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ANATOMY OF THE AUSCHWITZ DEATH CAMP

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Auschwitz—An Overview

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In the years since the Second World War, the name Auschwitz has become virtually synonymous with the unrestrained tyranny, the power of terror, and the systematic murder of millions of human beings during German Nazi rule.

In *Der SS Staat* (the SS state), a book on the structure of the concentration camp system, Eugen Kogon, a former prisoner of the Buchenwald camp, described almost unlimited totalitarianism in which living arrangements and behavioral norms were imposed on persons deprived of any right to participate in shaping their lives and fate.¹ It was under the unremitting oppression of the concentration camps that the Nazi concept of absolute power over a captive population came closest to full implementation. Thus a survivor, Primo Levi, observed that

never has there existed a state that was really "totalitarian." . . . Never has some form of reaction, a corrective of the total tyranny, been lacking, not even in the Third Reich or Stalin's Soviet Union: in both cases, public opinion, the magistrature, the foreign press, the churches, the feeling for justice and humanity that ten or twenty years of tyranny were not enough to eradicate, have to a greater or lesser extent acted as a brake. Only in the *Lager* was the restraint from below non-existent, and the power of these small satraps absolute.²

In a similar vein, Hannah Arendt argued that "the concentration and extermination camps of totalitarian regimes serve as laboratories in which the fundamental belief of totalitarianism that everything is possible is being verified."³

Auschwitz was the largest of the Nazi concentration camps. In the period from May 1940, when German authorities laid the groundwork for its establishment, to January 1945, when most surviving Auschwitz prisoners were marched off by their German captors and Soviet Army troops liberated the camp, approximately 405,000 prisoners of both sexes from nearly every European country were registered, assigned serial numbers, and incarcerated there. Of this number an estimated 200,000 perished.⁴ (This figure does not include prisoners who were murdered without being registered.) The proportion of deaths among Auschwitz prisoners was much higher than in other concentration camps, such as Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald, and Mauthausen.⁵

With the expansion and development of the camp complex, Auschwitz and its satellites encompassed more than 40 camps spread over a vast industrial area rich with natural resources. These camps served as a huge pool of prisoner labor for the German war effort, as well as for work in mines, construction, and agriculture.

But the uniqueness and historical significance of Auschwitz do not derive from those features. In January 1941, the head of the RSHA (Reichssicherheitshauptamt, or Reich Main Security Office) of the elite Nazi police unit, the Schutzstaffel (SS), Reinhard Heydrich, second in the SS hierarchy to Heinrich Himmler, classified various concentration camps in accordance with the severity of the offenses committed by their prisoners. Auschwitz was placed in the same category as Dachau and Sachsenhausen as a camp for prisoners whose offenses were "relatively light and definitely correctable." One might conclude that at that time Auschwitz did not differ significantly from other concentration camps.

From May 1940 to January 1942, 36,285 prisoners (26,288 civilians and 9,997 Soviet prisoners of war) were incarcerated in the camp. But not even the mass scale of the camp and the savagery of its regime were fated to become its hallmark.

The gruesome history and enduring horror of Auschwitz can be attributed primarily to the machinery for mass extermination of human beings created by the Nazis at the nearby Birkenau camp, a unit of Auschwitz. The location was designated by Himmler as the centerpiece for "the final solution of the Jewish question in Europe." From spring 1942 until fall 1944, the operation designed to annihilate European Jews functioned almost without letup as transport trains delivered Jews from Nazi-occupied countries and European satellites of the Third Reich.

The overwhelming majority of those victims, designated as "RSHA transports" earmarked for "special treatment" (*Sonderbehandlung*), were ignorant of their destination and their fate. They were moved like cattle and arrived in a state of total exhaustion. It has been said that "there will never be people as innocent as the victims on the threshold of the gas chambers."

"Selections" took place on the railroad siding ramp at the gates of Birkenau. Children, the elderly, the sick, and large numbers of men and women were selected for death and marched immediately to the gas chambers. Other transport arrivals, classified as able-bodied, were selected for work and were registered in the camp as prisoners. According to the best estimates now obtainable, more than one million Jews were murdered in the gas chambers on arrival and their bodies incinerated in the camp's crematoria without the victims ever being registered.

Of those murdered upon arrival, no trace remained: no name, no record, no precise information. In *The Nazi Doctors*, Robert Jay Lifton writes:

When we think of the crimes of Nazi doctors, what comes to mind are their cruel and sometimes fatal experiments. . . . Yet when we turn to the Nazi doctor's role in Auschwitz, it was not the experiments that were most significant. Rather, it was his participation in the killing process—indeed his supervision of Auschwitz mass murder from beginning to end.⁶

The place that gave its name to the camp was the small Polish district town of Oswiecim, located 50 kilometers (km) southwest of Krakow and 286 km from Warsaw. From the partition and subjugation of Poland in 1772 until the establishment of the independent Polish republic in 1918, Oswiecim, virtually unknown outside Poland, lay within the territory of the Hapsburg Empire. Following the occupation of Poland in September 1939 by the Third Reich, Oswiecim was incorporated into Germany together with Upper Silesia, hitherto under Polish rule, and renamed Auschwitz. On the eve of the war, the town's population stood at 12,000, including nearly 5,000 Jewish residents. The Sola River, a tributary of the Vistula, flows near Oswiecim; yet at this latitude it is little more than a creek. Although Oswiecim is not far from the Tatra mountains, whose peaks remain snowclad year-round, it lies in a humid and foggy valley with swampy soil, an unpleasant climate conducive to disease.

The initiative to establish a concentration camp in Auschwitz in the spring of 1940 came from the SS and the police district command, which argued that the jails and prisons could no longer meet its needs due to the intensification of Polish resistance activities. Martin Broszat, a German historian of National Socialism and Nazi power, writes in his study of the concentration camps:

Establishment of the camp and the selection of distant Auschwitz in the Katowice [Katowice] district, part of the annexed new eastern territories (about 30 km east of Katowice, on the juncture of Eastern Upper Silesia, the General Government, and Warthegau) as its site was due above all, though not exclusively, to the large number of Polish prisoners captured by the security

police in these areas. They were incarcerated in congested prisons without any intention of putting them on trial.⁷

The concentration camps, which existed from the time of the Nazi takeover until the collapse of the Third Reich, were conceived as an "iron fist" to circumvent the law as dictated by the regime's changing needs. Initially the camps served as instruments of terror and "reeducation" to frighten, deter, and paralyze the Nazis' opposition, primarily members of left-wing political parties and others with liberal views. As the regime consolidated its grip on power, some of its highly placed functionaries concluded that the camps had fulfilled their purpose and should be abolished. During 1936, some 7,500 prisoners on average were incarcerated in concentration camps in Germany. Eventually the chancellor and Nazi Führer Adolf Hitler decided to continue the camps under Himmler and the SS and consolidated their power.

In the second stage of the camps' history, from 1936-37 to the first years of the war, the camps served as dumping grounds for "work shirkers," "asocial elements," criminals, and Jews (especially in the aftermath of the *Kristallnacht* anti-Jewish violence that erupted on November 9, 1938). Many such prisoners worked as forced laborers, described by the historian Karl Dietrich Bracher as slave laborers impressed for work in Hitler's "megalomaniac" construction projects.⁸ SS-owned plants and other enterprises were created next to existing camps, and two new camps were established at Flossenbürg and Mauthausen. On the eve of the war, the prisoner population of Nazi concentration camps had reached 25,000.

The war brought in its wake "a great change in the life of concentration camps," according to the commander and architect of the Auschwitz camp, Rudolf Ferdinand Höss, who wrote his memoirs in a Polish jail after the war. The growing network of concentration camps began absorbing ever-increasing numbers of nationals of Nazi-occupied countries, mainly underground political activists and other suspects. Conditions in the camps deteriorated steadily. As Martin Broszat points out,

the tendency of the SS to turn concentration camps into the pool of manpower for forced labor at its disposal can be detected as early as the winter of 1941-42. Paradoxically, this tendency ran counter to the desire, which had also gained momentum since the outbreak of the war, to eradicate and drive out certain groups of undesirables.⁹

In practice, this meant that along with planning and promoting productive labor, methods known collectively as "destruction through work" (*Vernichtung durch Arbeit*) were introduced. Destruction through work assumed two main forms: (1) work as punishment in the comprehensive terror system, involving

humiliation, brutal treatment, and physical abuse, and (2) backbreaking labor without even the simplest work tools, performed by prisoners living in conditions below subsistence-level.

