at great risk by a camp inmate in, shows “the burning of corpses on a crematorium pyre.”

Kazimierz Smolen, *Auschwitz Birkenau Guide Book*, State Museum in Oswiecim, 2002, p 9

3-6

Resistance was almost impossible in Auschwitz, where disobedience meant torture and death, for one's peers as well as oneself. Nevertheless, it occurred. The most notable instance was that of the Sonderkommando that seized a crematorium.

Just months before the liberation of the camp, when it was already known that the Russian army was approaching, the SS caught wind of the fact that the last of the Sonderkommando--the squads of Jewish prisoners formed to shepherd their fellows to the gas chamber-- were planning an uprising. They determined to eliminate them all.

On October 7, 1944, as the SS were forming a detail of three hundred members of the Sonderkommando for some outside work (this was thought to be a ruse to separate and execute them), the Sonderkommando began pelting the SS with stones and drove them off. They packed crematorium IV with explosives they had "organized" or stolen, and blew it up. Eighty to one hundred trucks of SS men arrived and the Sonderkommando fought them with stolen machine guns and grenades they had been stockpiling; the SS responded in kind and by unleashing fifty attack dogs.

Sonderkommando in other units rose up too; some seized crematorium II and threw an SS man and a kapo into the furnace alive. Some men cut holes in the barbed wire and fled, but in the wrong direction, remaining within the larger confines of the extended camp. The SS trapped some in a barn and set fire to it, and hunted others down in the woods; by the end of the day, hundreds of members of the Sonderkommando had been burned or shot to death.

After the revolt was put down, the remaining two hundred members of the Sonderkommando were executed, some with flamethrowers.

Auschwitz Alphabet, Friedrich, pp. 80-85, spectacle.org/695/resist.html (Jan 30, 2003)

3-7

The Jews were the target of a complete annihilation policy in the Nazi Holocaust called **The Final Solution**. <http://www.mtsu.edu/~baustin/gypsies.html> (Jan 31, 2003)

Country Jewish population of origin	Estimated pre- Final Solution	Estimated Jewish population annihilated	%
Poland	3,300,000	3,000,000	90
Baltic Countries	253,000	228,000	90
Germany/Austria Protectorate	240,000	210,000	90
Slovakia	90,000	80,000	89
Greece	90,000	75,000	83
The Netherlands	70,000	54,000	77
	140,000	105,000	75

Hungary	650,000	450,000	70
SSR White Russia	375,000	245,000	65
SSR Ukraine*	1,500,000	900,000	60
Belgium	65,000	40,000	60
Yugoslavia	43,000	26,000	60
Romania	600,000	300,000	50
Norway	1,800	900	50
France	350,000	90,000	26
Bulgaria	64,000	14,000	22
Italy	40,000	8,000	20
Luxembourg	5,000	1,000	20
Russia (RSFSR)*	975,000	107,000	11
Denmark	8,000	--	--
Finland	2,000	--	--
Total	8,861,800	5,933,900	67

*The Germans did not occupy all the territory of this republic.

jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/Holocaust/killedtable/html (Jan 27, 2003)

3-8

The camp was surrounded by a double electrified (5000 volts) barbed wire fence. All contact with the outside world was forbidden.

3-9

We encountered groups of students from Poland, Germany, Holland, Israel, France, and so on...

4-1

Vast and desolate, Birkenau is the largest cemetery in the world.

David Cesarani, "The Auschwitz Question," **The Gazette**, Montreal, Dec 24, 1993, p B3

4-2

Immediately after getting off the train, the Jews were told to line up into two columns, one of women and children and the other of men. Each column was subjected to 'selections' by SS doctors and medical orderlies, there and then on the ramp: the strong and the healthy were separated from the old, the sick, and children. People selected as fit for work were sent to the camp. The others, usually 70-75% of the transport, were sent to be murdered in the gas chambers.

At the height of the deportations in 1943, up to 8,000 Jews were gassed each day.

US Holocaust Memorial Museum, <http://www.ushmm.org/topics/>(February 21, 2003)

4-3

The stockcamp **Canada** was the depot for objects confiscated from newly arriving inmates. Jews were told to bring their essential belongings on the transport to "Relocation". Immediately on unloading, these were taken away and sorted in **Canada** - a place of **abundance**. After unloading their human victims, trains would be loaded with the possessions of earlier victims and sent back to Germany. They passed each other in opposite directions.

The Nazis burned **Canada** to the ground, lest its contents fall into the hands of the advancing Soviets.

20th Century History, <http://history1900s.about.com/> (Jan 31, 2003)

4-4

Pond of human ashes

Eda: A shield of trees, beyond them, cabbage farms.

4-5

At the site of the remaining gas chamber, on January 27, 1995, the fiftieth observance of the liberation of Auschwitz, Dr. Hans Münch (SS physician) signed a documents verifying the existence of the gas chambers.

jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/Munch.html(Jan 30, 2003)

4-6

Eda: We are silent on the ride back, everybody processing this experience in their own way