

# Remembering Auschwitz-Birkenau

## Secondary school lesson plan for HMD



HOLOCAUST  
MEMORIAL  
DAY TRUST

This lesson plan, suitable for secondary school students, will introduce your students to the history of Auschwitz-Birkenau (pronounced Ow (like in how) -shvitz Beer-ken-ow), and share with them the stories of some of those who were imprisoned there.

Auschwitz-Birkenau was the largest and most infamous of all the Nazi camps, where approximately 1.1 million people were murdered.

For many, Auschwitz-Birkenau is the main thing they associate with the Holocaust, yet there were many varied experiences of the Holocaust which you can make your students aware of. Some people went into hiding; some were rounded up into ghettos, imprisoned in concentration camps, and driven to their deaths by starvation; people were killed by bullets, in slave labour camps, in gas chambers and in death marches. Even within Auschwitz-Birkenau, experiences were varied. This lesson plan will highlight to your students the variety of experiences within Auschwitz-Birkenau.



### Notes for teachers:

Please be aware that this lesson plan asks students to consider traumatic events. Some students may find the subject matter difficult, especially if they themselves have experienced trauma.

### Learning objectives:

Students will gain an understanding of the history of Auschwitz-Birkenau, what happened to people who were sent there, and why it is important for us to learn about and remember Auschwitz-Birkenau today.

### Background knowledge:

- This activity explores life stories from the Holocaust and Nazi Persecution, so could be an introduction to the subject, or an extension to prior learning of this period of history.
- Differentiation is built into the lesson for teachers to adapt activities for different ages and abilities.
- This activity is designed for a secondary school age group – see notes below.
- Background information sheets are provided for teachers at the end of this lesson on the Holocaust and Nazi Persecution to help you answer students' questions.

## Levels:

Depending on the year group you are teaching and what they have studied before, students' existing knowledge about Auschwitz-Birkenau may vary. This lesson therefore has two levels – for students who know very little, and students who know more. Each level includes the history of Auschwitz-Birkenau and experiences of individuals who were imprisoned there.

There is so much that can be taught about Auschwitz-Birkenau that we have tried to provide you with a broad overview to introduce students to the topic and help them to understand references they may have heard. Therefore each level could fill a double lesson (around 90 minutes), or you can choose a selection of the topics if you have less time. Level One covers more topics, but each one takes less time than in Level Two.

You can choose to teach both levels to the same class to give them an in-depth understanding of the topic. Please read through all the content before deciding to do this and bear in mind your students' age and maturity levels. For example, the debating activity towards the end of Level Two might be too advanced for younger students.

Pages	Slides	Level	The History of Auschwitz	Individuals featured
3	1-3	<b>Both</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introductory discussion</li> <li>• Starter activity</li> </ul>	Mindu Hornick
4-9	4-21	<b>Level One</b>  Suitable for students aged 11-15 or those with little prior knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deportations</li> <li>• Arrival and selections</li> <li>• Where was Auschwitz?</li> <li>• Life as a slave labourer</li> <li>• The 'Family Camp'</li> <li>• Death in Auschwitz</li> <li>• Survival</li> </ul>	Terry Farago Kitty Hart-Moxon Ceija Stoyka
10-11	22-25	<b>Level Two</b>  Suitable for students aged 15-18, those with some existing knowledge, or as a follow on to level one	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Timeline</li> <li>• Resistance</li> <li>• Liberation</li> <li>• Auschwitz today</li> <li>• Auschwitz in today's culture</li> </ul>	Rudolf Vrba Iolo Lewis
12	26	<b>Both</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plenary discussion</li> <li>• Next steps</li> </ul>	

# Introduction to Holocaust Memorial Day

(To complete before either level)

What is Holocaust Memorial Day? (2 minutes)

## Slide 1

Each year on 27 January we mark Holocaust Memorial Day, to remember:

- the six million Jewish people who were systematically persecuted and murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators during the Holocaust
- the Nazis' other victims, including Roma and Sinti people, disabled people, gay people, political opponents and many others who faced persecution and death at the hands of the Nazis
- the millions of men, women and children, who have been murdered in the genocides which followed in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur

## Starter activity (To complete before either level)

Watch 'Mindu's Story' (10 minutes)

## Slide 2

As a group, watch this three-minute film. Explain to students in advance that you are going to hear from someone who was targeted during the Holocaust.

(**Teacher note** – the film is on YouTube so requires an internet connection to play. You can download a copy of the film in advance to play offline here: [vimeo.com/343229997](https://vimeo.com/343229997))

## Slide 3

After the film, discuss:

- What do we know about Mindu?
- What is her religion?
- Have you heard of the place she was taken to – Auschwitz?
- Did anything surprise you about what she said about Auschwitz? Why/why not?

## Level One – Introduction (5 minutes)

Hand out the 'Auschwitz-Birkenau information sheet' (provided at the end of this resource) to students in pairs or small groups. This will help them with the activities that follow.

