

Learning from the Holocaust

VISITING KRAKOW and AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU



Holocaust Education Trust Ireland

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Holocaust Education Trust Ireland

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Suitcases of Jews deported from different European countries



Archive PMA-B



Preparing to visit Auschwitz-Birkenau

The Holocaust was a deliberate attempt by the Nazis to annihilate the Jews of Europe. It was genocide perpetrated on an industrial scale with industrial efficiency. It is estimated that six million Jews were murdered as well as millions of other people who were targeted because of their ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, religious beliefs or political affiliations.

The Nazi era lasted from 1933 to 1945. Since the end of the Second World War, genocide has taken place in many countries. Intolerance and racism are still widespread today. By learning more about the Holocaust, the victims, survivors, perpetrators, bystanders, rescuers and resisters, we might be able to devise strategies to prevent such atrocities from happening again.

A visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau is a profound experience that prompts reflection on many levels, it's a challenge that people respond to in different ways. Before, during and after the visit you may find you need to take time out to reflect. We are not going to Auschwitz-Birkenau as a punishment but as an education. Visiting the Auschwitz-Birkenau camps reminds us of what happens when the principles of tolerance and respect break down and discrimination is allowed free rein. The study visit will give us the opportunity to reflect on the relevance of the Holocaust to our own lives and the world around us.

The study visit is a challenge, and people respond to it in different ways. It is a private experience shared with others. It is thought-provoking and personal, and can be unsettling for some. The experience is also meaningful and positive. It may cause us to change our perceptions. The purpose of the visit is to become informed, educated, and to rebut Holocaust denial and do our best to combat racism, bigotry and prejudice which still prevail.

Why go to Auschwitz-Birkenau?

There are many reasons NOT to go:

- It is more than 60 years since the end of World War II, time to move on.
- Time to forgive and forget.
- Life is already complicated. Dealing with our daily lives is difficult enough without having to face the past.

But there are many reasons to go:

- We go to consider and to reflect.
- We go to remember.
- We go to learn.
- We go to become informed.
- We go so we can teach the lessons.

Points to ponder

- What expectations do you have about the visit?
- How are you expecting to react to Auschwitz-Birkenau?
- How do you feel right now?
- Are you concerned about anything you might see?
- Is Auschwitz-Birkenau a tourist site? Are we tourists?
- How will you react to other visitors who may not appear to be as thoughtful as you?

Sixty years is less than a lifetime. Even as we read this booklet, printing presses all over the world are churning out another Holocaust denial publication. Accurate, irrefutable information gives us the tools to rebut this.

Oswiecim

The town of Oswiecim (oss-vee-yen-chim) is a small town with a population of about 40,000, located very close to the camps at Auschwitz-Birkenau. It was the name of this town, Oswiecim, that was 'Germanised' by the Nazis into the name of Auschwitz. Before the war, Jews represented 60% of the population of Oswiecim and there were three synagogues, one of which is now a museum. Today there are no Jews in Oswiecim.

Death Camps and Auschwitz-Birkenau

The Nazis developed over 16,000 camps across occupied Europe, from the Channel Islands to Norway, from Greece to the Baltic. Most camps were slave labour camps connected to factories run by German companies. Others were concentration camps, first founded in 1933 in Germany for work and punishment of political opponents. Some camps were both concentration camps and labour camps; some, like Auschwitz-Birkenau, were a combination of labour camps, concentration camps and death camps.

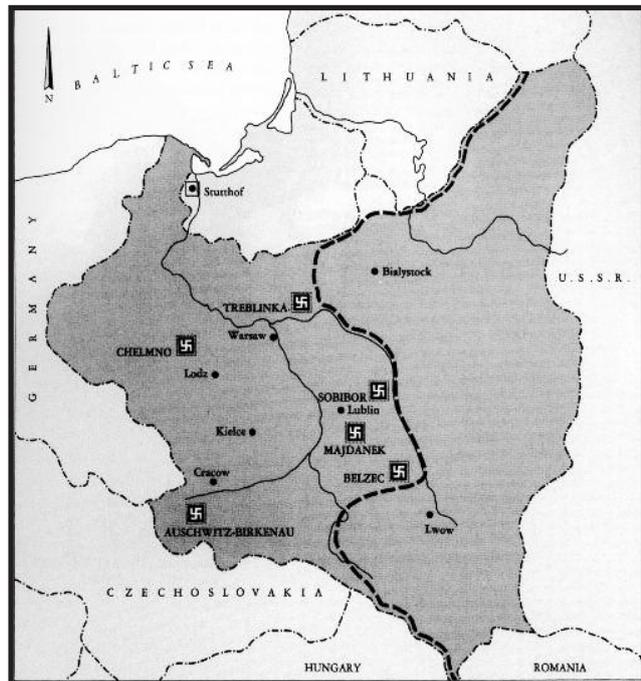
There were six death camps, all of them on Polish territory occupied by Germany. All of them were strategically located close to large Jewish populations and on main transportation routes. The main purpose of four of these camps – Chelmno, Treblinka, Sobibor and Belzec – was murder, and most people were killed within a few hours of arrival. There were few survivors, and as a result the names of these death camps are unfamiliar to most. They were dismantled on completion of their 'function.' The other two death camps, Majdanek and Auschwitz, also functioned as slave labour camps.

