Auschwitz

Over the years, Auschwitz has become a symbol of the Holocaust. It represents the thousands of camps in which millions of Europeans died. Israel Gutman, the Director of the Center for Holocaust Research at Yad Vashem in Israel, estimates that about 85 to 90 percent of all those murdered at Auschwitz were Jews. Among the others were Russian prisoners of war and the Roma ("Gypsies").

Rudolf Hoess, the commandant of Auschwitz, describes the role the camp played in the "Final Solution."

The extermination procedure in Auschwitz took place as follows: Jews selected for gassing were taken as quietly as possible to the crematoriums, the men being separated from the women, in the undressing rooms, prisoners of the Special Detachment, detailed for this purpose, would tell them in their own language that they were going to be bathed and deloused, that they must leave their clothes neatly together and above all remember where they had put them, so that they would be able to find them again quickly after the delousing. The prisoners of the Special Detachment had the greatest interest in seeing that the operation proceeded smoothly and quickly. After undressing, the Jews went into the gas chambers, which were furnished with showers and water pipes and gave a realistic impression of a bathhouse.

The women went in first with their children, followed by the men who were always the fewer in number. This part of the operation nearly always went smoothly, for the prisoners of the Special Detachment would calm those who betrayed any anxiety or who perhaps had some inkling of their fate. As an additional precaution these prisoners of the Special Detachment and an SS man always remained in the chamber until the last moment.

The door would now be quickly screwed up and the gas immediately discharged by the waiting disinfectors through vents in the ceilings of the gas chambers, down a shaft that led to the floor. This insured the rapid distribution of the gas. It could be observed through the peephole in the door that those who were standing nearest to the induction vents were killed at once. It can be said that about one-third died straight away. The remainder staggered about and began to scream and struggle for air. The screaming, however, soon changed to the death rattle and in a few minutes all lay still. After twenty minutes

at the latest no movement could be discerned. The time required for the gas to have effect varied according to the weather, and depended on whether it was damp or dry, cold or warm. It also depended on the quality of the gas, which was never exactly the same, and on the composition of the transports which might contain a high proportion of healthy Jews, or old, and sick, or children. The victims became unconscious after a few minutes, according to their distance from the intake shaft. Those who screamed and those who were old or sick or weak, or the small children, died quicker than those who were healthy or young.

The door was opened half an hour after the induction of the gas, and the ventilation switched on. Work was immediately begun on removing the corpses. There was no noticeable change in the bodies and no sign of convulsions or discoloration. Only after the bodies had been left lying for some time, that is to say after several hours, did the usual death stains appear in the places where they had lain...

The special detachment now set about removing the gold teeth and cutting the hair from the women. After this, the bodies were taken up by the elevator and laid in front of the ovens, which had meanwhile been stoked up. Depending on the size of the bodies, up to three corpses could be put into one oven retort at the same time. The time required for cremation also depended on this, but on an average it took twenty minutes.

During the period when the fires were kept burning continuously, without a break, the ashes fell through the grates and were constantly removed and crushed to powder. The ashes were taken in trucks to the Vistula, where they immediately drifted away and dissolved.1
Himmler later ordered the original camp enlarged so that it could contain thirty thousand people (Auschwitz I). He also established a second camp in nearby Birkenau, which was to hold one hundred thousand prisoners-of-war (Auschwitz II). And he called for the construction of a labor camp to provide workers for a factory run by I. G. Farben, one of Germany's leading industrial firms (Auschwitz III). By the summer of 1942, Auschwitz had grown beyond Himmler's original plans.

Rita Kesselman recalled her first view of the camp: For three days and three nights, we were taken. Destination unknown. Trains were stopping in villages and train stations, in cities. We were screaming through the windows, "Water, water." We were hungry. The pail in the corner filled up very quickly. And then people went on the floor. The

stink, the smell, in the cattle car was terrible. People were changing positions. One was standing up, and one was sitting down. I was alone. I didn't have my parents to cuddle up with. I was sitting there by myself.