### Slide 4

If necessary, remind students what the Holocaust was, and tell them that today we are learning about one specific Nazi concentration and extermination camp that has become the most notorious - Auschwitz-Birkenau. They may have heard about it in books or on television, so today they will learn the facts and hear stories from real people who were imprisoned there.

## Activity One – Deportations (5 minutes)

The Nazis were determined in their plan to eliminate all Jewish people from Europe. In order to achieve this plan, an enormous scheme was organised to transport Jews from every country in Europe to extermination camps such as Auschwitz. The vast majority of them were murdered as soon as they arrived.

### Slides 5-6

As a group click from slide 5-6 to see how many Jewish people were deported to Auschwitz from each country.

1.1 million Jewish people who were deported to Auschwitz. Not everyone who was deported there was Jewish, the total number was 1.3 million.

### Discussion:

The scale of this attack can be very difficult to imagine. Each one of these numbers is an individual with family, friends, a profession, hobbies. How can we get our head around these enormous numbers?

## Activity Two – Arrival and selections (12 minutes)

### Slide 7

Terry Farago is a Hungarian Jew. In 1944, when she was 17 years old, Terry and her family were deported to Auschwitz. Terry survived, and after the war she made her home in Cardiff, Wales.

Play the three-minute video clip of Holocaust survivor Terry Farago describing what happened when she arrived at Auschwitz.

**(Teacher note** – the film requires an internet connection to play)

### Discussion:

- Why were Terry and her mother separated?
- What were their fates?
- Who decided?
- Why do you think Terry was chosen to remain alive that day?

## Slide 8

Read the quotes from other survivors about the selection process, and discuss:

- How did prisoners who were already at Auschwitz try and help people arriving?
- Ivor says they spoke in Yiddish – what is Yiddish and why did they do that?
- What lies did people tell to try and influence the selection?
- What do you think people knew about Auschwitz before arriving there?
- Do you think the people who were sent straight to their deaths knew what was happening?

## Teacher notes:

- Yiddish is a language that was widely used by Jews in central and eastern Europe before the Holocaust. It borrows from German, Hebrew and other eastern European languages. The SS guards would not have been able to understand what the prisoners were saying.
- When people were deported they were told they were being 'resettled' in another country. The Nazis disguised their intentions throughout the operation with the aim of keeping people in the dark and avoiding chaos and rioting. People who were selected for death were told they were being sent for a shower, and wouldn't have known what was happening until they were already locked in the gas chamber.

## Slide 9

### Who was Dr Mengele?

Lily Ebert's quote mentioned 'Dr Mengele'. Have your students heard of him?

Josef Mengele was one of several doctors who worked at the camp and became a notorious and feared figure. One of the doctors' duties was to conduct the selections, as it involved judging quickly whether a prisoner was fit to work. Although he was not the only one to perform this task, many survivors remember him being present. This is in part due to his other interest at Auschwitz – medical experimentation.

Mengele would attend arrivals to search the crowd for twins – one of his areas of interest. He was also interested in 'race science' and selected Jewish, Roma and Sinti people for experimentation, aiming to prove they were 'inferior' to German Aryans. This was strong Nazi ideology, and 'scientific proof' would have gained him acclaim amongst Nazi leadership. He conducted many cruel and painful experiments on Auschwitz prisoners, which often led to the permanent injury or death of his subjects.

In January 1945, Mengele fled Auschwitz and evaded capture. Wealthy family members helped him to escape to South America, where he lived in Argentina until his death in 1979.

## Discussion: What do we expect from doctors and how was Mengele acting differently?

For example - We think of doctors as people who heal, work towards people's wellbeing, and take an oath to 'do no harm'. Mengele was deliberately, maliciously harming people for his own gains. He showed no remorse and received no justice.

## Activity Three – Where was Auschwitz? (10 minutes)

### Slides 10-12

Show students the images of Auschwitz I and Birkenau from Google Maps.

The third image shows the two camps with the town of Oświęcim (as it is today). Oświęcim is much bigger today than it was during World War Two, but this will help give students an idea of the context of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Before the war, Oświęcim (pronounced oz-vee-en-chim) was a town with a population of 14,000, and 8,000 of those people were Jewish. It was known by Jewish people across Europe as being a welcoming and safe place, due to the thriving Jewish community and culture there.

Oświęcim was occupied from the very beginning of World War Two - by October 1939, it was part of 'Greater Germany'.

The occupation was brutal on the population of the town, so despite the fact that people knew about Auschwitz and what was happening there, many people did nothing to help for fear of what would happen to them. There are some stories of people hiding Jews from the Nazis, and other stories of residents of the town turning Jewish neighbours in to be taken to the camp. However, for the most part the Polish residents just tried to survive the war.

### Teacher notes:

A term used to describe people in Nazi-occupied countries who didn't try and help people during the Holocaust and Nazi Persecution is 'bystanders'. The majority of people in Oświęcim would fall into this category, as they had some understanding of what the Nazis were doing, and didn't try and help. There are a range of complex reasons for this. Antisemitism (racism against Jewish people) was a widespread problem across Europe, so some people would have not felt compelled to help the Jews because of this. Some believed they should 'stay out of it' because it was a situation that didn't involve them, and some feared the repercussions of being caught by the Nazis trying to help people, as the Nazis ruled with terror.