Auschwitz I was originally built as a Polish army barracks. The Nazis converted it into a camp, originally for Polish political prisoners. Here you will see the famous iron gateway that says 'ARBEIT MACHT FREI' (work makes one free). Today, some of the brick-built barracks, with neat paths between them, house displays of artifacts and collections of photographs and objects stolen from the victims: mounds of hair, prostheses, spectacles, shoes, children's clothes, and domestic utensils.

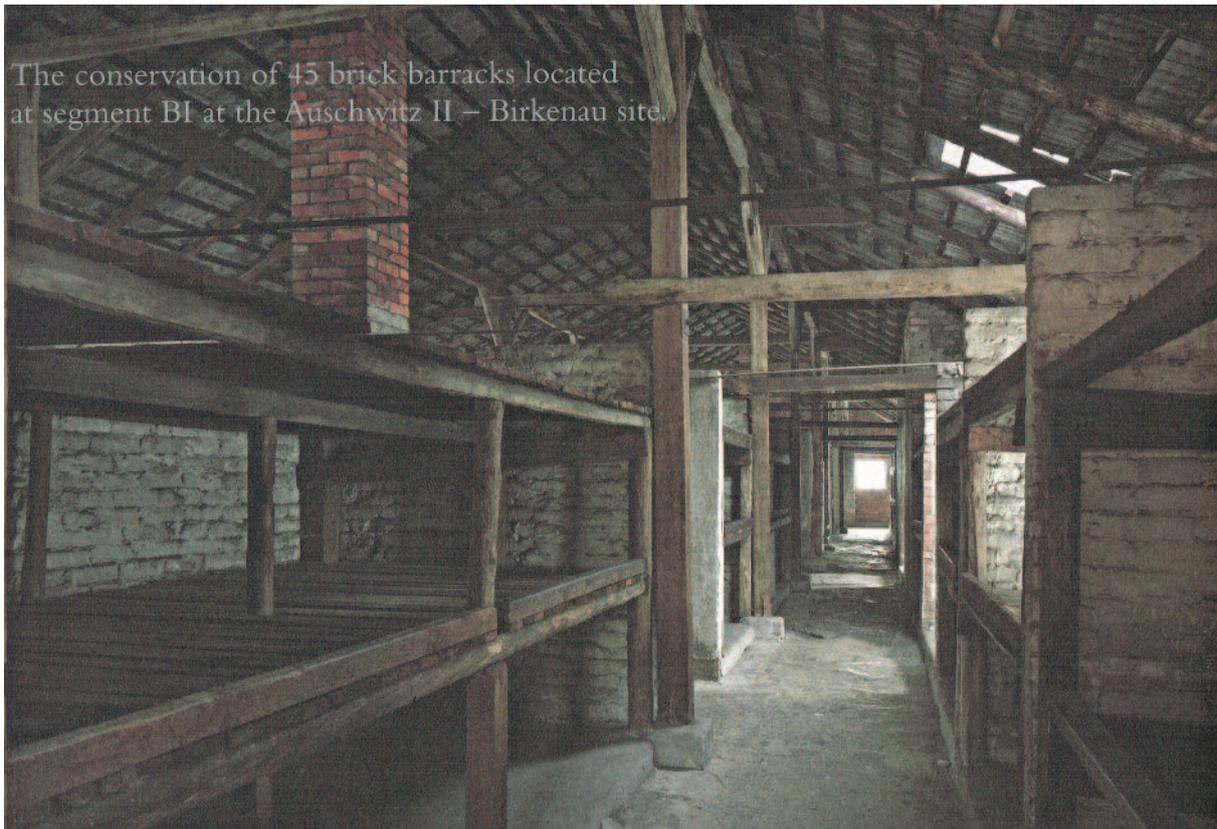
Auschwitz I was established within months of the Nazi occupation of Poland in September 1939. The first transport of political prisoners arrived in June 1940 from the town of Tarnow. Originally, those destined for Auschwitz were political prisoners, prisoners of war, Gypsies (now called Roma and Sinti), and Jews. At first, all prisoners were photographed, and some were tattooed. As the number of inmates grew, those who were destined to die on arrival were not registered at all.

