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Auschwitz

Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration Camp

I

The extermination of 2,500 Belgian Jews by the SS at Auschwitz-Birkenau

This tragedy began on 7 June 1942. On the morning of this fine summer's day, an order was issued in Belgium requiring all Jews to wear a star. An order to sign up for voluntary work was sent a few days later. All young Jews of modest means, aged 16 to 30, were to "voluntarily" report for work. Since they were all naive and gullible, thousands of Jews answered this call, wanting to protect their families from trouble. Three days later, information that youth was assembled in the barracks in Malines [Mechelen] with no knowledge of where they were going to be transported spread, so the rest of the young Jews who did not sign up became distrustful, and no one else applied for "voluntary work". Everyone was looking for a place to hide.

A week later, the SS and the Gestapo began their barbaric practices. Thousands of the SS and Gestapo functionaries, using countless vehicles, started to methodically hunt the Belgian Jews. The streets were under inspection from 5.00 a.m. to midnight; every house and road was shut. The Gestapo burst into houses, searching them from the cellars up to the attics. Jews were beaten and thrown out in a brutal manner. Young and old, big and small, men, women, and children – they were all pushed into vehicles. Sick men and women were dragged out of beds, cripples missing one or both legs were thrown in the front of the cars. Severely ill or dying patients were taken from hospitals and sanatoriums, and sent to carry out "voluntary work". All these people were selected from all over Belgium and gathered in the barracks in Malines [Mechelen].

Every other day, a transport of 2,000 people left the barracks and was sent as a workforce to an unknown destination in the Third Reich. In this cruel and brutal manner, we – poor, unsuspecting people – were brought to a huge extermination camp in Auschwitz-Birkenau.



From 1942 to 1944, prisoners were always received at Auschwitz-Birkenau in the same manner. The destination station was always surrounded by SS men with machine guns and dogs.

Doors to all of the wagons were open. The SS men ordered everyone to step off the wagon and leave their belongings behind. Men were then made to stand in a separate line, and so were women and children. Scenes of atrocity accompanied the separation of families. Then the SS men came to supervise the men. They would point with their thumb, sending people left and right in order to separate the young and healthy prisoners from the weak and elderly. The same thing happened to women and children. Young and healthy women were on one side, weak and old on the other.

20–25 percent of men and 15–20 percent of women from each transport were deemed healthy and marched to the camp. The rest of the men, women, and children were marched to Birkenau.

This camp was located about two kilometers from Auschwitz. A white building with no windows was there, next to a small forest. All men, women, and children were told to undress and were then herded into the white building. Once the building was full, all doors were tightly shut. One of the SS men would then let the gas into the building through an opening in the roof, and ten minutes later all prisoners would be dead.

Up to 3,000 people could be killed in the gas chamber. After gassing, corpses were taken from this place of massacre, their gold teeth were pulled out, and barbers cut off the long hair of the dead women and children. All victims were then carried to a ditch nearby, into a pond where gasoline had been poured. They were thrown into it and burnt.

This massacre would last different amounts of time, depending on the transport. Those who didn't know what was going to happen to them and consequently walked to the gas chamber calmly, received a large dose of gas and died within minutes; a transport of people suspecting something bad had to be pushed into the gas chamber and would receive a small dose of gas so that the victims had to suffer for hours before they died.

This method of extermination was used until March 1944. Four large crematorium ovens were functioning until that point. They looked like small factories or shower rooms.



Upon arrival, transports were led to a big barrack where everyone was ordered to pack their clothes and shoes in order to reclaim them in the same condition after the bath. Each of them was given a towel and soap, and had to walk naked into an underground bunker with a sign "To bathhouse" on the door. The bunker was designed in such a way that it could easily be taken for a shower room. Once the bunker was full, the door was shut and the gas was let inside from above. Everyone died within minutes.

The gas was called Zyklon and had been brought to Auschwitz in a wagon from Hamburg. All corpses from the bunker were thrown into the crematorium ovens with the use of an electric lift. Gold teeth were pulled out and women and children's long hair was cut off. Corpses were then transported to the ovens in wagons on rails, two at a time, including corpses of the children. A child's corpse was referred to as an "addition". Temperature in the ovens was so high that the bodies burnt to ashes within minutes.

