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The Oświęcim-Brzezinka Concentration and Death Camp (Konzentrationslager Auschwitz-Birkenau)

Located in Oświęcim in the Biała county in the Katowice Government District (Regierungsbezirk Kattowitz) Silesia Province (Provinz Schlesien) and from 1941 in the Upper Silesia Province (Provinz Oberschlesien) near the border with the GG. Its location was convenient, as it was close to the main lines which connected Upper Silesia with southern European countries.

The camp was located in the Zasole quarter beyond the Soła River in a complex of former army barracks and buildings of the former State Tobacco Monopoly. It was the largest Concentration camp in occupied Poland.

It was established by order of Heinrich Himmler on April 27, 1940, while its other part in Brzezinka (Birkenau, Auschwitz II) was set up in spring, 1941. At first it officially functioned as a POW camp (Kriegsgefangenenlager). After the introduction of the plan to exterminate the Jews it became a place of immediate mass extermination of Jews.

The third part of the camp (Auschwitz III) in Monowice (Monowitz) was built during 1942–1943. The structure of the camp was reorganized on November 25, 1944. The Birkenau camp was incorporated into the Auschwitz mother camp (Auschwitz I), while the Auschwitz III camp became KL Monowitz, to which all Subcamps organized by the industrial plants were subordinated. Its more than 40 Subcamps worked for factories, industrial concerns, and the SS. Slavish work was not only a tool of extermination, but also brought profits. During the initial period of the camp's functioning many prisoners worked on its further development.

From the camp's opening until spring 1942, almost all of the prisoners were Polish. The first transport of political prisoners (728 people) arrived on June 14, 1940 from Tarnów. The Auschwitz camp became the main center for extermination of members of the Polish underground, Polish political and social activists and intellectuals. The camp also received transports of hostages, people captured during street round-ups, and people isolated as a preventive measure. In 1942 the camp began to receive transports of people displaced from the Zamość region. After the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising in 1944 the camp became the site of detention for ca. 10,000 Varsovians.

At the end of 1941 the camp received 10,000 Soviet POWs, most of whom were murdered. In 1942

the camp became the site of extermination of Jews from various regions of Poland and the USSR. That year the camp began to receive mass transports of Jews from other countries. It was also the site of extermination of over 20,000 Roma (Gypsies).

The prisoners were murdered in the so-called “death block” and during executions. Some of the sick prisoners were killed using injections of gasoline, anesthetics, or phenol. The SS physicians also performed pseudo-medical experiments on the prisoners. SS physician Dr. Josef Mengele conducted experiments on twins and did research on people with inborn physiological abnormalities. They were subjected to specialist medical examination and then killed using intracardiac phenol injections.

In fall 1941 the Nazis began to kill the prisoners in the gas chambers using cyclone B. The bodies of the murdered were burnt in the crematoriums in Brzezinka. This was how the Nazis exterminated the Jews who arrived in train transports from many countries of Europe.

In chronological order the camp commandants were: SS-Obersturmbannführer Rudolf Höss (1940–1943), SS-Obersturmbannführer Arthur Liebehenschel (1943–1944), and SS-Sturmbannführer Richard Baer (1944–1945).

From mid-1944 to January 17, 1945 over 65,000 prisoners were evacuated from the camps in railway transports, and during January 17–19, 1945 nearly 60,000 prisoners marched in columns out of the camp (“Death Marches”). The number of victims of the January evacuation is estimated at ca. 15,000. At the turn of 1944 and 1945 some of the camp infrastructure (for example the crematoria) was destroyed. On January 27, 1945 the Red Army took control over the camp, liberating ca. 7,000 prisoners.

The number of victims of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp amounts to about 1,000,000 Jews and 70,000–75,000 Poles. The total number of the people murdered during its functioning is 1,100,000.

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Concentration camps functionaries

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