The Nazis' concentration camp system was designed to allow access to all the factories on the 50km² Auschwitz complex. By March 1941, the decision was taken to build a sub-camp on the site of Brzezinka, or Birkenau. (Brzezinka means 'birch trees' in Polish, and many can still be seen around the perimeter of the camp). This second camp (also known as Auschwitz II or Auschwitz-Birkenau)

Death camps in the Nazi-occupied territories



became the main death centre. Before the building of crematoria II and III, two existing farmhouses were used as gas chambers. At the same time as Birkenau was under construction, Auschwitz III was brought into use, located at a chemical plant and known as Buna-Manowitz (where Primo Levy was imprisoned). Those running the plant (I G Farben) hired workers from Auschwitz I and II at 4 Marks a day, which was paid to the SS. Originally, the prisoners walked the 7km to the factory, but this was found to be inefficient, and prisoners later lived in a sub-camp at the factory. Altogether there were over 40 sub-camps at Auschwitz, all usually attached to farms or factories, and all in existence for varying lengths of time, each incarcerating up to 500 prisoners.



The conservation of 45 brick barracks located at segment BI at the Auschwitz II – Birkenau site.

Photograph: Peter Thorpe

The Nazis also set up a network of ghettos, labour camps, concentration and death camps across Poland and other occupied countries. The SS imposed a reign of terror, and one from which they profited. They encouraged German industrial firms to build factories next to the camps and take advantage of the cheap labour for which they paid the SS. The labourers were mostly Jews but also included Polish political prisoners, priests and nuns, Gypsies, Jehovah's Witnesses, and homosexuals. All were worked and/or starved to death. It suited the Nazis if they could show that the prisoners had died of 'natural causes'.



Entrance to the Lodz Ghetto: the sign reads 'Jewish residential district, entry forbidden'

Yad Vashem



The huge camp at Birkenau is situated 3 km from the main camp. At first, those going to Birkenau walked there from Auschwitz I. This well-trodden path can still be seen from the watchtower. Later, a branch line was added, carrying trains directly into Birkenau and up to the selection ramp. Birkenau was divided into 9 areas, each surrounded by a barbed wire fence. The trainloads of people brought to Birkenau were Jews and Gypsies (Roma/Sinti). Non-Jewish Poles and Prisoners of War continued to be imprisoned at Auschwitz I.

Birkenau was built by the Nazis with two purposes: to house slave labourers selected from transports of Jews from across Europe, and to exterminate Jews who were elderly, sick, pregnant and those under 18 or over 35, all of whom were deemed 'useless eaters' and gassed immediately. The majority of victims of Birkenau were Jews, although Gypsies, political opponents, gay men and common criminals were also incarcerated there.

You will be aware of the vastness of the camp: you will see the railway that leads under the gate-tower to the selection ramp. It is sometimes possible to go up into the gate-tower for an overview of the entire camp complex. We will see the 'selection ramp', the wooden barracks, the latrines, the sites of the gas chambers and crematoria, the reception area (known as 'The Sauna'), and 'Kanada', where personal belongings were sorted and where one can see the names and family histories of some of the victims.

One section of Birkenau was known as the 'Family Camp', where families from the ghetto of Theresienstadt were imprisoned but allowed to live together. This unusual treatment was due to an impending Red Cross visit to Theresienstadt. The Nazis were concerned that prior to the

inspection they might have to demonstrate that those deported were still alive. In one barracks, the children were asked what they would like to have painted on the walls. They asked for a frieze of Snow White. In the hideous circumstances of Birkenau, they were able to look at a Disney cartoon. The SS kept each group alive for exactly six months before murdering them and bringing in a new group from of victims Theresienstadt. Out of 15,000 children imprisoned in Theresienstadt, fewer than 100 survived. In March 1944 the 'Family Camp' was liquidated, and all those living there were sent to the gas chambers.

The gas chambers themselves were made to look as ordinary as possible. Crematoria II and III had underground gas chambers, and those being sent there were deceived into believing they were being sent to the showers prior to being admitted to the 'relocation' camp. The deceit went as far as surrounding the buildings with well-tended flower beds and numbering the clothes pegs in the undressing room. Sonderkommando (a special detachment of prisoners who worked inside the crematoria) reminded those undressing to remember their peg number so they could find their clothes after showering. They also gave out string to tie shoes together.

