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## Holocaust Tourism

# Visiting Auschwitz, the Factory of Death

*By Alexander Schwabe*

**The tourist hotels of Krakow lie just one hour away from the world's most horrid place: Auschwitz. Close to 600,000 visitors come to the death camp every year. Among them are former prisoners, religious Jews and descendants of the dead. For everyone, it is a trip laced with pain.**



AFF

Visitors walk through the former Nazi death camp bundled up for winter. Camp inmates had no such luxury.

Oswiecim, Poland -- "My name is Lukas," says the friendly young tourist guide. His next words leave his listeners, all gathered for a tour of the Auschwitz death camp, speechless. Heads turn down in shock and horror.

"Officials at the camp had no problem with all the ash produced. One thousand incinerated corpses produce about three tons of ash. They then dispersed the ash in the river and over the empty fields." In Auschwitz, he explains, there is not one spot of ground where one can walk without stepping on the ashes of cremated prisoners. Lukas describes this and other unspeakable horrors with quiet humility. The facts speak for themselves.

Lukas, a young Pole who speaks flawless English, spends every day leading tours of Auschwitz. About 20 tourists boarded the tour bus this morning at a Krakow hotel, ready to drive 70 kilometers west to Auschwitz. Along the way, the bus passes a fortress-like villa which used to be the home of the infamous Hans Frank, who Hitler named "general governor" of Poland and who after the war was sentenced to hanging for his heinous crimes against humanity.

As they ride, Lukas bombards the tourists with figures. Today, numerous Americans are in the group, but there are also Brits, French and Spaniards. Most are under 40. The more numbers Lukas cites, the quieter they become.

The numbers are outward signs of the stunning brutality and immeasurable pain that made up daily life at Auschwitz, a place where mass murder became an industry. In just about five years, 1.6 million prisoners arrived at the camp's ominous gates. Most came in cattle cars. Among them, only 400,000 were registered as inmates. The rest went straight to the gas chambers and were then incinerated in the camp's five crematoriums. More than one million people died in this factory of death.

### 700 SS officers guarded 90,000 prisoners

In the last few weeks before the Soviet Red Army liberated the camp on Jan. 27, 1945, Nazis officials destroyed 80 percent of the camp's records. They also blew up parts of the main camp, known as Auschwitz I, and a large part of the more damning 200 hectare Auschwitz II-Birkenau camp, where the three large gas chambers were located, Lukas explains.

The gas chambers and crematoriums stood about 100 meters from the arrival ramps --some to the left, some to the right. In other words, death was everywhere. It was on this platform, just after arrival, that the newcomers were "selected." At its height, the camp had about 90,000



REUTERS

Close to 7,000 inmates were still

prisoners with 700 guards overseeing them. Cruelty abounded and the capacity for organized murder continues to shock. The SS system permitted the gassing of 2,000 people at a time. The problem was, they couldn't get rid of the corpses as fast as they could create them: the crematoriums could only incinerate 1,500 corpses a day. Often, they compensated by building large bonfires in which the bodies were burned.

alive when the Red Army liberated Auschwitz 40 years ago. Among them were about 600 children.

People from all across Europe were brought to this camp, the biggest of the at least 52 major camps erected by the Nazis. Partly that was because of logistics: Auschwitz lies at the geographical heart of the continent and was simple to access by train. The landscape is not only vast and flat but also simple to seal off from the rest of the area. For prisoners, the trip to Auschwitz took 10 or more days. Passengers arrived hungry and thirsty and sure their situation could only improve. Upon arrival, they wanted nothing more than a shower. As such, most gladly walked into the chambers where they would be gassed. Protest was rare.

Greek Jews often were forced to pay for their trip to Auschwitz. At one point in the tour, Lukas pulls out the remnants of tickets Greek Jews purchased. Many of them were promised land and farms in Poland. No one believed that something so terrible could happen to them, Lukas said. Even when escapees from the Treblinka camp told Jews in the Warsaw ghetto about their experiences, many refused to believe them.

The number of transport wagons arriving in Auschwitz increased dramatically after Jan. 20, 1942, the day of the Wannsee Conference, when the "Final Solution" -- which called for the eradication of all European Jews -- was put into effect. Throughout Europe, ghettos and work camps were emptied as, by the hundreds of thousands, Jews were sent to the death camps. After July 1942, 400,000 Jews from the Warsaw ghetto arrived at Auschwitz. In October 1942, 7,000 Jews from Krakow pulled into the station and in May 1943, another shipment of 2,300 people arrived. In May 1944, the camp received 1,500 children, elderly and sick who had been kept at the forced labor camp of Plaszow, under the eye of Amon Goeth. In July 1944, 4,000 Hungarian Jews arrived. There were also about 80,000 non-Jewish Polish prisoners and about 20,000 Sinti and Roma brought to the camp.



