

## 7. Auschwitz-Birkenau

*"They put us into cattle trains, luckily, they were not tightly built so that we had enough air, but we were packed so tightly that we had to stand. It was wall to wall people, and I think we were going about four days, the destination was Auschwitz. Now in these four days, maybe a fourth of the people died while standing there because it was impossible, the stench and the hunger, and older people couldn't take it, so they didn't even fall because the people held them together ... We came to Auschwitz, and all of a sudden the doors open, and all we heard was barking dogs, shouting, screaming, "Juden aut [aus]" which means "Jews out." And then they told us ... the women and children separate, and the men separate, in a different part and four Gestapo came and whoever caught their eye, they grabbed by the shoulder and put aside, and in our transport it must have been about fifteen hundred people and one hundred they took out and took aside. One hundred girls, young girls.*

*" ... We had to walk in rows of five, and they took us away, and the others, they pushed in a different corner ... inside the concentration camp, we had to completely disrobe, and everything was working just like clockwork. One girl came and she shaved us everywhere, another girl came and she tattooed a number on our arms, and then they took us to wait in sub-zero temperature outside, naked we were standing like monkeys, without hair, without nothing ... "*

— Anne K. a Holocaust survivor currently living in Washington in the video "Never Again I Hope." Produced by the Washington State Holocaust Education Resource Center.

### MYTH: All concentration camps tattooed prisoners upon their entry.

The Auschwitz Concentration Camp Complex (including Auschwitz I, Auschwitz-Birkenau, and Monowitz) was the only location in which prisoners were systematically tattooed during the Holocaust. Prior to tattooing, several means of identifying prisoners, both by number and by category, had been implemented; serial numbers were the main method. When they arrived at the camp, prisoners were issued serial numbers which were then sewn to their prison uniforms. These serial numbers were often accompanied by different shapes, symbols or letters which identified the status, nationality, or religion of the prisoner. This practice continued even after tattooing was introduced (Rosenthal).

Beginning in 1941, prisoners arriving at Auschwitz would be tattooed on the left breast. Later, the tattoo location was moved to the inner forearm (Jewish Virtual Library).

The sequence according to which serial numbers were issued evolved over time. The tattoos included a letter that identified the prisoner's "crime." This system was used from May 1940 – January 1945.

AU: Soviet Prisoners of War

Z: *Zigeuner* (the German word for Gypsy)

EH: *Erziehungshaftlinge* (Prisoners that had been sent for "reeducation")

A & B: First issued in May 1944 to Jewish prisoners. In each series, men and women had their own separate numerical series, ostensibly beginning with number 1. The A series was to be completed with 20,000; however an error led to the women being numbered to 25,378 before the B series was begun. The intention was to work through the entire alphabet with

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20,000 numbers being issued in each letter series (Rosenthal).

*To the old hands of the camp, the numbers told everything: the period of entry onto the camp, the convoy one was a part of, and consequently the nationality. Everyone will treat with respect the numbers from 30,000 to 80,000: there are only a few hundred left and they represented the few survivals from the Polish ghettos. It is as well to watch out in the commercial dealings with a 116,000 or a 117,000: they now number only about forty, but they represent the Greeks of Salonica, so take care they do not pull the wool over your eyes. As for the high numbers they carry an essentially comic air about them, like the words 'freshman' or 'conscript' in ordinary life. The typical high number is a corpulent, docile and stupid fellow: he can be convinced that leather shoes are distributed at the infirmary to all those with delicate feet, and can be persuaded to run there and leave his bowl of soup 'in your custody' ...*

— Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, p. 28

### Sources

- Jewish Virtual Library: [jewishvirtuallibrary.org](http://jewishvirtuallibrary.org)
- Levi, Primo. "Survival in Auschwitz." New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.
- Rosenthal, George. "The Evolution of Tattooing in the Auschwitz Concentration Camp Complex: Based on Documents Obtained from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum." [www.chgs.umn.edu](http://www.chgs.umn.edu).