On 27 January 1945 the Red Army liberated Auschwitz-Birkenau. They found 7,650 prisoners alive. They were the sick and the weak, those who had been left behind by the Nazis to die, as they were too ill to be forced on to the death marches.

It is estimated that approximately 1.4 million people perished in Auschwitz, 90% of whom were Jews.

All there is to know about Adolf Eichmann

Eyes.....medium
 Hair..... medium
 Weight..... medium
 Height..... medium
 Distinguishing features..... none
 Number of fingers..... ten
 Number of toes..... ten
 Intelligence..... medium

What did you expect?

Talons? Green saliva? Oversize incisors? Madness?

from: *Flowers for Hitler* by Leonard Cohen

A brief history of the Jews of Poland

Jews moved from the biblical land of Israel to east central Europe in Classical times, first living in Greek cities along the Adriatic, Aegean and Black Sea coasts. After the dispersal of the Jews following their expulsion by the Romans from the land of Israel (Judaea) in 70 CE, they moved along all points of the compass. They formed Jewish communities in Africa, China, India, South America, North America, Australia and Europe. In Europe these communities stretched as far south as Greece and Rhodes and as far north as Norway and Sweden, as far east as the Baltic States and Russia, and as far west as the Channel Islands, Britain and Ireland (see map).

In 1900 it is estimated that there were 10.6 million Jews in the world, and 70% of them lived in east central Europe. How did they arrive there?

Jews migrated from country to country as they were alternately welcomed and expelled. With the rise of discrimination and persecution against the Jews in the Holy Roman Empire in the twelfth century, they began to move eastwards. The migration to Poland continued during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In Poland, Jews were welcomed and encouraged, particularly by King Kasimir in the fourteenth century (after whom the old Jewish quarter Kasimierz in Krakow was named). Jews were only allowed to live in certain areas and do certain jobs. Although they were given freedom to worship and trade, they were not allowed to own land or to join any of the Christian guilds, so it was difficult for them to farm or to become craftsmen. Many of them became pedlars, and others had to do the jobs that the Christians did not want to do: they became tax collectors and moneylenders.

Poland expanded eastwards in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, becoming the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Jews were encouraged to settle in the eastern parts of the country – Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine – and this trend continued until the Cossack revolt of 1648. The first major pogrom in Poland took place between 1648 and 1649 and was led by the Ukrainian Cossacks, who were rebelling against proposed changes to their religion. About 20% of Poland's Jews, 120,000 were murdered, leaving the Eastern fringes of Poland with few Jewish communities.

Over the next century the community returned and grew. By the end of the eighteenth century Poland was partitioned by its neighbours – divided between Russia, Prussia and Austria in 1772, 1793 and 1795 – and most of the Jewish areas came under Russian rule. Almost immediately the Russian authorities placed restrictions on where Jews were permitted to travel and live. The area where they were allowed to live, mostly part of historic Poland, became known as the Pale of Settlement, or just The Pale. The other densely Jewish-inhabited area that had once been part of historic Poland was Galicia, which was incorporated into the Austrian empire in 1772. By the end of the eighteenth century, Poland had the largest Jewish community in the world. Unlike many in western Europe, Jews in the Austro-Hungarian empire had the freedom to speak their own language, Yiddish (a combination of old German and Hebrew), and to follow Talmudic law.

Two thousand years of Jewish Life in Europe by 1933



Atlas of the Holocaust by Martin Gilbert

It was the Pale (Galicia and Moldavia) that became the heartland of Ashkenazi, European Jewry. From this part of the world came some of the most important developments in modern Jewish thought. Hassidism, Zionism, the Bund and Jewish Socialism, Yiddish literature and scholarship all flourished.

Jews in Europe contributed to every sphere of life: music, literature, science, philosophy, politics, arts and finance. In some countries large Jewish communities developed. In the 1930s, the Jewish population of Russia numbered 2.5 million. In Germany, about 500,000 (1% of the

population) were Jewish. Many German Jews had assimilated, a large number had intermarried with Germans and some had converted to Christianity. In Poland, over 3 million (10% of the population) were Jewish. Jews had lived in Poland since the thirteenth century. Three quarters of Polish Jews were orthodox and traditional Jews, most of whom spoke Yiddish at home. The rest were assimilated, wore Western clothes, spoke Polish and participated in social and political activities.