The growing number of prisoners classified by the Nazis as "racial" inferiors coincided with the attitude that such persons constituted a hostile and expendable element that should be eliminated. Their taskmasters acted as if the supply of prisoner manpower was inexhaustible, requiring no effort to preserve it. This stance changed in 1942, however, as the war on the eastern front dragged on and the shortage of manpower was keenly felt.

In March 1942, concentration camps were placed under the SS Economic-Administrative Main Office (Wirtschafts-Verwaltungshauptamt or WVHA), a move that suggests a more rational approach to prisoner manpower in concentration camps. From the second half of that year, and particularly from 1943 on, this shift was apparent in a modest improvement in the living conditions of prisoners, which in turn somewhat reduced the mortality rate. While this relaxation of prisoner labor policies did not extend to the policy on the extermination of European Jews, which reached its climax during this period, it did affect the conditions of some Jewish victims. Under heavy pressure from officials interested in the most effective use of manpower for the war machine, Himmler consented to the temporary use of some able-bodied, skilled Jewish workers in the production process, while making sure that these prisoners were placed in concentration camps under SS control.

Although the living conditions of Jewish prisoners in the camps generally were much harsher than those of other national and ethnic groups and their mortality rate consequently was higher, it is nonetheless incontrovertible that the few Jews who survived until the end of the war in the camps owe their lives largely to the Germans' desperate need for manpower, which brought a relaxation of camp regime in the later stages of the war.

In the first years of their existence, the camps were populated by German prisoners and, after the annexation of Austria in 1938, by numerous Austrians as well. In the final stages of the war, Germans from the Reich (*Reichsdeutsche*) comprised only 5 percent to 10 percent of the prisoner population, while the overwhelming majority of prisoners were Russians, Poles, French, Dutch, Czechs, Greeks, and Jews from Nazi-occupied European countries. The growth in the prisoner population was formidable, from 25,000 at the outbreak of the war to 525,000 in 1944. In January 1945, a few months before war's end, the camps held more than 700,000.

The concentration camp system was a relatively small segment of the vast network of more than 2,000 camps in areas under Nazi control, including labor camps, prisoner-of-war (POW) camps, and transit camps for prisoners and Jews awaiting transport to their final destination. Concentration camps differed from other types of camps in that they remained under the control

of the central SS authorities and maintained a uniform internal regime and unified command. All SS-controlled concentration camps were bound by the same harsh regulations which governed other prisoners and SS personnel: a daily schedule that regulated prisoners' lives down to the last detail, a hierarchy of SS command with some power handed to functionary-prisoners (those assigned official duties), and a penal system which permitted the hanging of prisoners.

The camp established at Dachau in 1933 by Himmler, then police chief in Munich, served as a model for all subsequent concentration camps. Dachau served also as a training facility for the SS's so-called Death's-Head Unit (Totenkopfverbände), which became the core of SS personnel responsible for running the concentration camp system. Having completed the Dachau "school," they went on to serve as commanders and senior officials in other such facilities.

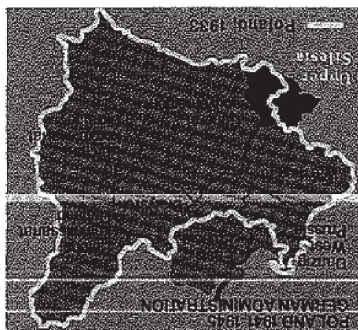
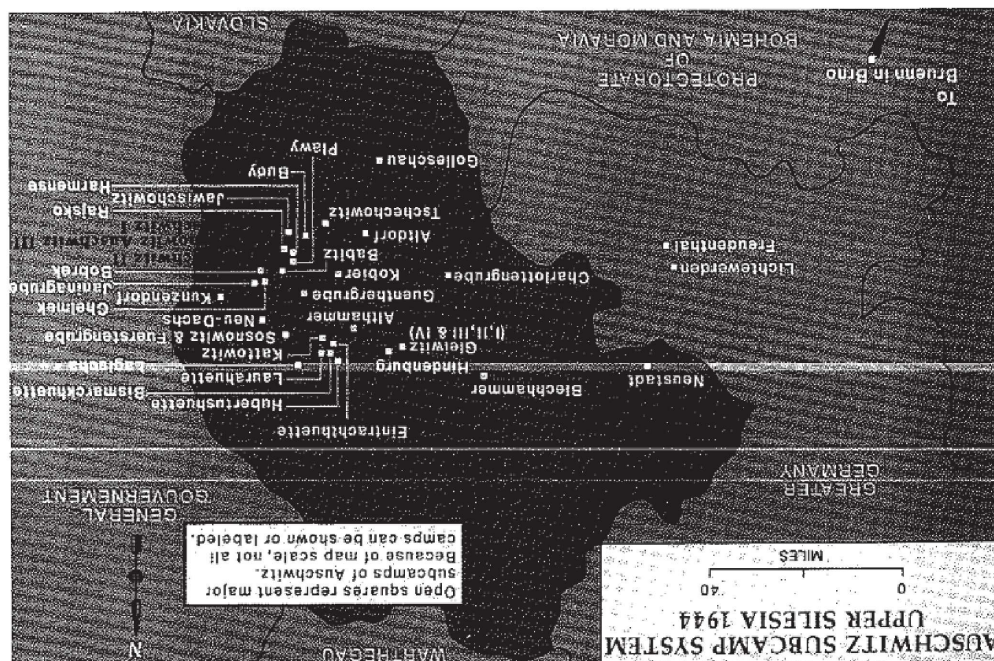
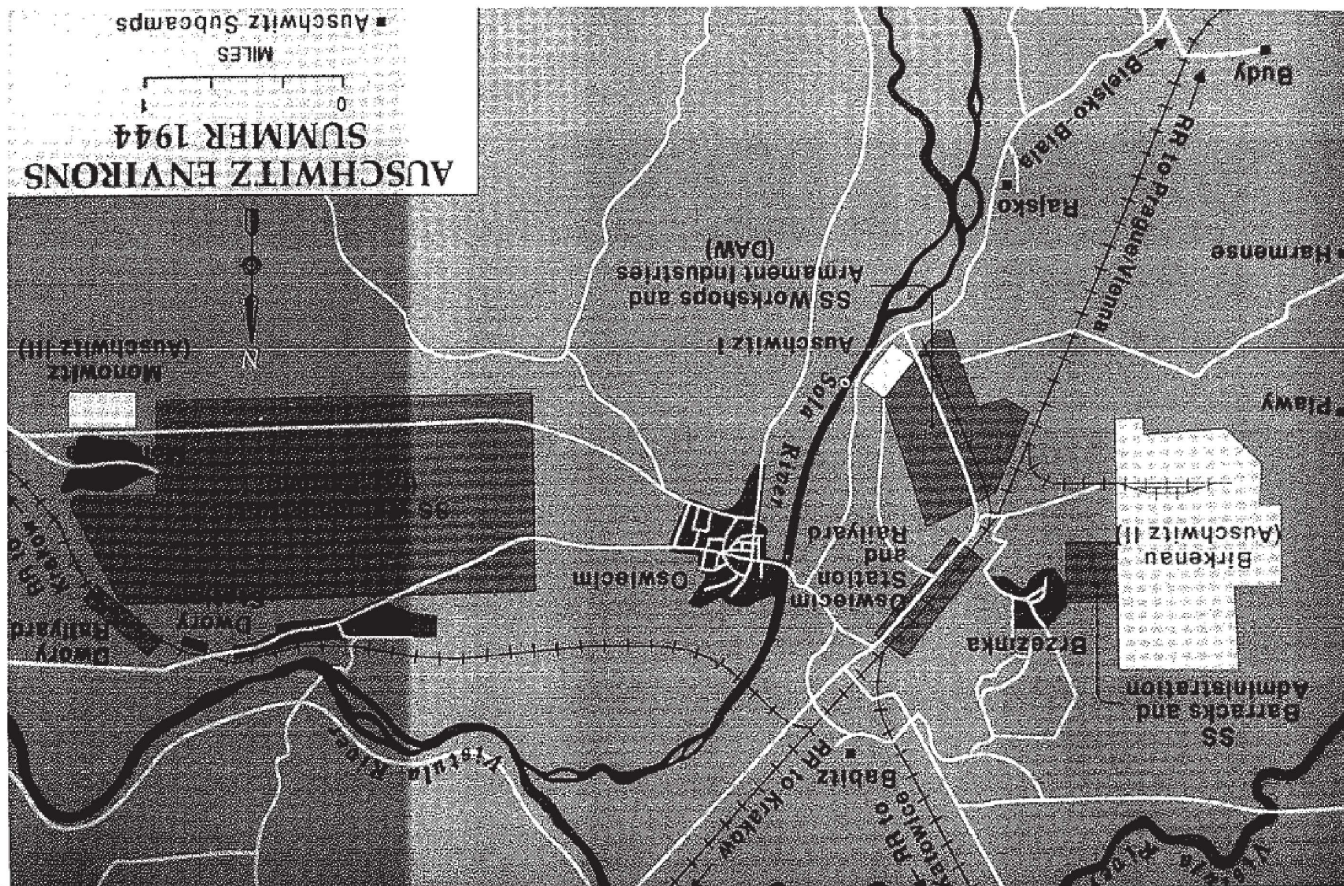
SS-Oberführer (Colonel) Theodor Eicke, the first Dachau commander and later the inspector for concentration camps, designed the Dachau camp regulations, which served as a model for regulations in all other concentration camps. It was Eicke who determined that "commiseration with the enemy of the state [the prisoner] does not benefit the SS man." At the beginning of the war, Eicke joined the combat SS formation (Waffen SS) and was killed on the eastern front in 1943, but his theory and practice remained in force in Nazi concentration camps until the end.

