

# HOLOCAUST:

## RESISTANCE, RESCUE AND SURVIVAL

### Auschwitz-Birkenau

*By Stephen Pagaard, History teacher at North Kitsap High School. Education Advisory Committee, Washington State Holocaust Education Resource Center. And Ilana Cone Kennedy, Education Coordinator at the Washington State Holocaust Education Resource Center.*

*“They took us away from our home on April 1, 1944. We had to put on the yellow star. They put my father down in a coal mine. My mother, my brother, and myself were taken to another city, there was no food. About the middle of June they put us in the cattle wagons to be taken away. We didn’t know where we were going. On the 21st of June, my brother’s 15th birthday, we arrived. We saw the name, Auschwitz. They took my brother away. My mother was so weak. She was sent to the left, and I was sent to the right. I tried to run after my mother, and they grabbed me back and said, ‘Just go ahead, she will go take a shower, and we will meet.’ So I yelled out, ‘I love you mom and I’ll see you later.’ That was the last I saw my mother.”*

— Magda S. from “Weaving Women’s Words”  
Jewish Women’s Archive. 2004

Many of us have seen the pictures. We’ve heard of the gas chambers and the ovens and the overcrowded barracks. **Auschwitz.** The word invokes the most horrific images.

Between 1.1 million and 1.3 million Jewish people died in Auschwitz-Birkenau, along with countless others — including Poles and Roma and Sinti (Gypsies).

The Nazi’s first concentration camp, Dachau, was constructed in 1933 outside of Munich for the purpose of “re-educating” political prisoners. By 1942, hundreds of camps were operating throughout German-occupied Europe. Hitler’s policies began to shift from persecution and concentration to mass-murder. Six major slave labor and death camps were built in Poland: Chelmno, Belzec, Treblinka, Sobibor, Majdanek and Auschwitz-Birkenau.



*Train tracks leading into the Birkenau camp. This photo is taken just inside the main entrance to the camp. Here the train would stop, the prisoners would be unloaded, and the selection would occur.*

Photo by Ilana Cone Kennedy, Birkenau, Poland. 2004.

Auschwitz-Birkenau was a killing center, but it was also a massive slave labor camp. At its height, Auschwitz I held 30,000 prisoners and Auschwitz II (Birkenau) imprisoned 100,000 in the most crowded and squalid conditions.

The first large transport of Jews arrived at Auschwitz by train in July 1942. For more than two years the routine was the same. The prisoners were commanded to get out of the boxcars, leave their belongings behind, and stand in two lines according to gender. The S.S. doctors would conduct a **selektion** — those people who appeared healthy and strong were chosen for hard labor, while those who appeared old, young or weak were sent directly to the

gas chambers. These men decided at that moment who would live and who would die.

Those selected for the gas chambers did not know this was where they were going. The Nazis told them they were going to the showers.

The prisoners selected for hard labor had their clothing taken from them and their heads shaved. In place of their names, they were assigned numbers. They were given starvation rations and no care was given to sanitation. Few survived more than several months. Surviving Auschwitz required a combination of extraordinary effort and some measure of luck.

The Nazis blew up the gas chambers and crematoria before they fled in 1945. They set fire to their records, and ordered the prisoners who could still walk to march out of the camp. This has become known as the “death march.” Only days later, on January 27, 1945, the Soviet Army arrived at Auschwitz and liberated the camp and its remaining 7,000 inmates. At the camp they discovered more than 830,000 women’s coats and dresses, nearly 348,000 men’s suits, and seven tons of human hair (Holocaust Chronicle).

The camp and its history raise troubling and difficult questions:

- How could ordinary people commit such crimes against other humans?
- How does one maintain hope and dignity in such conditions?
- And what lessons does Auschwitz offer to us today?

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# activities

1. The survivors of the Holocaust demonstrate traits that are important to each of us — strength and courage. Look for articles and images in today’s Seattle Times that demonstrate strength or courage. Do you think these traits are rare or common? Why or why not?
2. Discuss the questions at the end of today’s article — how would you answer each of them?
3. Look through today’s Seattle Times for articles about oppression, hate, violence, etc. How prevalent is it in today’s world? What countries might be experiencing similar situations as those during Nazi Germany? Further research these countries and find out what is happening there. What is our responsibility to intervene in other countries? You might want to watch the movie “Hotel Rwanda” or research the genocide in Rwanda, Sudan, former Yugoslavia, etc.
4. As important as it is to know about events and issues occurring around the world and in our own community, it is important to find hope — discuss why “hope” is so important to our survival. What does “hope” do for us? Look for images and stories of hope in today’s Seattle Times.



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