Pale of Settlement
 Kingdom of Poland *Reserved for Jewish settlement*

Life in the shtetls (country towns and villages), revolved around the market place, which usually accommodated the town's water supply (pump or well) and the Shul (synagogue). These villages were predominantly Jewish, although sometimes there were non-Jews living in the shtetl or nearby. The shtetl would have everything a Jewish family needed: kosher butcher, burial society, Mikveh (ritual bath), the Jewish Aid Society (which looked after the community's poor). Friday afternoon would see the village preparing for the start of Shabbat (Sabbath). Within these towns and villages the majority spoke Yiddish as their first language. Ultimately, this was one of the reasons that Jews were easily picked out during the Nazi era, as they spoke Polish with a strong accent.

The rise of nationalism in the nineteenth century was not positive for the Jews. Wherever they lived, and however long their families had lived there, they were not regarded as part of the national group. Nationalist movements often thrive on discrimination, on creating an image that excludes other people such as Jews, Gypsies, Armenians and others. This period of the nineteenth century saw a significant rise in antisemitism.

With the outbreak of pogroms (organised violence against Jews) in the Russian Empire, during the 1880s and early 1900s, thousands of Jews decided to leave. Poverty and persecution drove them from countries where their families had lived for hundreds of years. Many Jews from Galicia went to Budapest, Vienna or further west. Others sought refuge in the neighbouring regions, Bukovina and Moldavia. Those who had relatives in western Europe or America tried to join them, particularly the young and fit. Between 1880 and 1914, an estimated 350,000 eastern and central European Jews went to Western Europe; some 2.4 million went to America.

World War I (1914-1918) and the German occupation of parts of Poland had a different impact on Polish Christians and Jews. The occupying German army included Jewish soldiers who shared with Polish Jews a religious and cultural heritage. Compared to their treatment by the Russian

tsarist empire, Polish Jews viewed the arrival of the Germans as a positive step. The German army allowed the Jews to have Yiddish newspapers and Jewish schools.

The end of World War I brought the long-awaited State of Poland. The Treaty of Versailles set about carving up the former Prussia, and Poland benefited. The arrival of many German-speakers in the new state of Poland caused tension amongst Polish nationalists. Antisemitism increased. The lives of Jews were restricted once again, and life was hard.

Left-wing Jewish groups had developed alongside other groups in response to the revolutionary times at the beginning of the twentieth century. They continued to grow and the Bund, became the largest Jewish political group in Poland during this period. They had links with other Polish socialist groups. Zionist groups also grew among Jews who thought there was no future for them in Poland or anywhere outside of a Jewish homeland. Nationalist ideas had spread to them, and they wanted what the Poles and Czechs had obtained – a state of their own where they would be the majority and not be dependent on the goodwill of others. Many Polish Jews, particularly young people, joined Zionist groups, and some of them went to Palestine. Meanwhile, the Orthodox were looking at strengthening religious practice in Poland through the Hassidic movement.

The cultural life of the Polish Jewish communities thrived in the 1920s and 30s. It was the golden era for the Yiddish film industry, both in Poland and the USA. Films told the stories of daily life in the shtetl, old Jewish fables about those choosing to emigrate to the USA and leaving behind the old country (between 1880 and 1920, one million Jews left Poland). Yiddish theatre and literature also flourished, despite political upheavals and increasing antisemitism.

The invasion of Poland by Nazi Germany in 1939 devastated everyone in Poland, except the ethnic German population. The division of Poland between Germany and the Soviet Union was a further blow. For all Poles – Christians and Jews – in German-occupied Poland, life was very bitter indeed. The Nazis wanted to expand the German empire by ethnic cleansing and vast population movements. Christian Poles were moved out of their homes and forced eastwards so that their houses and farms could be given to ethnic Germans arriving from eastern Poland and other regions. The Jews were forced into ghettos, crammed together and starved. Jews from other parts of Europe were moved to these ghettos, which were regularly emptied, as the inhabitants were transported to killing sites, concentration and death camps. Few survived.

Until June 1941, when the Germans invaded eastern Poland and the Soviet Union under Operation Barbarossa, the Jews in eastern Poland did not suffer as much as the Jews in western Poland or other areas under Nazi control. The Soviets had allowed the Jews their own schools, newspapers, and the use of the Yiddish language. It was not equality, but for many Jews it was an improvement on the life they had lived under Polish rule since 1918. This led to many tensions, at the time and since. The Jewish community has historically always been left-wing. The yearning for a Messianic Age has been interpreted by some to be a socialist, egalitarian

state. Many Jews in Soviet-occupied Poland worked with the Communists. Some of the few Polish Jews who survived the Holocaust moved to the Soviet Union after World War II. This collaboration with the Soviet occupying forces angered many Christian Poles and fuelled antisemitism. However, under Operation Barbarossa most of the Jews living in these Soviet territories were murdered.