### MYTH: All concentration camps were killing centers.

A killing center (or death camp) is a concentration camp with special facilities specifically designed for systematic murder. Six such camps existed: *Auschwitz-Birkenau*, *Belzec*, *Chelmno*, *Majdanek*, *Sobibor*, and *Treblinka*. All were located in Poland.

By WWII, the Nazis had in place killing centers, concentration camps, labor camps, penal settlements, Jewish camps, resettlement centers, camps for foreign workers and POWs, transient camps for those waiting, and ghettos.

Konnilyn Feig, in his book "Hitler's Death Camps," explains, "Hitler established the camps when he came into power for the purpose of isolating, punishing, torturing, and killing Germans suspected of opposition to his regime. From 1933 – 1938, the Nazis considered the camps primarily as places for the protective custody of political enemies of the state, not as the death pits, labor extractors and medical research stations that they became" (23).

The concentration camp system was constantly in a state of flux and expansion. According to Feig, the exact number of camps is not known, but they numbered in the thousands (26). Nineteen primary camps existed; the thousands of others were attached to, or under the supervision of these 19.

These 19 camps can be divided into four major categories:

- **Killing Centers**  
*Chelmno*, *Belzec*, *Sobibor*, and *Treblinka*.  
 All are located in Poland. These centers were intended to be secret and were only for killing.
- **Killing Center and Slave Labor Camp** (combined functions)  
*Auschwitz-Birkenau* and *Majdanek*.  
 Located in Poland. Although both of these camps had full extermination facilities, this was not their only goal. A majority of an incoming group would be killed. The

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Nazis would profit from the remainder by providing private and SS industries slave labor.

### ■ Concentration Camps

*Dachau, Sachsenhausen, Ravensbruck, Buchenwald, Flossenbürg, Neuengamme, Gross-Rosen, Natzweiler, Mauthausen, Stutthof, Dora/Nordhausen*

Concentration camps were designed to hold large numbers of people in a limited and defined area. Prisoners were used for both labor and experimentation.

### ■ Official Reception and Holding Center *Bergen-Belsen*

### Sources:

- Feig, Konnilyn G. "Hitler's Death Camps: The Sanity of Madness." New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1979.
- Jewish Virtual Library: [www.us-israel.org](http://www.us-israel.org)
- Museum of Tolerance — Simon Wiesenthal Center: [motlc.wiesenthal.com](http://motlc.wiesenthal.com)
- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: [ushmm.org](http://ushmm.org).

### Resources for Educators:

#### ■ "Auschwitz Chronicle: 1939 – 1945."

Danuta Czech. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1990.

*"A monumental reference that records — day by day, month by month — the events and developments of the concentration camp from its planning ... to its liberation in January 1945 ... "*

#### ■ Photo gallery: [wsherc.org](http://wsherc.org)

Photos may be used for educational purposes.

#### ■ "Auschwitz: Inside the Nazi State."

PBS documentary. Aired in January and February, 2005. To borrow, please contact the Washington State Holocaust Education Resource Center at [info@wsherc.org](mailto:info@wsherc.org) or 206-441-5747.

#### ■ For a comprehensive timeline, maps and plans of Auschwitz, visit [pbs.org/auschwitz](http://pbs.org/auschwitz).

#### ■ Map of rail system leading to Auschwitz

(Florida Center for Instructional Technology):  
[fcit.coedu.usf.edu/holocaust/MAPS/map008b.PDF](http://fcit.coedu.usf.edu/holocaust/MAPS/map008b.PDF)  
 (reproduced here)

#### ■ Map of concentration camps in Europe

(Florida Center for Instructional Technology):  
[fcit.coedu.usf.edu/holocaust/MAPS/map009b.PDF](http://fcit.coedu.usf.edu/holocaust/MAPS/map009b.PDF)  
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For additional suggested resources and Web sites on Auschwitz, go to [wsherc.org](http://wsherc.org) and click on "Teaching the Holocaust."