The site selected to become the core of the future Auschwitz camp lay outside the town of Oswiecim. It included 16 one-story buildings that had served as army barracks. The Inspectorate for Concentration Camps dispatched two commissions to inspect the proposed site. The first, which arrived in January 1940, issued a negative opinion. The second, which arrived in April 1940, was headed by SS-Hauptsturmführer (Captain) Rudolf Höss, whose name was to become permanently linked with the camp. Acting on a report from Höss, Himmler ordered the establishment of the camp on the site and appointed Höss as its commander.

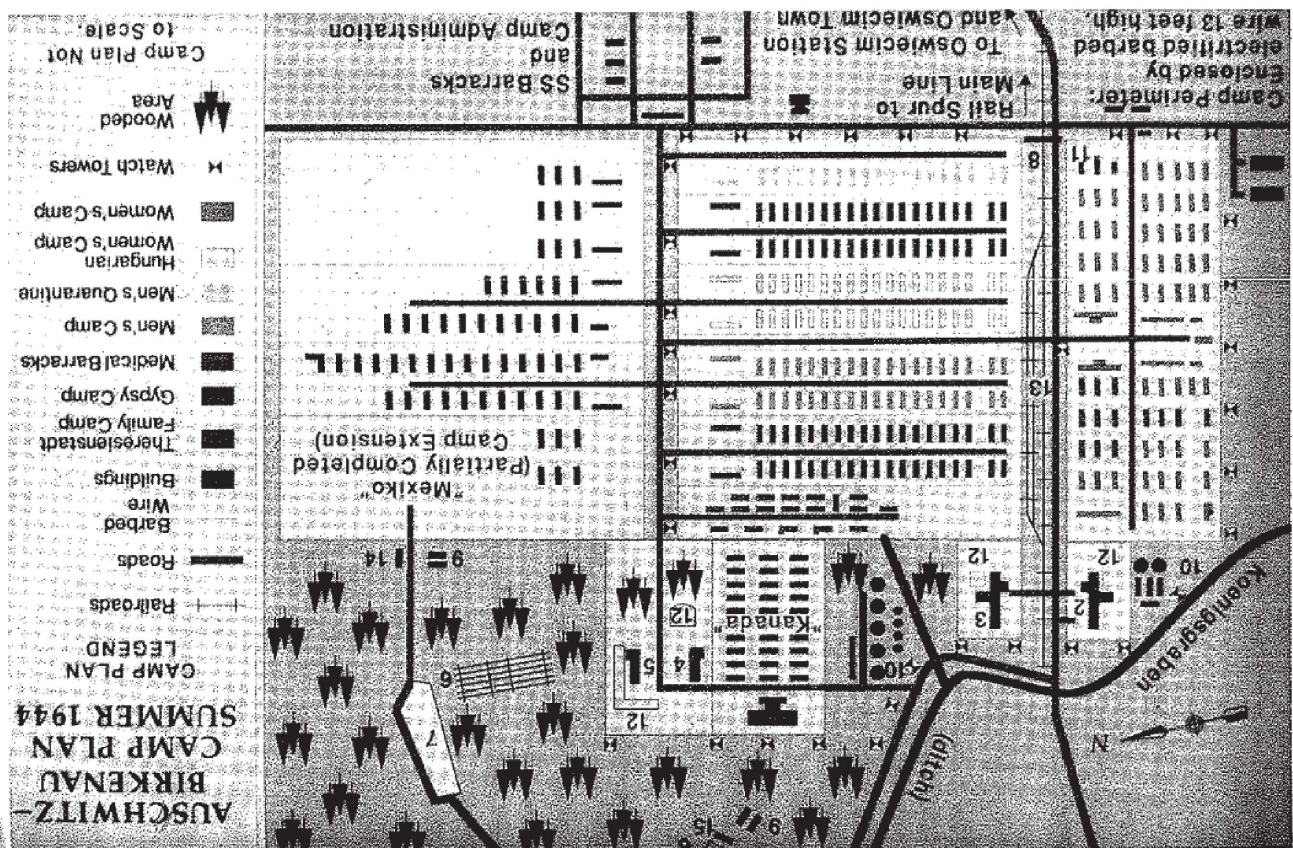
The first order of business was the eviction of about 1,200 persons who lived in shacks and cabins in the vicinity of the projected camp. Next, 300 Jewish residents of Oswiecim were brought in for six weeks to level the terrain and lay foundations. Then, in May 1940, 30 German criminal prisoners arrived from the Sachsenhausen camp. Assigned the first Auschwitz camp serial numbers, these prisoners made up the network of functionary-prisoners holding official posts in the prisoner hierarchy, "the long arm of the SS in the camp," as David Rousset, a French concentration camp survivor, put it.

On June 14, 1940, the first transport carrying 728 Polish inmates from the town of Tarnow in Galicia arrived in the camp. The administration and





Selected features: 1. "Sauna" (disinfection). 2. Gas chamber and crematorium #2. 3. Gas chamber and crematorium #3. 4. Gas chamber and crematorium #4. 5. Gas chamber and crematorium #5. 6. Crematorium pits. 7. Mass graves for Soviet POWs. 8. Main guard house. 9. Barracks for disrobing. 10. Sewage plant. 11. Medical experiments barracks. 12. Buried ashes from crematoria. 13. "Rampa" (railroad platform). 14. Provisional gas chamber #1. 15. Provisional gas chamber #2.



Selected features: 1. Camp commander's house. 2. Main guard house. 3. Camp administrative offices. 4. Gestapo. 5. Reception building and prisoner registration. 6. Kitchen. 7. Gas chamber and crematorium #1. 8. Storage buildings and workshops. 9. Storage of confiscated belongings. 10. Gravel pit, execution site. 11. Camp orchestra. 12. "Black wall," execution site. 13. Block 11, punishment bunker. 14. Block 10, medical experiments. 15. Gallows. 16. Block commander's barracks. 17. SS hospital.



management staff was assembled, mostly officials transferred to Auschwitz from other camps. SS-Obersturmführer (First Lieutenant) Josef Kramer from Mauthausen was appointed as Höss's deputy. Karl Fritsch of Dachau was appointed chief of the prisoner camp. A political department (a branch of the Gestapo, the state secret-police organization) was also established.

As the main concentration camp for the occupied Polish territories, the Polish underground, and the Polish intelligentsia, Auschwitz grew steadily and gradually to accommodate prisoners of various categories. To facilitate implementation of plans for the camp, more residents were evicted from several districts of the town and from surrounding areas; all Jewish residents of Oswiecim were evacuated to the nearby town of Chrzanow. By uprooting the local population, the Germans created an empty area measuring 40 sq km designated as "the interest area of the camp."