After the Nazis annexed all of Poland, their racism was mainly focused on Jews, of whom they wanted to rid the world, destroying them completely. Almost 4 million Jews were annihilated in 14 months from the end of 1941 to the end of 1943. By the conclusion of the war approximately 6 million European Jews had been murdered.

At the end of the war a few thousand Jews from Poland had survived the Holocaust and returned to their former homes. Some were welcomed back, others returned to find their houses and belongings taken over, and in extreme cases they faced further pogroms and persecution. In 1946 in Kielce, Jews who had survived the Holocaust were murdered. After this, many Jews felt it was not safe to remain in Poland.

Today, from the 3.4 million Polish Jews living in Poland before World War II, the Jewish community of Poland numbers approximately 6,000. Out of thousands of synagogues used for worship across Poland before the war, now only a handful are in use. The majority of Jewish buildings, synagogues and cemeteries destroyed during the Nazi occupation and following the post-war Communist era are now municipal offices, libraries or cinemas, or have become derelict and fallen into disrepair. The once large and vibrant Jewish communities of Poland have disappeared, and in many cases the only evidence that they ever existed are derelict buildings.

The Jewish presence in the history of Warsaw has left its mark on many places in the city. The boundaries of the Jewish Ghetto, which was destroyed after the uprising in 1943, are marked on street corners with inscribed black basalt stones. There is, however, a movement of Jewish revival in Poland, which is restoring synagogues and cemeteries and opening Jewish schools. A new museum, the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, was opened in Warsaw in April 2013 with a mission to document the story of Jews in Poland over the centuries.

This is the background to the history of the Holocaust in Poland, and to the experiences of the Christians and Jews you will meet there. Most of the Jewish visitors to Krakow who come from the USA, Canada, Australia, Europe and Israel are the descendants of Jews who left the Pale and Galicia in the short period 1880-1914. The Jews who migrated between 1918 and 1939 generally came from western Europe. Small numbers went to Palestine between the world wars, and others joined family members who had left before 1914. Some of the visitors are children of Holocaust survivors.

The Jews who stayed in this region stayed because many of their families had lived in the same area for 700 years. It was where they settled and it was all they knew – it was home.

The Third Reich

– A brief overview

The Third Reich is the term used to describe the rule of the Nazi Party in Germany from 1933 to 1945.

On coming to power, leading Nazis immediately set about removing all challenges to Hitler's authority throughout Germany. The regime combined the offices of the president and the chancellor, which became united in the person of Adolf Hitler as Führer or undisputed leader. Far from being a well-oiled super-state, guaranteeing to make everything run in place and on time, the Third Reich was a confusion of competing authorities and private empires that strove for the dictator's favour.

The appointment of various personalities contributed to the development and power of the Reich. Reinhard Heydrich, Adolf Eichmann, Heinrich Himmler and others are names that crop up constantly concerning the SS. Himmler had reformed Hitler's Personal Headquarters Guard of 1922/23, and his appointment as Reich SS Leader in January 1929 saw the SS grow from a few hundred to over 209,000 in 1933. The SS revolved around an absolute and unswerving loyalty to Hitler. Its power rested on three main strands: (1) monopoly of the police, which became the main instrument of SS Nazi terror, implementing the Nazi policy of genocide; (2) monopoly of the security service and intelligence gathering; and (3) responsibility for the organisation and running of the concentration camp system.

As the Nazis swept across Europe their power appeared unchallengeable. The world powers had turned a blind eye in 1938 to both the Nazi annexation of Austria (the Anschluss) and their take-over of the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia. Communists, other political dissidents, teachers and priests were targets of the SS. Jews and opponents of the Nazis were arrested and murdered. The international policy of appeasement gave the Nazis the sense that they could act with impunity. They believed they had the right to invade and seize land for the expansion of the Reich and creation of Lebensraum (living space). The result was the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939 and the beginning of the World War II. Across Europe, millions of people's lives were destroyed. In Poland, approximately two million Poles were 'removed' as they were in the way of Nazi expansion plans, as well as the usual victims: Jews, communists, trade unionists, priests, teachers and others.

The influence of the Third Reich penetrated all areas of people's lives in Germany: the rich, the poor, the middle class, farmers, labourers, scientists, women and youth groups – all were encouraged to subscribe to the policies of the Nazi Party, and most did, willingly.

