

The Holocaust

Since the end of World War II, the Holocaust has been represented as the culmination of humanity's greatest evils and encapsulated in the notoriety of Auschwitz.

What was Auschwitz?

Auschwitz was the most stream-lined mass killing center ever created and was one of the five "death camps" constructed by the Nazis.

Construction of the camp began after Heinrich Himmler ordered its creation on April 27, 1940. Auschwitz continued to grow until 1945 when it was evacuated by the Nazis. Auschwitz was composed of three large camps and 45 sub-camps. Auschwitz I or "the Main Camp" was the original section of the camp that was built near the Polish town of Oswiecim. At the entrance of Auschwitz I stood the infamous sign that stated "Arbeit Macht Frei" (work makes one free).

Because of the continued influx of prisoners, Auschwitz II or "Birkenau" was built. Birkenau was built approximately 3 kilometers (1.5 miles) away from Auschwitz I and was the real killing center of the Auschwitz death camp. It was in Birkenau where the dreaded selections were carried out on the ramp and where the sophisticated and camouflaged underground gas chambers laid in waiting.

Auschwitz III or "Buna" was built last as "housing" for the forced laborers at the Buna synthetic rubber factory.

What happened when people arrived at Auschwitz?

Jews, Gypsies (Roma), homosexuals, asocials, criminals, and prisoners of war were gathered, stuffed into cattle cars on trains, and sent to Auschwitz. When the train stopped at Auschwitz II: Birkenau, prisoners were forced to disembark from the train and gather upon the landing - the ramp.

On the ramp, SS officers would make selections. Most women, children, and those that looked unfit or unhealthy were sent to the left; while most young men and others that were fit would be sent to the right. Though these people did not know this at the time, the left line meant immediate death at the gas chambers and the right meant probable death from hard labor.

At the ramp, these selections split families. There are many stories of young boys leaving the right to join their mothers on the left, thus unknowingly dooming themselves to the gas chambers or indeed young men choosing the opposite by leaving their mother's side to join their father.

The majority of the people sent to Auschwitz were either sent directly to the gas chambers or they were sent after a few months of hard labor.

Nazi Experiments

High altitude

In 1942, Sigmund Rascher and others conducted high-altitude experiments on prisoners at Dachau. Eager to find out how best to save German pilots forced to eject at high altitude, they placed inmates into low-pressure chambers that simulated altitudes as high as 68,000 feet and monitored their physiological response as they succumbed and died. Rascher was said to dissect victims' brains while they were still alive to show that high-altitude sickness resulted from the formation of tiny air bubbles in the blood vessels of a certain part of the brain. Of 200 people subjected to these experiments, 80 died outright and the remainder was executed.

Twins

In an effort to find ways to more effectively multiply the German race, Dr. Josef Mengele performed experiments on twins at Auschwitz in hopes of plumbing the secrets of multiple births. After taking all the body measurements and other living data he could from selected twins, Mengele and his collaborators dispatched them with a single injection of chloroform to the heart. Of about 1,000 pairs of twins experimented upon, only about 200 pairs survived.

Poison

Researchers at Buchenwald concentration camp developed a method of individual execution by injecting Russian prisoners with phenol and cyanide. Experimenters also tested various poisons on the human body by secreting noxious chemicals in prisoners' food or shooting inmates with poison bullets. Victims who did not die during these experiments were killed to allow the experimenters to perform autopsies.

Tuberculosis

To determine if people had any natural immunities to tuberculosis, and to develop a vaccine against the disease, Dr. Kurt Heissmeyer injected live tubercle bacilli (bacteria that are a major cause of TB) into the lungs of inmates at the Neuengamme concentration camp. About 200 adult subjects died, and Heissmeyer had 20 children from Auschwitz hung in an effort to hide evidence of the experiments from approaching Allied forces.

Bone, muscle, and joint transplantation

To learn if a limb or joint from one person could be successfully attached to another who had lost that limb or joint, experimenters at Ravensbruck amputated legs and shoulders from inmates in useless attempts to transplant them onto other victims. They also removed sections of bones, muscles, and nerves from prisoners to study regeneration of these body parts. Victims suffered excruciating pain, mutilation, and permanent disability as a result. In an attempt to find an antidote to phosgene, a toxic gas used as a weapon during World War I, Nazi doctors exposed 52 concentration-camp prisoners to the gas at Fort Ney near Strasbourg, France. Phosgene gas causes extreme irritation to the lungs. Many of the prisoners, who according to German records were already weak and malnourished, suffered pulmonary edema after exposure, and four of them died from the experiments.

Sterilization

To come up with an effective means of sterilizing millions of people with a minimum of time and effort, doctors at Auschwitz, Ravensbruck, and elsewhere conducted experiments on both men and women. They radiated the genitals of young men, and then castrated them to study the resulting changes in their testes. A woman had caustic substances forced into her cervix or uterus, which caused horrible pain, bleeding, and bursting spasms in the stomach. The thousands who were sterilized suffered untold mental and physical anguish.