When Himmler first visited Auschwitz in March 1941, 10,900 prisoners, most of them Poles, had been incarcerated in the camp. After touring the camp with an entourage of senior SS officers, local officials, functionaries of the Inspectorate for Concentration Camps, and officials of the giant industrial conglomerate IG Farbenindustrie who sought to establish a subsidiary on the camp grounds, Himmler laid down expansion plans. They included intensive construction work in the camp area with a view to accommodating 30,000 prisoners and the establishment at Birkenau (Brzezinka), about 3 km away, of a camp for 100,000 prisoners of war. Three months before the Germans attacked the Soviet Union, Himmler was clearly anticipating prisoners from that future campaign. Expansion plans also called for supplying 10,000 prisoner workers to IG Farben for the construction of a large industrial enterprise in the vicinity of Auschwitz and for agricultural development with the help of prisoner manpower, establishment of workshops, and war effort enterprises in the camp.

Himmler's visit inaugurated an upsurge in construction. In 1942, an average of 8,000 prisoners worked daily in construction. The main camp (*Stammlager*), Auschwitz I, expanded so rapidly that by the end of 1941 it could accommodate 18,000 prisoners and in 1943 held as many as 30,000. Living quarters for the SS were built within the perimeter of the camp, together with barracks for SS guards, headquarters for the Auschwitz complex, and a workshop and depot sector. The entire main camp occupied an area 1,000 m long and 400 m wide.

Construction in the Birkenau camp, which was to become Auschwitz II, started in October 1941. The terrible congestion which prevailed in the main camp as a result of the arrival of Soviet prisoners of war toward the end of 1941 forced the Germans to accelerate the pace of construction work in Birkenau. Preparation of the ground necessitated draining swamps. Workers labored under inhuman conditions and suffered cruel treatment. The new

camp was completed at a high cost in lives of POWs and civilian prisoners. But ultimately the construction did not go according to plan, and the projected scope of construction and the division of the camp into subcamps had to be modified.

In the second half of 1941, Himmler entrusted Auschwitz authorities with preparations for the projected mass annihilation of European Jews. In the context of this plan, Birkenau was designed to hold various categories of prisoners and to function also as a death camp. The first sectors of Birkenau, subcamps separated by barbed-wire fences and equipped with gates and watchtowers, were completed in 1942. In 1943, the sector designated as BII was completed. It consisted of separate subsectors designed for living quarters (designated BIIb to BIIIf) and located in long wooden structures built originally as horse stables. Thus a barrack originally designed for 52 horses served as living quarters for over 400 prisoners.

In March 1942, a women's sector was established in the main camp. It held 999 German women prisoners brought from the Ravensbrück concentration camp and the same number of Jewish women brought from Slovakia. Before long, the population of the women's camp rose to 6,000 prisoners. In August, it was moved to Birkenau. In January 1944, the Birkenau women's sector held 27,053 prisoners, who suffered from a lack of the most basic sanitary and hygienic conditions and were subject to frequent selections for gassings.

The Birkenau camp sectors, both men's and women's, held prisoners of many nationalities, most of them Jews. In January 1944, the total prisoner population of Auschwitz camps reached 80,839.

In February 1943, a separate family camp for Gypsies was created in sector BIIe, and a similar camp for Jews from the Theresienstadt ghetto in Czechoslovakia was opened in September. Later, both family camps were liquidated and most of their inmates murdered in the gas chambers.

In addition to the intensive expansion and construction of sectors of the main camps in the years 1942-45, some 40 camps were established over a wide area around Auschwitz, some of them tens of kilometers from the main camp. These camps were either directly affiliated with Auschwitz or served as branches. Varying in size, their prisoner populations ranging from several dozen to several thousands, these camps were established near mines, foundries, and other industrial enterprises. Establishment of such an extensive network of satellite camps was necessary because prisoners could not march more than several kilometers to work, and mines and other sources of raw materials were often located considerable distances from the main camp. The Germans also sought to avoid concentrating a large number of industrial buildings close to the main camp for security and other reasons.

The various types of satellite camps were designated *Aussenlager* (external camp), *Nebenlager* (extension or subcamp), *Arbeitslager* (labor camp), and

others. For the most part, their internal regime was patterned after that of the concentration camp. They were populated mostly by Jewish prisoners living in the utmost deprivation, often under worse conditions than in the main camps. Mines and other industrial enterprises using the slave labor of prisoners (who, of course, were paid nothing, with all the proceeds from their labor going to the SS coffers) belonged to some of the largest German companies, including Hermann Göring Werke, Siemens-Schuckert, and IG Farbenindustrie. Acting in concert with the huge Krupp conglomerate, camp authorities established a large plant owned by Weichsel Union Metallwerke close to the main camp. It employed hundreds of prisoners, including men from Auschwitz I and women from Birkenau. In the last phase of the camp's existence, women workers from this plant were transferred to separate living quarters near the main camp.

In a comprehensive survey of the structure of the camp, Danuta Czech, a Polish scholar on the staff of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, concludes:

Twenty-eight of the forty satellite camps of Auschwitz worked either directly or indirectly for the German armaments industry. Nine were established near foundries and other metal works, six near coal mines; six more supplied prisoner labor to chemical plants, three others to light industry; one was situated next to the plant manufacturing construction materials and one near a food processing plant. Prisoners of other camps worked in renovation and construction, in forestry, farmsteads and growing livestock, experimental agricultural stations, and other enterprises.¹⁰

Prisoners of the Jaworzno and Jawiszowice satellite camps worked in coal mines; of Swietochowice camp, in a foundry; of Lagisze camp, in the construction of a power plant; of Myslowice camp, in a coal mine. The largest satellite camp was Monowice (Monowitz), where IG Farben erected a huge synthetic rubber plant (Buna Werke). Studies conducted after the war indicate that the performance of prisoners working under duress, in conditions of brutal regime, harsh oppression, and extreme deprivation, fell far short of German objectives, and the overall performance of the huge industrial complex near Auschwitz can be considered an abysmal failure in terms of output and efficiency.

In the fall of 1943, sweeping organizational and administrative changes were made in the camp complex. These changes appear to have been precipitated by the discovery of widespread corruption in the Political Department (Politische Abteilung) headed by Maximilian Grabner, perhaps the most feared and cruel SS functionary in Auschwitz. Investigation proceedings instituted against Grabner uncovered unauthorized appropriation of property and other cases of abuse of power involving some senior SS

officials, including Höss himself. Grabner was relieved of his duties and subsequently put on trial; others were transferred to new posts. In November, Höss was removed as camp commandant and transferred to the Inspectorate for Concentration Camps at Oranienburg. He was replaced by SS-Obersturmbannführer Arthur Liebehenschel.

Simultaneously, the entire camp complex was broken into three parts. Auschwitz I remained the main camp; Birkenau became Auschwitz II; and Auschwitz III, also called Monowitz, the industrial camp, comprised Buna Werke and the network of satellite camps. Liebehenschel was the commander of Auschwitz I. SS-Sturmabführer Fritz Hartjenstein was the commander of the Birkenau complex, which included the mass-murder installations and crematoria for incinerating the bodies of victims. These changes brought some relative improvement in living conditions in the camp and opened the final phase of its existence, which lasted until its evacuation and liquidation beginning on January 18, 1945.

It is all but impossible to portray the living conditions faced daily by prisoners of the Auschwitz camps. Every day in the life of a prisoner was filled with unbearable tension and superhuman effort, emotional turmoil and terror, continuing without respite for months on end. The prisoner's day was also hollow, empty, and mirthless, lacking any novelty and enveloped in everlasting gloom. Despite the stress, with the ever-present danger to Auschwitz prisoners could never lower their guard, all their energy going to maintain permanent vigilance. Furthermore, the prisoners enjoyed no privacy; day and night they remained in tangible proximity to others. Spoiled food provided no nourishment. Incessant hunger was also a source of ceaseless torment and anguish.

The daily regimen of the prisoner, whose name was replaced by a camp serial number, was punctuated by duties and orders from morning until night which had to be performed quickly and accurately. In addition to personal responsibility for inadequate performance, the prisoner had to bear the burden of collective responsibility. Sleeping and waking were regulated as well. Each morning the prisoner had to draw on every ounce of strength to survive.