The SS utilised the personal possessions of the prisoners and victims to finance the concentration camp system. Human hair was woven into rough fabric and sold along with shoes, clothing and household items in German markets for low prices. Jewellery and art were hoarded. Gold teeth were melted down to be stored as ingots and used as currency.

The Wannsee Conference

On 20 January 1942, fifteen senior Nazi and German officials were summoned to a meeting at a secluded lakeside villa on the shore of Lake Wannsee, a few miles from Berlin. The meeting had been convened by SS General Reinhard Heydrich, who informed them that he had just been appointed 'Plenipotentiary for the Preparation of the Final Solution of the European Jewish Question'.

The aim of the meeting was to coordinate the work of most of Hitler's ministries and departments which dealt with the expulsion, deportation, and murder of the Jews and the disposal of Jewish property across Nazi-occupied Europe. Adolf Eichmann and his deputy Heinrich Müller, who were in charge of the Gestapo's Jewish Affairs Section, were also present. Eichmann drew up a list detailing the number of Jews living in each country, whom it was intended to deport to their deaths. Ireland is on the list with 4,000 Jews.

At the meeting, Dr Josef Bühler requested that the Jewish question be solved as rapidly as possible. The bureaucrats present, most of them lawyers, were concerned with the legal frameworks and with the thorny issue of how one decides who is a Jew. They debated the pros and cons of mass sterilisation as an alternative to mass murder. The main issue for the SS officers present at the meeting was the well-being of their men, some of whom had been badly affected by participating in mass shootings. Their aim was to develop ways of killing which were more efficient and less troubling for the perpetrators.

At the conclusion of the meeting at Wannsee, a new phase in the murder of the Jews began. To mass slaughter and starvation was added a third method of killing: mass murder by poison gas.

List of number of Jews living in Europe presented to delegates at the Wannsee Conference

Land	Zahl
A. Altreich	131.800
Ostmark	43.700
Ostgebiete	420.000
Generalgouvernement	2.284.000
Bialystok	400.000
Protectorat Böhmen und Mähren	74.200
Estland	- judenfrei -
Lettland	3.500
Litauen	34.000
Belgien	43.000
Dänemark	5.600
Frankreich	Besetztes Gebiet Unbesetztes Gebiet
	165.000 700.000
Griechenland	69.600
Niederlande	160.800
Norwegen	1.300
B. Bulgarien	48.000
England	330.000
Finnland	2.300
Irland	4.000
Italien einschl. Sardinien	58.000
Albanien	200
Kroatien	40.000
Portugal	3.000
Rumänien einschl. Bessarabien	342.000
Schweden	8.000
Schweiz	18.000
Serbien	10.000
Slowakei	88.000
Spanien	6.000
Türkei (europ. Teil)	55.500
Ungarn	742.800
UdSSR	5.000.000
Ukraine	2.994.684
Weißrußland aus- schl. Bialystok	446.484
Zusammen:	über 11.000.000

Yad Vashem

Krakow



Saint Mary's Church in the main market square, Krakow old town.

Photo: Piotr Trojański

Krakow is Poland's second city and cultural capital. The city itself is dominated by a magnificent castle, and there are many churches and a historic city centre which are a draw for tourists from around the world.

Archaeologists have dated human settlement in Krakow to 50,000 years from the stone tools found in the city's central Wawel Hill, where the castle now stands overlooking the Vistula river. In 1000 AD Krakow got its own bishop, and in 1038 the city became Poland's capital. By the end of the fifteenth century the city was the centre of a vast and prosperous kingdom stretching from the Black Sea to the Baltic.

Krakow remained Poland's official capital till 1791. Although kings were crowned in Krakow from 1609, they all chose to reside in Warsaw, which became the country's political centre. However, monarchs kept returning to Krakow as they wished to be buried in the Wawel Cathedral. Throughout the eighteenth century, Krakow suffered a series of sieges and foreign occupations, but it returned to dominance when Poland became independent in 1918. From the German invasion in September 1939, the Nazis created a protectorate in south-west Poland with their governor-general's residence in Krakow. The Nazis protected the city of Krakow as they regarded it as an example of German cultural heritage, rather than Polish. Unlike Warsaw, which had to be rebuilt after 1945, Krakow was largely untouched.

Before World War II, Jews represented over 25% of Krakow's population, with 65,000 living within the greater Krakow area. Today, 70% of Jews can trace their heritage back to Poland. In the Kazimierz district of Krakow today, one can almost tangibly feel the absence of the generations of Jews who once lived there. For 700 years prior to their expulsion to the German-created Podgórze Ghetto in March 1941, Kazimierz had been the Jewish quarter of Krakow.