AP

The last known picture of the notorious Josef Mengele, who conducted cruel experiments on children in the name of science. The photo was taken in 1956 in Brazil, where Mengele fled after the war.

The tourists follow Lukas into the brick barracks of the Auschwitz I camp. It was in one of these brick buildings that the cruel Dr. Josef Mengele conducted his grotesque experiments on children, notably twins. In another, gynecologist Carl Clauberg dreamed up brutal ways of sterilizing Jewish women. In the summer of 1943, Block 24 became the privileged domain of SS-chief Heinrich Himmler. It included Himmler's private bordel, for which he personally selected appealing women prisoners. Today, however, these blocks are the camp's main museum. Here, behind glass stand empty canisters of Zyklon B, the poison used in the gas chambers. Five to seven canisters of the poison -- originally used against insects -- were enough to kill 2,000 people. In the next room, behind a 20 meter glass window, is a two-ton pile of human hair, including several long braids. The Nazis used the hair to make blankets and clothes. When the Russian soldiers arrived they, found a full seven tons of human hair.

At this point, no one is talking. The visitors keep their heads down. No one makes eye contact. Each person has to find a way of coming to terms with the reality behind the glass.

The next block contains a pile of thousands of glasses taken from prisoners upon arrival. There is also a pile of prosthetic arms and legs as well as crutches that were taken from prisoners. Most prisoners with missing limbs were World War I veterans who had lost their body parts fighting for Germany. The SS collected the prosthetics to give to wounded Nazi soldiers. Another room is filled with suitcases which still bear the names, addresses, birthdays and transport numbers of their owners, many of whom arrived hopefully, with their last remaining valuables wrapped up for safety.

On some of the suitcases, the word "young child" is written. Close to 200,000 children were murdered in Auschwitz, Lukas explains. By comparison, only a shockingly small 700 were liberated. Fifty were born in this inferno. Several thousand children's shoes lie behind one window and another showcases 80,000 adult shoes.

### Tears at the Memorial

The tourists pass Block 10, the sterilization ward. It was here that Mengele practiced his sinister crimes. One of the doctors who worked under Mengele went on to have a regular practice after Auschwitz, explains Lukas. His patients accepted him as a decent and well-experienced doctor. No one knew about his Nazi past.

Between Block 10 and 11 stood the execution area. Here, 20,000 people were stood up against a wall and shot. The SS-officer responsible for most of the killings disappeared in the spring of 1945 and was never brought to justice, Lukas said.

This morning, a Belgian group is holding a memorial. Among them are a group of religious Jews and an elderly woman who says she lost family members here. As the memorial begins, she breaks down in uncontrollable sobs and has to be escorted out.

Block 11 stands open. This was the torture chamber of a camp that in itself was a torture. The narrow rooms where the prisoners had to undress before they were shot remain intact. In the basement are dark chambers in which many were suffocated. Next to them are chambers so narrow, prisoners could not sit down. Often prisoners were forced to spend the night here, and then the next day, when they were weak from exhaustion, they were sent out for hard labor. Many were kept so long in the cells that they simply died.



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The crematorium. Here, and in three other buildings, the bodies of close to 1.5 million people were incinerated.

Just about 100 meters from the large villa where long-time Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Hoess lived, and where his children played in the garden, stands a gas chamber. It is the only one the Nazis did not destroy in the days before the camp's liberation. From the outside, it looks like an air raid bunker. Inside, there are still holes in the ceiling from which Zyklon B hissed into the room. "Those directly under a hole died quickly," Lukas explains. Those standing in the corners spent 10 or 15 minutes fighting or screaming for life.

A door leads from the gas chamber directly into the crematorium, where at one point SS officers burned up to 300 corpses a day. The Nazis stopped using this crematorium in 1943, when they moved most of the killing machine to the nearby Auschwitz II- Birkenau camp. After the war, the crematorium, the smallest of the four at the camp, was rebuilt as part of the museum. The metal rollers, on which the corpses were placed and then pushed into the oven, are, however, original.

At then end of the two-hour tour, Lukas thanks the tourists for paying such close attention. How could they have done otherwise? In such a place, it is impossible to look away.

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Piles of prosthetics taken from prisoners, many of whom lost a limb fighting for Germany in World War I.

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