It comes as no surprise that memoirs and reminiscences of former prisoners abound with descriptions of terror and superhuman efforts. Despite being surrounded by thousands of fellow inmates, each prisoner remained utterly alone. Only a handful appear to have established ties of friendship, to have considered other prisoners, or to have understood the reality engulfing them. Others drew sustenance from memory in their obstinate effort to go on, to nourish their hope of survival, to eventually reach the shore of the living.

Setting foot on the soil of Auschwitz marked a radical and irrevocable departure from one's previous existence. The camps were surrounded by a

double length of barbed wire, an electrified fence illuminated at night and dotted with watchtowers manned by armed SS guards. All around were other camps and kilometers of empty space patrolled by the SS. On entry, the prisoner was stripped not only of all personal possessions but also of his or her identity. Even the prisoner's body was violated, as all body hair was shaved off. A camp serial number was tattooed on the prisoner's left arm (a practice unique to Auschwitz), and a small triangle if the prisoner was Jewish. Name was replaced by number, home by block, room and bed by a tiered bunk with a thin layer of straw for a mattress.

Throughout the year, the prisoners wore striped camp fatigues, the fabric stiff with dirt and sweat, without underwear, and their feet shod in wooden shoes without socks. A piece of cloth was attached to the coat and trousers bearing the prisoner's serial number and the symbol of his or her category: red triangle for political prisoners; green triangle for ordinary criminals; black triangle for asocials. There were several other such identifying marks, for homosexuals, for "Bible researchers" (*Bibelforscher*, that is, for Jehovah's Witnesses), and others. All Jewish prisoners were marked by a Star of David composed of red and yellow triangles.

For most prisoners, the first encounter with what one former French prisoner described as *l'univers concentrationnaire* was usually the decisive one. As a rule, adjustment to the camp proved most difficult for persons accustomed to comfort, order, and a predictable social milieu; such individuals either could not or would not become part of camp life. Prisoners who had experienced the harsh living conditions of prisons and ghettos, which served as an antechamber of sorts to the inferno of the concentration camp, were, on the whole, better prepared. Those unwilling or unable to adapt soon sunk into apathy and dejection; they were known as "*Muselmänner*" in the camp slang (the origins of this appellation remain unknown, some surmise that it derived from the alleged resemblance of these prisoners, unable to stand on their feet, to Muslims in supine prayer). Moribund, their senses dulled, such prisoners hovered in the twilight zone between life and death. Before long, their bodies lost their shape, becoming little more than skeletons covered with dry yellowish skin. Gazing aimlessly with their lifeless eyes, they moved slowly, unperturbed by savage cries in German urging them to move on, even after truncheon blows rained hard on their bodies. For their part, veteran prisoners found little pity for these "misfits." We may surmise that the sight of these tragic figures caused fellow inmates considerable fear and anxiety at the prospect of deteriorating into one of them.

The prisoner's day began with reveille at 4:30 A.M. Half an hour was allowed for morning ablutions. At the mandatory roll call, prisoners stood at attention in straight rows to be counted; the number of prisoners had to match

the official figures. After roll call, the prisoner work details or labor squads, called *Kommando*, would set off to their places of work. Most prisoners were assigned permanently to a labor squad. In rows of five abreast, they passed through the gate emblazoned with the sign *Arbeit macht frei* (Work makes one free), often to the accompaniment of an orchestra playing near the gate.

Most of the work was performed outdoors in both summer and winter. In summer the workday lasted 12 hours, in winter a little less. Work was performed under the watchful eyes of the *Kapos*—prisoner foremen assigned to oversee the entire squad or parts of it—and the SS escort, who urged on both the *Kapos* and the working prisoners. No rest was allowed. A prisoner assigned to latrine duty would measure the time taken by workers to relieve themselves.

The squads considered as "good" assignments were those employed in services: kitchen, laundry, and various workshops. Prisoners in such squads worked indoors and enjoyed greater opportunity to "organize" (a camp slang expression for "steal") some extra food, the most precious benefit in the camp. For the most part, only the old-timers and prisoners with "connections" worked in these squads. Relations in the prisoner society, such as they were, originated in prewar ties, solidarity among prisoners from the same transport, and, above all, ties of membership in the political underground and resistance movements.

After returning to camp from work, the prisoners reported to evening roll call, also mandatory. The number of prisoners present again had to match official figures. The failure of even a single prisoner to appear, whether because he or she had fallen asleep or escaped, caused considerable agony to fellow inmates at the evening roll call; they had to remain in their places, standing at attention, regardless of the weather, sometimes for hours until the missing prisoner or the reason for his or her disappearance was discovered.

The evening roll call was often followed by individual or collective punishments. Only after that were the prisoners allowed to retire to their living quarters in the "block" to receive their bread rations with meager supplements and a watery drink. Those with enough strength or will power would leave their block to meet with friends or relatives from another block. At curfew two or three hours later, prisoners were confined to their cold and dark blocks. Prisoners used their rolled-up clothes and shoes as headrests to prevent their theft during the night.

Except for those employed in armaments plants, the prisoners did not work on Sundays. Nevertheless, Sunday was not a day off. Cleaning, shaving, showering in groups, and similar activities were compulsory, keeping the prisoners occupied even on their one day free of work.

Although the prisoner society lived under a uniform regime, it was far from homogeneous in its composition and, to some extent, in conditions.

Some tensions and conflicts, including divisions between different categories of prisoners, resulted from deliberate German policies. Camp authorities created a small though powerful stratum of prisoners in positions of authority: kapos in charge of the work units, *Lagerälteste* in charge of the entire prisoners' camp population, *Blockälteste* and *Stubendienste*—the prisoners commanding the blocks—and many positions in the central administration of the camps. They also divided the prisoner population into ethnic and "racial" groups, as Germans did with all subjugated populations. One important division in the camp set the so-called reds, or political prisoners, against the greens, or criminal prisoners.

Despite their small numbers, German prisoners generally held positions of authority and occupied key posts in the prisoner apparatus. Hermann Langbein, an Austrian political prisoner, wrote in his *Menschen in Auschwitz*, (People in Auschwitz) that

Höss concealed the fact that his subordinate [SS-Hauptsturmführer] Hans Aumeier, who served as camp director, admitted frankly after his arrest that prisoners with sadistic dispositions were deliberately singled out for the positions of "block elders" [chiefs of prisoner blocks]. "Most of them were professional criminals," Aumeier added.¹¹

In Auschwitz I, most official posts held by prisoners were assigned to Poles. In the men's and women's camps at Birkenau, many such posts were held by Jewish prisoners. Contrary to the prevalent opinion, not all prisoners in positions of authority, such as kapos and block elders, maltreated their fellow inmates. Mistreatment was the case mainly in the first two years of the camp's existence. This situation gradually changed, and the urge to harass and torment the prisoners abated somewhat.

Bruno Bettelheim and others argue that the concentration camp system spawned a reality in which all the beliefs, values, and norms of behavior adhered to in the world outside the camps were abandoned. The prisoners came to accept this situation as reality and in a certain sense even identified with the apparatus of brute power, thereby becoming an integral part of the system. Thus Bettelheim maintains that

even in the concentration camps, belief in the power and justice of the police was so strong that prisoners were not willing to believe that they had been unjustly persecuted. Rather, they searched their mind to find some guilt in themselves. The inner desire to be loved by the superego is extremely strong, and the weaker the ego becomes, the stronger is this desire. Since in the totalitarian system the most powerful superego surrogates are the rules and their representatives—in short the system itself—one can gain approval of the superego surrogates only by going along with the system.¹²

But such arguments chiefly articulate the soul searching that went on among German prisoners in concentration camps in Germany in the 1930s as they witnessed the growing power of the Nazi regime.

