

LIFE AND DEATH AT THE KILLING CENTERS

Finally, the Nazis decided to set up special camps which could kill people like in a factory. Train after train arrived with victims. After these trains arrived, guards ordered the deportees to get out and form a line. The people then went through a selection process. Men were separated from women and children. A Nazi, usually an SS physician, looked quickly at each person to decide if he or she was healthy and strong enough for forced labor. This SS officer then pointed to the left or the right; victims did not know that individuals were being selected to live or die. Babies and young children, pregnant women, the elderly, the handicapped, and the sick had little chance of surviving this first selection.

Those who had been selected to die were led to gas chambers. In order to prevent panic, camp guards told the victims that they were going to take showers to rid themselves of lice. The guards instructed them to turn over all their valuables and to undress. Then they were driven naked into the "showers." A guard closed and locked the steel door. In some killing centers, carbon monoxide was piped into the chamber. In others, camp guards threw "Zyklon B" pellets down an air shaft. Zyklon B was a highly poisonous insecticide also used to kill rats and insects.

Usually within minutes after entering the gas chambers, everyone inside was dead from lack of oxygen. Under guard, prisoners were forced to haul the corpses to a nearby room, where they removed hair, gold teeth, and fillings. The bodies were burned in ovens in the crematoria or buried in mass graves.

The Nazis changed to gassing as their preferred method of mass murder because they saw it as "cleaner" and more "efficient" than shooting. Gassing also spared the killers the emotional stress many mobile killing squad members had felt shooting people face to face. The killing centers were in semi-rural, isolated areas, fairly well hidden from public view. They were located near major railroad lines, allowing trains to transport hundreds of thousands of people to the killing sites.

AUSCHWITZ

Auschwitz was the largest camp established by the Germans. It was a complex of camps, including a concentration, extermination, and forced-labor camp. It was located near Cracow (Krakow), Poland. Three large camps constituted the Auschwitz camp complex: Auschwitz I, Auschwitz II (Birkenau). More than one million people lost their

lives at Auschwitz, nine out of ten of them Jewish. The four largest gas chambers could each hold 2,000 people at one time.

A sign over the entrance to the camp read ARBEIT MACHT FREI, which means "work makes one free." In actuality, the opposite was true. Labor became another form of genocide that the Nazis called "extermination through work."

Victims who were spared immediate death by being selected for labor were systematically stripped of their individual identities. They had their hair shaved off and a registration number tattooed on their left forearm. Men were forced to wear ragged, striped pants and jackets, and women wore work dresses. Both were issued ill-fitting work shoes, sometimes clogs. They had no change of clothing and slept in the same clothes they worked in.

Each day was a struggle for survival under unbearable conditions. Prisoners were housed in primitive barracks that had no windows and were not insulated from the heat or cold. There was no bathroom, only a bucket. Each barrack held about 36 wooden bunkbeds, and inmates were squeezed in five or six across on the wooden plank. As many as 500 inmates lodged in a single barrack. Inmates were always hungry. Food consisted of watery soup made with rotten vegetables and meat, a few ounces of bread, a bit of margarine, tea, or a bitter drink resembling coffee. Diarrhea was common. People weakened by dehydration and hunger fell easy victim to the contagious diseases that spread through the camp.

Some inmates worked as forced laborers inside the camp, in the kitchen or as barbers, for example. Women often sorted the piles of shoes, clothes, and other prisoner belongings, which would be shipped back to Germany for use there. At Auschwitz, as at hundreds of other camps in the Reich and occupied Europe where the Germans used forced laborers, prisoners were also employed outside the camps, in coal mines and rock quarries, and on construction projects, digging tunnels and canals. Under armed guard, they shoveled snow off roads and cleared rubble from roads and towns hit during air raids. A large number of forced laborers eventually were used in factories that produced weapons and other goods that supported the German war effort. Many private companies, such as I. G. Farben and Bavarian Motor Works (BMW), which produced automobile and airplane engines, eagerly sought the use of prisoners as a source of cheap labor.

Escape from Auschwitz was almost impossible. Electrically charged barbed-wire fences surrounded both the concentration camp and the killing center. Guards, equipped with machine guns and automatic rifles, stood in the many watchtowers. The lives of the prisoners were completely controlled by their guards, who on a whim could inflict cruel

punishment on them. Prisoners were also mistreated by fellow inmates who were chosen to supervise the others in return for special favors by the guards.

Cruel "medical experiments" were conducted at Auschwitz. Men, women, and children were used as subjects. SS physician Dr. Josef Mengele carried out painful and traumatic experiments on dwarfs and twins, including young children. The aim of some experiments was to find better medical treatments for German soldiers and airmen. Other experiments were aimed at improving methods of sterilizing people the Nazis considered inferior. Many people died during the experiments. Others were killed after the "research" was completed and their organs removed for further study.

DEATH MARCHES

Near the end of the war, when Germany's military force was collapsing, the Allied armies closed in on the Nazi concentration camps. The Soviets approached from the east, and the British, French, and Americans from the west. The Germans began frantically to move the prisoners out of the camps near the front and take them to be used as forced laborers in camps inside Germany. Prisoners were first taken by train and then by foot on "death marches," as they became known. Prisoners were forced to march long distances in bitter cold, with little or no food, water, or rest. Those who could not keep up were shot.

LIBERATION

Russian soldiers were the first to liberate concentration camp prisoners in the final stages of the war. On July 23, 1944, they entered the Majdanek camp in Poland, and later overran several other killing centers. On January 27, 1945, they entered Auschwitz and there found hundreds of sick and exhausted prisoners. The Germans had been forced to leave these prisoners behind in their hasty retreat from the camp. Although the Germans had attempted to empty the camps of surviving prisoners and hide all evidence of their crimes, the Allied soldiers came upon thousands of dead bodies "stacked up like cordwood," according to one American soldier. The prisoners who were still alive were living skeletons.