Every crematorium consisted of 12 ovens. Ashes of the burnt people were buried in ditches. This method was used until August 1944. When the Red Army was approaching Warsaw and Kraków, the ditches were dug up, and the ashes were transported in vehicles to the Vistula river and thrown into the water in order to get rid of the evidence.

All work connected to the gas chamber and crematorium ovens was carried out by a *kommando* of Jewish prisoners. This *kommando*, that is work detail, was called "special squad". In the summer of 1944, Russian prisoners were assigned to it as well. Those who worked in this special squad did not live for long. After some time they were exterminated by the SS and replaced by new prisoners. No prisoners signed up for the special squad voluntarily. Members of this squad were fed and dressed very well.

The special squad was tasked with herding the transports into the barracks, giving prisoners orders to undress and rushing them into the gas chamber. After gassing, this crew had to pull out gold teeth and cut off the hair of the corpses of women and children, and then transport the corpses into the ovens. It was all carried out under the compulsion and supervision of the SS.

Other prisoners from Birkenau held it against those who belonged to the special squad that while they did not try to refuse when they were assigned to it, being certain that they were going to die anyway – they also didn't destroy the crematorium ovens and disarm the SS, despite having nothing to lose.



The summer of 1944 was the only moment when the special squad restored its reputation on the following occasion. In August 1944, the camp commandant selected from the special squad numbering 1,000 people those 300 prisoners who were the weakest, and he designated them for transport. The prisoners then realized that the transport was a lie and that they were going to die. Many prisoners from the special squad were then assigned to especially large transports from Hungary which had arrived in May, April and June 1944 and became smaller in the following months. When the first of these people were led to a different camp and the SS wanted to select another 200, the prisoners protested and set crematorium oven III on fire. 150 prisoners from crematorium I saw the fire at crematorium III and disarmed the SS men who were present by their oven, cut through the electrical fence and ran away from the camp armed with rifles. The entire SS at Auschwitz was alerted immediately and the pursuit of the escaped prisoners began. They were surrounded and every single one of them was shot. About ten SS men were killed and wounded during this fight. On the same day, 300 people from crematorium oven III were killed. The group of 150 prisoners from crematorium I (mentioned before) included 19 Russians.

The second crew which took care of the transports was called "Canada" – probably because of the good living conditions guaranteed for its personnel. This *kommando* carried out various tasks: emptying the wagons when the transports arrived, unloading the corpses from the train, loading the luggage onto vehicles and sending it to the warehouse. This *kommando* exclusively consisted of Jewish prisoners. Unfortunately, it must be said that many of them signed up for this work voluntarily.

They wanted to lead comfortable lives and did not think about the fact that they were doing so at the expense of those who were being killed.

It is impossible to report everything that happened at Auschwitz in the years 1942–1944 in the form of an article. Every transport went through different experiences and had their own memories.

Hundreds of children were lead by *Oberscharführer* Moll, head of all the crematorium ovens, to be burnt alive. He personally shot thousands. Alive three-year-old child was once found amidst 3,000 corpses, when the bunker was opened after gassing. Moll threw the child into the fire himself.



II

Report concerning those who were arriving at the camp

Those men and women from the transports who were deemed healthy (about 20–25 percent) were marched to the concentration camp to work. All of their clothes were taken away. Once they were bathed and had their heads shaved (women too), they were given lousy prison uniforms and shoes. Apart from that, every prisoner had the appropriate number tattooed on their forearm with a needle.

They were then assigned to blocks. *Blockälteste* (responsible for the block) and barrack orderlies, who were prisoners, were behaving very brutally. People were beaten with large sticks for the most trivial offences.

Food was very scarce. The block elders and barrack orderlies stole for themselves some of the food distributed by the SS among the blocks.

At first we were forced to sleep on the floorboards, with no cover.

The work was hard, it started at dawn and lasted until the nightfall. Prisoners were beaten and abused by *kapos*, the SS and *Vorarbeiter* (overseer of a group of ten people) during work. As a result of this treatment and hard work, 50 percent of prisoners fell ill and were sent to the hospital within the first few weeks. They did not remain there for long, because a vehicle would drive there almost daily in order to take the sickest prisoners to the crematorium ovens. The majority of the sick suffered such a fate. 90 percent of the people who arrived at the camp died in this manner within a couple of months.