Bettelheim also refers to the phenomenon of a weak personality overawed by power and the desire to bask in its splendor, even to deliver oneself to its "mercies." This phenomenon is in evidence in different aspects of the totalitarian regime, including concentration camps. Some prisoners elevated to positions of official authority at Auschwitz apparently exhibited such behavior, but even at Auschwitz and other concentration camps, this phenomenon was exceptional, not routine. Primo Levi's comments are pertinent in this context:

I am not an expert on the unconscious and the mind's depths, but I do know that few people are experts in this sphere, and that these few are the most cautious. I do not know, and it does not much interest me to know, whether in my depths there lurks a murderer, but I do know that I was a guiltless victim and I was not a murderer. I know that the murderers existed, not only in Germany, and still exist, retired or on active duty, and that to confuse them with their victims is a moral disease or an aesthetic affectation or a sinister sign of complicity; above all, it is precious service rendered (intentionally or not) to the negators of truth.¹³

When key positions in the lower echelons of the camp hierarchy were held by habitual criminals, the Auschwitz prisoners were often subjected to humiliation, arbitrary punishment, and physical abuse, including torture. This treatment stemmed from a total disregard for human beings and a desire to fulfill the expectations of Nazi taskmasters. This character type outlived its usefulness, however, when productive work assumed critical importance for the beleaguered Third Reich. At that time, most supervisory positions were entrusted to the "politicals," bringing some relief into the lives of prisoners.

A considerable proportion of the political prisoners in positions of authority were linked to the underground and resistance organizations active in Auschwitz, enabling these groups, in the late stages of the camp's existence, to influence conditions in the camp. The underground groups operated through several channels, smuggling out information to the external world, procuring medicines and material assistance for prisoners associated with the underground, attempting to rescue prisoners due to be killed, and assisting in escapes. Although the underground's ability to lead a general uprising and mass escape from Auschwitz fell short of expectations, its activities, especially in preserving invaluable documentation and informing the outside world about the camp, indicate that prisoner subjugation to the overwhelming might of Nazi power was far from complete.

Józef Garlinski, a former Polish Auschwitz prisoner who studied the underground activity in the camp, especially the role of the Poles and their ties with the surrounding Polish population, wrote that

the earliest threads which linked the camp with the outside world did not have the character of an organized action. The people, seeing the prisoners working nearby, tried to help them. Food, sometimes medicines and dressings, were left in hiding places. The initiative was private and spontaneous, but the circle of those who helped kept growing and began to take the form of a clandestine society. At the end of 1940 the district command of the underground army in Krakow helped to organize the *Akcja Czynna Pomocy Więzniom* [Civil Action for Help to Prisoners].¹⁴

The help of the population was vital in accomplishing many escapes from the camp.

Hunger in Auschwitz was ubiquitous and pervasive. Prisoners were tormented by it before and after meals. Thoughts and fantasies about food haunted the prisoners, even in their sleep. Countless conversations revolved around hunger and ways of appeasing it. Food was uppermost on every prisoner's mind, although not everyone went equally hungry.

Theoretically, each prisoner was entitled to a daily ration of 350 grams of bread, half a liter of ersatz coffee for breakfast, and one liter of turnip and potato soup for lunch. Also, four times a week each prisoner was to receive a soup ration of 20 grams of meat, but in practice meat rarely reached the bowls from which the prisoners ate. The official daily value of food for prisoners employed in light work stood at 1,700 calories and for prisoners doing strenuous work, 2,150 calories. An analysis done after the war of the actual food content ranged from 1,300 calories for light-work prisoners to 1,700 calories for prisoners performing hard labor. The difference was caused by plunder of food by SS personnel and functional-prisoners. Inequality pervaded the food distribution system. The kapo, or the prisoner entrusted with ladling out the soup, made sure that the thicker, more nourishing contents from the bottom would reach "proper" prisoners, whereas the others had to content themselves with a watery substance from the top of the pot. (The red bowl and tin spoon were the only items of private property the prisoners could have, and they lugged them everywhere they went.)

Under these conditions, supplementary food was tantamount to survival. But other habits sometimes overrode even this paramount concern; prisoners addicted to tobacco went as far as trading part of their daily ration for tobacco. The bread ration thus served as a currency of sorts. The functionaries, who made up perhaps 3 to 5 percent of the prisoner population, exchanged their supplementary bread and soup for higher-quality and tastier victuals.

Prisoners condemned to subsist on the official ration lost weight rapidly, and their survival odds diminished accordingly. Non-Jewish prisoners could receive some money from relatives or sponsors outside and purchase low-quality supplements of food and cigarettes. From the end of 1942, camp authorities allowed prisoners to receive food parcels, which proved of critical importance. The parcels usually contained food of high caloric value, and lucky recipients could even exchange some of it for bread. But the Jewish prisoners, who soon constituted the majority in the two main camps at Auschwitz, received no parcels. Nor did Soviet prisoners.

In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Primo Levi argues that sometimes thirst was even more pervasive, more physically and mentally debilitating, than hunger. The water at Auschwitz was contaminated with various impurities, and members of the SS staff were instructed not to drink it. This warning, of course, did not apply to the prisoners. In Birkenau, the prisoners, especially the women, suffered from chronic shortage and poor quality of water. Levi writes from experience:

In August of 1944 it was very hot in Auschwitz. . . . There was no drinkable water in the camp or often on the work site . . . as a rule, the evening soup and the ersatz coffee distributed around ten o'clock were abundantly sufficient to quench our thirst, but now they were no longer enough and thirst tormented us. Thirst is more imperative than hunger: hunger obeys the nerves, grants remission, can be temporarily obliterated by an emotion, a pain, a fear . . . not so with thirst which does not give respite . . . in those days it accompanied us day and night: by day, on the work site, whose order . . . was transformed into a chaos of shattered constructions; by night, in the hut without ventilation, as we gasped the air breathed a hundred times before.¹⁵

Other critical factors affecting prisoners' chances of survival were their national origin and racial classification. In *Values and Violence in Auschwitz*, Polish researcher Anna Pawelczynska, who was also a prisoner in the camp, attempted to rank the prisoners according to their origins. "Pseudo-scientific theories of race," she writes, "began to take drastic effect by ranking the different nationalities of prisoners, thus spelling out their turns to die." Jews and Gypsies, regardless of their citizenship, occupied the bottom of the scale, a position which automatically made them the prime victims of the gas chambers and crematoria. Slightly above them, she adds, were Slavs, especially the Poles and the Russians, who were subjected to different murder methods at different times. The next category comprised persons of various European nationalities for whom no precise extermination plans were developed. The only ones exempt from such plans were persons of German origin.¹⁶

In point of fact, all the Jews and many of the Gypsies brought to Auschwitz were not only victims of murder but also subjects of plans for annihilation.

lation. With few exceptions, Soviet prisoners of war were also annihilated en masse. Prisoners of other national origins were not subjected to systematic murder, even though in some cases they met a gruesome fate. Among the victimized groups were a large number of members of the Polish intelligentsia who had been subjected to mass arrests and violent terror.

The harsh conditions in the camp and the savagery of its regime resulted in an inordinately high mortality rate, particularly in the first years of the camp's existence. Langbein maintains that the periodic savage onslaughts by the German camp command, assisted by functionary-prisoners, were directed against the "new arrivals," or *Zugänge*, as they were known in the camp. The first ones to bear the brunt of these murderous assaults were the Poles, followed by the Russians. The Jews' turn also came early.

But the Jews, including those registered and incarcerated in the camp as prisoners, met a different fate from that of victims of other origins. The few Jews who arrived at Auschwitz in the first transports were all murdered forthwith. Polish and other Jews who were deemed unfit for work were put to death mostly by phenol injections administered in the camp hospitals. Langbein, who occupied an official position in the Auschwitz hospital and was a leading figure in the prisoners' underground structure, maintains that reports compiled by the resistance showed that between 25,000 and 30,000 persons were murdered by phenol injections; the proportion of Jews among them was very high. In March 1943, murder by phenol injection was discontinued. But Jews continued to be identified in hospitals as unfit for work and dispatched to the gas chambers.

Camp hospitals evoked fear in prisoners. As long as they could summon enough strength to stand, prisoners avoided sick call, which might place them in the hospital. Even those suffering from high fever, crippling diarrhea, or festering wounds tried to avoid hospitalization as long as possible. At the same time, for some prisoners the prospect of several days' rest in bed, exempt from roll calls, backbreaking work, and physical abuse, could be very alluring.

The mortality rate among prisoners peaked periodically for various reasons. In the early stages, the terroristic regime and the poor living conditions pushed it upward. In those years, however, there were comparatively few prisoners in the camp. During the first two years, up to March 1942, about 27,000 persons were incarcerated in Auschwitz, whereas over the next year, until March 1943, the number of prisoners jumped by 135,000, five times the population of the two preceding years. This large influx marked a turning point in the composition of the prisoner population. According to reports compiled by the resistance, at this time 2.7 percent of the Auschwitz prisoners were Germans, 30.1 percent were Poles, and 57.4 percent were Jews. With time, this trend gained momentum, so that in the middle of 1944, Jews constituted two-thirds of all the Auschwitz prisoners.