After three days and three nights, we arrived in a big field. And that was Auschwitz. Auschwitz was a city, and Birkenau was a suburb. In Birkenau went on all the killing, gassing, and burning the people. There were four crematoriums in Birkenau. When I came into Auschwitz, the trains didn't go to Birkenau. They came into Auschwitz. And we were made, the people that were selected..., they made us come off the train. In front of us, SS men with guns and dogs. And on trucks, more SS men with guns, watching us.

And we saw people in striped clothes, helping the people coming off the train. At the time, we didn't know who they were. They were like mutes.
They didn't talk. They weren't allowed to talk. They were Jews, most of them, that helped the people come off the train. They were prisoners that had to help the Germans.

We were told to separate the men from the women. On the side were empty trucks waiting. The women and children were told to go on the trucks. And older people. And then, from the younger people were selected, people to go to the right and to the left. At the time, we did not know that the people, who were selected to go to the right, would live and the rest would die. About one hundred people were picked from the women to go to work. And we envied the others, because we thought that they would go on the trucks. And after three nights being exhausted and hungry, we had to walk.
It was smoggy and raining. We walked for miles, and as we came closer, we saw like a camp with barbed wires. A band was playing at the gate. And the SS men were watching the camp from towers. A band of women played at the gate. They brought us inside. There were barracks—twenty-five barracks. They put us in an empty barrack on the floor. And we waited all night, not knowing what is going to happen to us.

In the morning, the SS came, women and men SS, and they took us to another barracks. It was a bathhouse. We were made to undress, leave the clothes on one side, and they took us to the other side. Every person was given a tattoo. My number was thirty thousand seven hundred seventy-five...
Our hair was shaved and we were given striped clothes and wooden

shoes. And that was our uniform for the two years I was in Auschwitz. I never bathed. I never saw water. I never had water to drink.2

Primo Levi, an Italian Jew who fought in a resistance unit in Italy, was deported to Auschwitz in 1944. He recalled his first days there:

Then for the first time we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence, the demolition of a man. In a moment, with almost prophetic intuition, the reality was revealed to us: we had reached the bottom. It is not possible to sink lower than this; no human condition is more miserable than this, nor could it conceivably be so. Nothing belongs to us any more; they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair; if we speak, they will not listen to us, and if they listen, they will not understand. They will even take away our name: and if we want to keep it, we will have to find ourselves the strength to do so, to manage somehow so that behind the name something of us, of us as we were, remains.

We know that we will have difficulty in being understood, and this is as it should be. But consider what value, what meaning is enclosed even in the smallest of our daily habits, in the hundred possessions, which even the poorest beggar owns: a handkerchief, an old letter, and the photo of a cherished person. These things are part of us, almost like limbs of our body; nor is it conceivable that we can be deprived of them in our world, for we immediately find others to substitute the old ones, other objects which are ours in their personification and evocation of our memories.

Imagine now a man who is deprived of everyone he loves, and at the same time of his house, his habits, his clothes, in short, of everything he possesses: he will be a hollow man, reduced to suffering and needs, forgetful of dignity and restraint, for he who loses all often easily loses himself. He will be a man whose life or death can be lightly decided with no sense of human affinity, in the most fortunate of cases, on the basis of a pure judgment of utility. It is in this way that one can understand the double sense of the term "extermination camp," and it is now clear what we seek to express with the phrase: "to lie on the bottom."

Haftling: I have learnt that I am Haftling. My number is 174517; we have been baptized, we will carry the tattoo on our left arm until we die.

The operation was slightly painful and extraordinarily rapid; they placed us all in a row, and one by one, according to the alphabetical order of our names, we filed past a skillful official, armed with a sort of pointed tool with a very short needle. It seems that this is the real, true initiation: only by "showing one's number" can one get bread and soup. Several days passed, and not a few cuffs and punches, before we became used to showing our number promptly enough not to disorder the daily operation of food- distribution; weeks and months were needed to learn its sound in the German language. And for many days, while the habits of freedom still led me to look for the time on my wristwatch, my new name ironically appeared instead, a number tattooed in bluish characters under the skin.3

One day, Levi broke off an icicle that hung outside a window. A guard immediately took it away from him. Levi knew enough German to ask why. The guard replied, "There is no why here."

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