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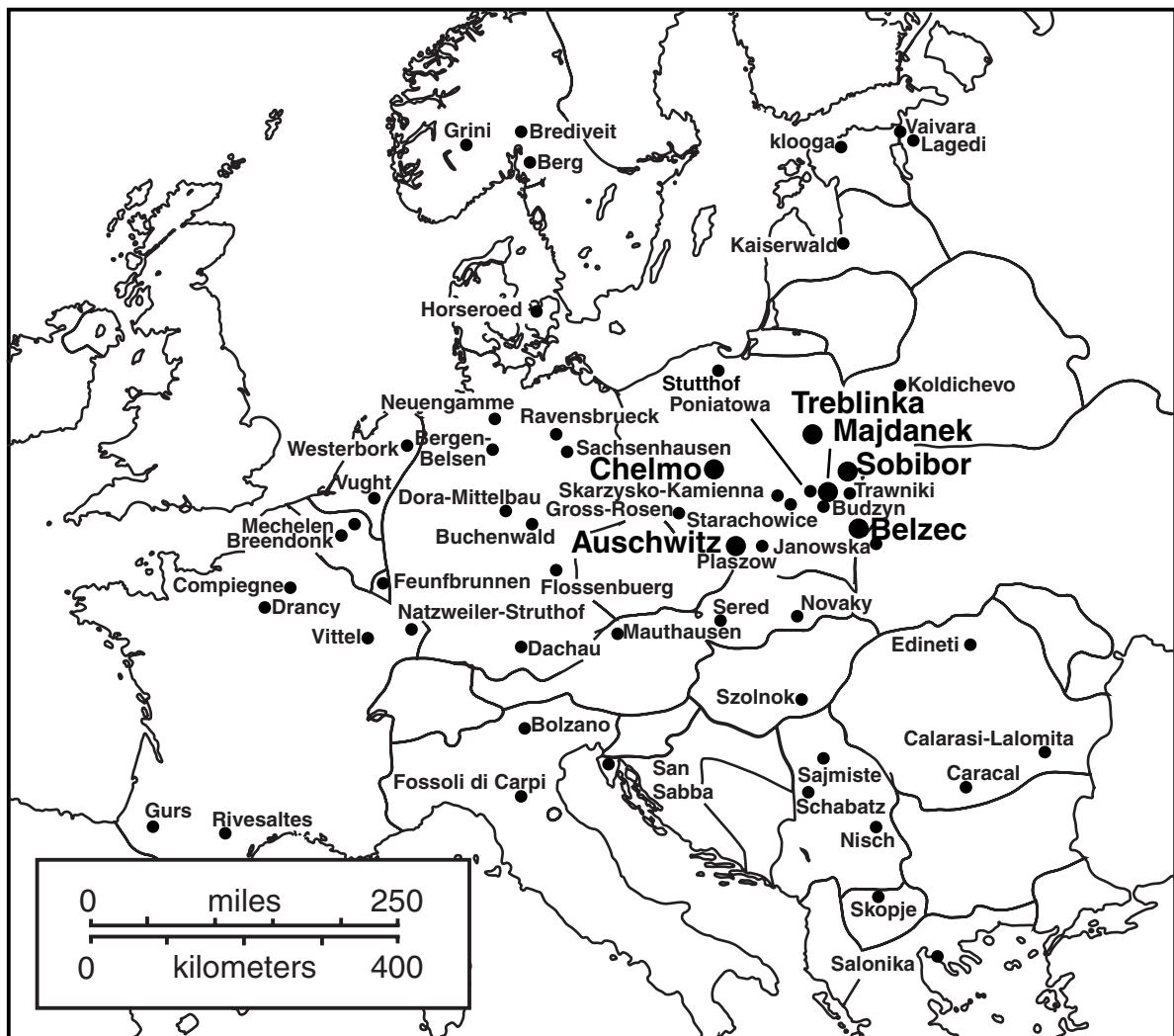
## RESISTANCE, RESCUE AND SURVIVAL

### Railroads Leading to Auschwitz (With City Names)



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### Concentration Camps in Europe



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