Epidemics of lice, typhus, dysentery, and common phlegmon, particularly in Birkenau, resulted in skyrocketing mortality rates in the period from July 1942 to March 1943; according to available data, they ranged from 19 percent to 25 percent per month. The decline that followed can be attributed to some improvement in the camp conditions in general and in hospitals in particular. In May 1943, the monthly mortality rate dropped to 5.2 percent, and in the main Auschwitz camp it dropped even more. Opportunities to help patients were seized by most prisoner-doctors and other members of the medical staff. Otto Kraus and Erich Kulka, authors of *The Death Factory in Auschwitz*, conclude that

most prisoner-doctors conducted themselves honorably. They succeeded in saving many lives not only by providing medical care but also by deceiving SS men with false diagnoses and examinations, by keeping secret the existence of contagious diseases, etc. In this way they saved a great many patients from gassing, hard work in the camp, and physical punishments.¹⁷

In addition to the racist policies that classified prisoners into national-ethnic categories, the atmosphere at Auschwitz made conflicts and divisions in the prisoner society inevitable. In a world with all moral norms and restraints lifted and no holds barred, where congestion, severe deprivation, and nervous tension were ubiquitous, the prisoners easily succumbed to violence and rudeness. Conditions of life in the camp managed to undermine any solidarity that might be expected to arise among human beings who found themselves in identical situations. The assumption that common suffering bridges distances separating people was not borne out by camp reality. Tempers were short, and foreign customs and habits, manifestations of religious piety, and the sound of foreign languages kept the prisoners on edge. Deprived of privacy, the prisoners proved especially sensitive to an unfamiliar language which grated on their ears and often gave rise to suspicion that the speakers were mocking those unable to understand it.

National stereotypes gained acceptance. The Germans were described as arrogant and conceited, seeking privileged treatment; the Poles were described as keeping to themselves and xenophobic; the French gained a reputation as unconcerned with personal hygiene. Jews were perceived as inferior by everybody else. Antisemitic stereotypes brought from the outside tended to become entrenched in the camp, though in some cases non-Jewish prisoners discarded their home-grown prejudices. Jewish prisoners were set apart by national origin, cultural and economic background, and language. Thus, for example, the Hungarian Jews who arrived at the camp as late as August 1944 from relatively tolerable conditions accused the Polish Jews, most of them old-timers, of aloofness and selfishness. Perhaps most difficult was the situation of the Greek Jews, who suffered more than

others from the harsh northern climate, did not speak any languages spoken in the camp, and often believed that other prisoners were responsible for their troubles and acute distress. Even if these divisions, rivalries, and rifts among the prisoner society were unplanned and did not stem from deliberate German policies, the camp authorities were of course well aware that this phenomenon worked in their favor.

Jewish prisoners in particular lived in the shadow of certainty that their relatives had perished, that their own fate was sealed, and that their incarceration in the camp was but a reprieve granted by the Germans to drain them of their strength through slave labor before sending them to their deaths. Writers of memoirs and researchers of concentration camps usually agree that a source of great anguish and torment for prisoners, even in the period of some improvement in living conditions, was uncertainty as to the timing and circumstances of their liberation. Although no prisoner remained unaffected by it, the shadow of a death that could come at any moment, even on the threshold of liberation, loomed particularly large over the Jewish inmates. Furthermore, unlike the great majority of other prisoners, who still had a home, a homeland, relatives, and friends waiting for them outside, the Jewish prisoners had lost these most precious possessions. Their homes, their entire precamp world, lay in ruins, and their families had perished.

In *Survival in Auschwitz*, Primo Levi writes about January 18, 1945, the day when the evacuation of Auschwitz began.

Nobody knew what our fate would be. Some SS men had remained, some of the guard towers were still occupied. About midday an SS officer made a tour of the huts. He appointed a chief in each of them, selecting from among the remaining non-Jews. The matter seemed clear. No one was surprised that the Germans preserved their national love of classification until the very end, nor did any Jew seriously expect to live until the following day. The two Frenchmen had not understood and were frightened. I translated the speech of the SS man. I was annoyed that they should be afraid: they had not even experienced a month of the lager, they hardly suffered from hunger yet, they were not even Jews, but they were afraid. . . . Then the bombardment began. It was nothing new: I climbed down to the ground, put my bare foot into my shoes, and waited. It seemed far away, perhaps over Auschwitz, but then it was a near explosion, and before one could think, a second and a third one loud enough to burst one's ear-drums. Windows were breaking, the hut shook, the spook I had fixed in the wall fell down. . . . The Germans were no longer there, the towers were empty.¹⁶

The first gassings of prisoners in Auschwitz were carried out in September 1941. The victims were thousands of Soviet prisoners of war, subsumed under the category of political activist, consigned to immediate annihilation

who were used in some way as guinea pigs in the trial run of the death machinery in the camp.

A great deal of information is now available about mass murder by gas in Auschwitz, the operation of killing installations, dates, the type of victims and their numbers, selections for and methods of murder. There exist precise documents about the construction of the gas chambers and crematoria and the use of the gas Zyklon B. We also have the written and oral testimony of witnesses among prisoners and German personnel, including the most important among them: the memoirs and testimony of the chief organizer and commandant of the Auschwitz camp, Rudolf Höss. Höss gave statements shortly after his capture by the British in March 1946 and appeared as a witness before the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg. After his extradition to Poland, during his imprisonment before and after the trial, and as he was awaiting execution by hanging on the grounds of the Auschwitz camp, Höss, on his own volition, wrote his biography and various pieces in which he spelled out in great detail the mass murders in Auschwitz.

Another written testimony of critical importance was given by Dr. Johann Paul Kremer, a uniformed SS doctor in the camp, who kept a diary during his duty there and took part in the selection of victims. An affidavit written during his captivity by the British in July 1945 by another SS man, Percy Broad, who served in the Political Department (the Gestapo office) in the camp, contains numerous details about the mass murders there. We also have statements by escaped prisoners, as well as reports from the camp smuggled out by the resistance. A collection of data based on daily resistance and other documents entitled *Kalendarium*, along with other data compiled by the Polish researcher Danuta Czech, offers a systematic and thorough chronological account of events in the camp. The *Kalendarium* includes lists prepared at the behest of the Nazis, lists and reports illegally copied by inmate clerks and preserved, and documents abandoned when the Nazis retreated from Auschwitz.¹⁹

One important and greatly moving category of documents comprises notes written by Jewish Sonderkommando prisoners assigned to work in the crematoria who carefully buried their accounts in the vicinity of the crematoria. Some of these documents were recovered and deciphered after the war and were published in a few languages. We also have the testimonies of German defendants in the Auschwitz trials, as well as those of the handful of surviving Sonderkommando prisoners.

The critical importance of the Höss testimony stems not just from Höss's unique knowledge of the details and overall picture of the camp. His testimony is crucial mainly because Höss answers the questions not only of who carried out the mass murders, but also when and how, who ordered the conversion of Auschwitz into a death camp, and who backed this order with the

necessary authority. Despite some inaccuracies due to tricks of memory, the general reliability of his testimony remains beyond doubt.