Letter to Mirele

Dear Mirele,

I can't believe I have one night to stuff a lifetime of love into this letter.

Tomorrow morning – if 4am can be called morning, I am giving you up. I am taking you, Mirele, to the back entrance of dear, brave Hermann's grocery and the child rescuers will be waiting there for you and the thirty-two other children under the age of three. They'll inject you with a sedative so you won't cry and then they'll slip off in the predawn with you – my life, my love, out of this barbaric country to safety.

We put it off, Mirele. We didn't want to believe we would have to give up our child, probably to never see her again. But this is the last child rescue. After this there will be none left to rescue, because tomorrow, our informers tell us, is the last big round-up. Tomorrow they come for men, women and children. And I have been convinced by these words, spoken by our trusted informer, Hermann, the brave gentile doctor. "Any child they have taken away either dies immediately or dies on the way to the death camp."

The word death three times in one sentence! We were the last ones to be convinced to give up our child. He said finally, with the deepest sadness in every exhausted wrinkle in his face. "I cannot force you. But if you keep her with you, she will be dead in a month. They have no use for babies, she cannot work for them. If you want to give her to us, bring her to the back entrance of my grocery at 4am. No belongings, whatever food you have. Goodbye."

Mirele, do you see why I have to give you up? He said no belongings, but I will beg, I plead that this letter will be allowed to go, sewn into your undershirt. And then, I will pray to G-d that the letter stays with you until you are old enough to read it. You must know that we love you. You must know why you are alone, without parents. Not because they didn't love you... but because they did!

It's eerie to think that by the time you read this I will probably be dead. That's what Hermann says is going on. People either die immediately or on the way or after a week or two of forced labour and no food. But I won't have lived in vain, Mirele, if I know that I brought you into the world and you will live and survive and grow big and strong and you will be happy. You can be happy, Mirele, because we loved you.

What makes the difference in the lives of adults, it seems, is if they had secure childhoods. Secure with lots of love and acceptance and needs fulfilled and predictable routine and the like. You've had that up to this minute. You'll have it up till 4am. But then you won't. Who knows who will end up taking care of you? Some family who will take you in for the money Hermann will pay them? They will surely be kinder to their own than to you.

Here is where pain mixes with rage! I rage at the animals who are making it possible for you to cry and I won't be there to comfort you.

But you will have this letter, and this letter will make you feel secure, if G-d answers my prayers. You have us, Mirele, even though you don't see us, we are with you. We're watching you and praying for you. Every time you have troubles we are pounding on the door to G-d's very throne-room, insisting on an audience and demanding mercy for our Mirele down on earth, alone without her parents. And G-d will listen to us. We won't leave Him alone until He agrees that you deserve health, love and happiness.

Mirele, you'll wonder what your first two years were like. You'll wish you could remember. Let me remember for you right now, tenderly, on this piece of paper.

You like hot cereal in the morning, with lots of milk and sugar. Except that there is no milk and sugar now, none in the whole city. But I make your cereal anyway and you eat it with big smiles between every bite. Then you come ready for your nap, so I rock you, after putting the rocker where the sunlight will fall on it. I rock you until you fall asleep and then I put you in to my bed. You sleep well there, you like my smell. What will you smell tomorrow night? Surely nobody will rock you tomorrow, not even in the shade? Oh G-d, I cannot do it! I will do it. For you, Mirele, so you will have at least a hope for life.

Mirele, do me a favour, after you've grown, after this dirty nightmarish war is over...I know there will be those who underplay the tragedies going on here every day. They will say, "A war is a war. It was just a war." Mirele, tell them about this agony! Tell them how you were secure in my arms rocking you to sleep in the sunlight. Tell them how your father ran, one night, a year ago, to ease your pain, Mirele. And now the three of us are being torn apart. "Just a war" ...?! Tell them, Mirele, that all wars in the world don't add up to the agony in my heart right now as I write this.

G-d it's 2 am already! Only two more hours with my love, my baby, my life, my Mirele. I'm going to hold you now, Mirele for two hours. Your father and I are going to wake you, feed you and tell you over and over how much we love you. You're barely two years old, but maybe, if G-d is good, maybe, you'll remember it and maybe you'll keep this letter until you're old enough to read it.

There will be bad times for you, Mirele, I know. But just think about me holding you, rocking you to sleep in the sunlight. Keep that sunlight in your heart always.

I love you. Your father loves you. May G-d help us all.

Mama



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