I arrived along with 1,200 men and 800 women, and about 35 (in words: thirty five) men and about 15 (fifteen) women from this group survived.

Greek and Dutch Jews died particularly fast. Not used to this climate and bad treatment, they were also less resilient.

The treatment improved slightly at the end of 1943. This probably occurred because the Red Army was approaching. Russian prisoners played an important part in this improvement, having organized themselves and abated *kapos* and block elders.

All of this applies also to the camp for women, where conditions were even worse.



The so-called selections occurred in the camp very frequently. The camp physician inspected all Jews, who had to strip naked. Those who seemed weak and emaciated, and who had wounds on their bodies ("Muslims") were taken in and gassed on the same day. One of the largest selections in Auschwitz took place on 20 January 1944. On that day, the SS doctors Mengele and Thilo chose 50 percent of Jews in the camp to be sent to the gas chamber. Many strong and healthy people were among them.

III

Military and administrative command of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp

Auschwitz (Polish name: Oświęcim) is located near the German-Polish border, 50 kilometers from Kraków and Katowice. Shortly after the war broke out, the Germans established a concentration camp in the former Polish barracks. The first prisoners were German and Polish. Russian prisoners of war started arriving in the second half of 1941. They expanded many other camps near Auschwitz at that time.

Bauabschnitt II (Building section II) was created. This section consisted of six camps. Each of them contained 35 large barracks for horses. Usually 3,000–4,000 prisoners lived in these barracks. When large transports arrived, this number increased by 800–1,000. Four large crematorium ovens were built to the right of the six camps, along with big shower rooms and a number of warehouses. Every camp was surrounded by an electrical fence which was watched closely by the SS. The concentration camp for women was located nearby. 30,000 women were imprisoned there.

Next to these camps, the SS started building *Bauabschnitt III*, which was even bigger than *Bauabschnitt II*. The barracks were already built, but the approach of the Russian army foiled the plans of the Germans.

Military command of the camp: at the beginning of 1943, the post of head of the camp was taken over by an SS officer named Palitzsch, an evil man who terrorized the camp. He was demoted for his lack of discipline. An SS man Scher Huber [Schwarzhuber?] was his successor. He was slightly more decent and not as brutal as his predecessor.

The notorious head of the concentration camp in Lublin, Thumann, who on 21 September 1943 ordered to shoot 19,000 Jews there, became head of the camp in Birkenau for an extended period of time.



Less prominent in the camp was *Rapportführer* [report leader] (Schillinger), the commandant's main secretary. He was tasked with counting prisoners and carrying out the camp authorities' orders.

Rapportführer Schillinger's actions make for a separate chapter. He too has deaths of many people on his conscience. Numerous prisoners were beaten and murdered by him. He died in the following accident: 80 percent of people from the newly arrived transport of Jews from Warsaw were selected for gassing, as usual. Among the people who were meant to be killed was a famous Jewish dancer who refused to undress and persuaded other women to do the same. Schillinger was alerted and came to restore order. When he appeared in the bunker, the dancer leapt at him, yanked a revolver out of his hand and shot him on the spot. She also injured another SS man with his weapon and finally shot herself.

Besides that, there were many ordinary SS men called *Blockführers* (heads of the block) in the camp. They were real murderers, exceptionally brutal and sadistic. Their only task was to cause the prisoners to suffer at work and in the camp. SS men Porecki, Umlauf, Garbardin, Weiss and others were prime examples of that. Among them, there were also those who pretended to be "humane". They never beat anyone and sometimes even provided help and took pity on prisoners, but this was only to gain their trust in order to spy on them. *Blockführer* Schneider was one of them. He became friends with several prisoners and promised to help them escape from prison, naturally for a small fee. Instead of helping them to get free, he handed the prisoners over to the Gestapo officers who shot them.

The worst sadist and murderer at Auschwitz, who personally shot thousands of people, was the head of all four crematorium ovens, *Oberscharführer* Moll. Short and fat, he was a drunk with the face of a killer. He could never eat a meal without killing several people first. He especially enjoyed taking small children (preferably infants) by the legs and crushing their skulls with a revolver or throwing them alive into the fire.

IV

Order within the camp (regulations)

Order within the camp and regarding work was maintained by the prisoners themselves, under the supervision of the SS men.