Höss relates how in the summer of 1941—he could not give the exact date, but we have reason to assume that it was in July or August—he was suddenly summoned from Auschwitz to the SS headquarters in Berlin. Himmler, contrary to his custom, received Höss outside the company of his aide-de-camp and addressed him as follows:

The Führer has ordered the final solution of the Jewish question and we, the SS, were assigned this mission. The existing liquidation sites in the East cannot cope with the large operations expected in the future. I have therefore chosen Auschwitz for this purpose, first, because of its convenient location in terms of transportation, and, second, because the site can be easily isolated and concealed.²⁰

Höss claims to have been keenly concerned with what kind of gas could be used as an efficient killing agent. During his absence from Auschwitz, Zyklon B, a product usually used for sanitation, was used to kill a large group of Soviet prisoners, and, he learned, it suited the requirements of mass killing.²¹

In early 1942, two peasant cottages near Birkenau whose inhabitants had been evicted began functioning as provisional gas chambers. About 2,000 persons could be squeezed into them at one time. In this phase of the operation, the gas victims were Jews brought in transports from Upper Silesia and Slovakia. Then, from March 1943 on, four gas chambers and crematoria, designed and built specifically for mass murder by German engineers and companies, were in operation at the Birkenau camp. At their top capacity, these installations could "process" 4,416 victims in 24 hours.²²

It was in these installations at Birkenau that hundreds of thousands of Jews were systematically murdered after being transported from European countries. The chronicle of events, the *Kalendarium*, enables us to follow the transport of Jews rounded up in various "actions," or mass seizures of Jewish nationals, in several countries. Thus in 1942, Jews from Upper Silesia, Slovakia, the Netherlands, France, Belgium, Yugoslavia, and parts of occupied Poland reached Auschwitz. In 1943, Jews from Germany, parts of Poland, Theresienstadt in Czechoslovakia, the Netherlands, France, and Greece (continuous transports), as well as Yugoslavia, the Majdanek camp and ghettos of Zagreb in Poland, the Bergen-Belsen camp, and Italy, met their fate. In 1944, transports rolled into Auschwitz with Jews from France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Theresienstadt, Italy, Slovakia, and Poland (Łódź, Radom, Galicia); one huge consignment was of several hundred thousand Hungarian Jews. Unlike other victims, Jews, with some exceptions, were not brought to Auschwitz individually, accused of real or imaginary offenses. With the es-

tablishment of the death factory, Jews arrived in mass transports from Nazi-occupied countries or satellites of the Third Reich. Most transports carried entire families uprooted from their residences as part of the process of total eradication of Jewish communities, their only offense being their "racial" and national origins.

Designated as RSHA transports, the Jews faced selection immediately upon arrival; those deemed fit to work, usually a small minority of those on the transports, became registered prisoners, whereas all others, including as a rule all children and the elderly, went to their death in the gas chambers. Transport entries in the *Kalendarium* referring to mass transports of Hungarian Jews in May–July 1944 reveal a clear pattern which indicates their fate. Danuta Czech points out that individual deportees, mainly twins (designated as subjects of the Nazi physician Josef Mengele's experiments), were put in the camp as registered prisoners. Furthermore, a certain number of young people and those classified as fit for work were consigned to other camps. The remainder went to the gas chambers. Thus, for example, in an entry of May 2, we read that following the selection of two transports—one carrying 1,800 Jews, "men and women fit for work, ages 16 to 50," and another carrying 2,000 deportees—486 men and 616 women were incarcerated in the camp, whereas the remaining Jews were gassed. The selections among Jews were carried out by SS doctors. Regular transports of non-Jews did not go through the selection process; non-Jews went on to become registered prisoners.

The overwhelming majority of Jews transported to Auschwitz, particularly those from Western Europe, Greece, and Hungary, were unaware of their destination or its nature until the very end. The SS was in charge of the killing process, and SS men poured the gas pellets down the shafts of the gas chambers. The Sonderkommando, comprising mostly Jewish prisoners kept in isolation from the rest of the camp, performed the "dirty work," consisting, as Höss wrote in his biography, of "helping [the victims] to undress, filling the bunker with Jews, removal of the bodies," and burning the corpses. There is no doubt that the Sonderkommando workers were the most wretched of all the Auschwitz prisoners. Not only was their work the incarnation of a nightmare, but also they knew, as witnesses and participants in the labor of death, that their fate was sealed. In autobiographical notes, some wrote descriptions of their deeds; one wrote that no interpretation of the camp's meaning would be complete without their testimonies. In October 1944, Sonderkommando prisoners staged a doomed uprising against their oppressors; explosives were smuggled in by Jewish women workers from a factory to the Birkenau camp. Their uprising and subsequent attempt to escape, which ended with the murder of all participants, was the only significant act of resistance of its kind in the history of the camp.

On January 18, 1945, ahead of approaching Soviet troops, the Nazis began a hasty and chaotic evacuation of Auschwitz. The last roll call in the main camp listed 48,342 male prisoners, 16,000 women, and 96 prisoners of war. About 58,000 prisoners then started forced marches from stop to stop, from camp to camp. They walked through Austria and Germany in the cold and snow of the winter and early spring months of 1945. Along the way, a large percentage of the last Auschwitz victims perished.

About 6,000 sick and completely exhausted inmates and a few of the hospital personnel remained behind in the camp area waiting for the end. Finally, on January 24, the SS left in a hurry. Levi, who was among the few thousand inmates liberated at Auschwitz, writes:

January 24th. Liberty. The breach in the barbed wire gave us a concrete image of it. To anyone who stopped to think, it signified no more Germans, no more selections, no work, no blows, no roll-calls, and perhaps, later, the return. But we had to make an effort to convince ourselves of it, and no one had time to enjoy the thought. All around lay destruction and death.²³

Attempts have been made to classify the survivors according to their behavior or personality traits, in an effort to pinpoint factors that might explain their survival. In some cases, physical fitness, endurance, a capacity to distance oneself mentally from the camp realities, or a callous attitude toward fellow prisoners undoubtedly played some part. But for the majority of survivors, one is hard put to formulate general rules in this regard. Life in the camp resembled walking through a minefield, and the fact that some prisoners managed to brave all the obstacles and dangers was due mostly to pure luck.

NOTES

1. Eugen Kogon, *Der SS Staat: Das System der deutschen Konzentrationslager* (Frankfurt am Main, 1946).
2. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York, 1988), p. 47. Published originally in Italian as *I sommersi e i salvati*.
3. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Cleveland, 1951), p. 437.
4. The estimate was reached by Franciszek Piper in *Ile ludzi zginelo w KL Auschwitz* (How many people perished in Auschwitz) (Oswiecim, 1992), p. 90. See also the essay on this question by Piper in the present volume (chap. 4).
5. Falk Pingel, *Häftlinge unter SS Herrschaft* (Hamburg, 1978), p. 230. According to Pingel, of the 405,000 persons registered as prisoners of Auschwitz, 265,000 lost their lives in the camp.

6. Robert Jay Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York, 1986), p. 4.
7. Martin Broszat, "Nationalsozialistische Konzentrationslager 1933-1945," in Martin Broszat, ed., *Anatomie des SS-Staats*, vol. 2 (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1965), pp. 97-98.
8. Karl Dietrich Bracher, *Die deutsche Diktatur-Entstehung Struktur, Folgen des Nationalsozialismus* (Cologne, 1969), p. 393.
9. Broszat, p. 108.
10. Danuta Czech, "KL Auschwitz: An Historical Outline" (in Polish), in *Auschwitz* (Warsaw, 1987), pp. 30-31. I drew heavily on this article for information about the establishment, construction, expansion, and structure of the camp. I also relied on Jan Sehn, *The Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration Camp* (in Polish) (Warsaw, 1956), and *Konzentrationslager Oswiecim* (Warsaw, 1955); and on *Bulletin of the Main Commission of German Crimes in Poland* (in Polish), vol. 1 (1946), PF-65-130.
11. Hermann Langbein, *Menschen in Auschwitz* (Vienna, 1972), p. 170.
12. Bruno Bettelheim, *Surviving and Other Essays* (New York, 1980), pp. 329-30.
13. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, pp. 48-49.
14. Józef Garlinski, "The Underground Movement in Auschwitz Concentration Camp," in *Resistance in Europe: 1939-1945*, ed. Stephen Hawes and Ralph White (Middlesex, 1976), p. 64.
15. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 79.
16. Anna Pawelczynska, *Values and Violence in Auschwitz: A Sociological Analysis* (Berkeley, 1979), pp. 54-55.
17. Ota Kraus and Erich Kulka, *The Death Factory in Auschwitz* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1960), p. 8.
18. Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* (New York, 1958), pp. 141-43.
19. See the German edition of the volume: Danuta Czech, *Kalendarium der Ereignisse im Konzentrationslager Auschwitz-Birkenau 1939-1945* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1989).
20. See *Kommandant in Auschwitz: Autobiographische Aufzeichnungen des Rudolf Höss*, ed. Martin Broszat (Munich, 1963), pp. 157-59.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 159.
22. *Nationalsozialistische Massentötungen durch Giftgas*, ed. Eugen Kogon, Hermann Langbein, Adalbert Rückerl et al. (Frankfurt, 1986), p. 219.
23. Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, p. 153.