### Discussion:

- Over half of the town's population was Jewish, and didn't survive the Holocaust. What would it be like for half of the people in your town or city to disappear?
- Could the other residents have done more to help, or was the danger too great?

## Activity Four – Life as a slave labourer (5 minutes)

### Slide 13

For the majority of people who arrived at Auschwitz, the selection process meant they were sent to their death. We will learn more later about what happened to these people.

However, a minority of people were selected for 'forced labour'.

These people were 'processed' as prisoners in the camp. Their belongings were taken, their heads were shaved, many of them received a number tattooed onto their forearm, and

they were given a camp uniform. The Nazis were aiming to dehumanize and humiliate their prisoners.

Life in the camp meant living on a very small amount of food, in overcrowded and dirty conditions, with no access to medical care. Forced labourers worked long days doing backbreaking work. The Nazis estimated that people would survive for less than six months, before dying of starvation, exhaustion or disease.

Play the recording of Kitty Hart-Moxon's testimony about her time as a slave-labourer in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

## Activity Five – Roma and Sinti people in Auschwitz (10 minutes)

### Slide 14

Europe's Roma and Sinti people (often called 'Gypsies' historically) were targeted by the Nazis for total destruction. More than 200,000 Roma and Sinti people were murdered or died as a result of starvation or disease; around 25% of the pre-war population. Many more were imprisoned in various ghettos and concentration camps, used as forced labour or subjected to forced sterilisation and medical experimentation.

### Slides 15-17

Ceija Stoyka (pronounced Chaya Stoyka) was deported to Auschwitz because she was Roma. Scroll through the slides to read elements of Ceija's story. You can read her full life story at [hmd.org.uk/ceija](http://hmd.org.uk/ceija).

**Teacher notes:** The Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933 – the same year that Ceija was born.

### Slide 18

Read through and discuss the facts about the 'Gypsy Family Camp'. Additional details:

Unlike Jewish inmates, Roma men, women and children were not separated. They didn't go through selection, and very few Roma people were made to endure forced labour. However, conditions were very poor and they were treated badly by the SS guards. On arrival, all Roma people were tattooed on their arms. Even babies were tattooed, for them it was on the thigh. The tattoo was a number prefixed by a Z for Zigeuner, meaning 'Gypsy'. They were allowed to keep their own clothing, but had to wear a brown or black triangle with a Z written on it.

On 2 August, all remaining prisoners in the 'Gypsy Family Camp' were given a ration of bread and salami and were told that they would be transported to another camp. They were put on to lorries, but rather than a substantial journey to another camp, they were only driven a short distance to the nearby gas chambers.

### Teacher notes:

Traveler communities, including Roma and Sinti people, still face discrimination in the UK and Europe today. This can take the form of hate crime and prejudice. Ceija is worried that if this hatred and discrimination isn't dealt with, Roma people could be targeted again. HMD is a good time for students to raise awareness of these communities, their history and the importance of us supporting them today. We can be allies by calling out hateful language or prejudiced actions, and saying that it is unacceptable.

Your students might interpret this quote literally and be concerned that Auschwitz or other Nazi camps could be reopened. This is not the case, although the prejudice and hostility Roma people and other minority groups face in different countries is very real today.



## Activity Six – Death in Auschwitz (10 minutes)

### Slide 19

*Please note, this section describes traumatic events.*

The majority of the people who entered Auschwitz-Birkenau were killed immediately.

We have discussed the fact that for some of those who were kept alive in the camp, death was slower and came through terrible conditions, starvation or disease. There were also some instances of ad-hoc executions by SS guards who shot or hanged prisoners. Some prisoners chose to take their own lives, such as by running into the electrified fences.

However, most of the killings happened in the gas chambers. People selected for death were made to hand over any remaining valuables and remove all of their clothes. After being ushered into the gas chambers, the doors would be shut and bolted, and pellets of the poison Zyklon B were thrown in through holes in the roof. The poison took up to 20 minutes to kill those in the chambers. Camp prisoners were then forced by the SS guards to remove the corpses from the chambers and to remove hair, gold teeth and fillings. The corpses were then burned in crematoria.

In this camp and others, the Nazis killed millions of people using this method.

Before liberation, the Nazis destroyed as much evidence as they could before fleeing the camp, including blowing up the crematoria, as shown in the picture on the slide.

### Discussion:

These are some of the worst crimes humans have committed. It can be hard to process the details because it is so horrible to hear. But the crimes were committed by humans, not monsters. Why is it important for us to learn about this?

### Slide 20

The Nazis lied to people and told them to pack for 'resettlement in the East' – an attempt to hide their true plans. As a result a huge collection of belongings were gathered at Auschwitz-Birkenau, taken from the people who were murdered. These collections are on display in the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum and Memorial Centre today, and help to show the scale of the murders. Seeing the everyday belongings that these people brought, such as shoes, glasses and cooking pots reminds us that these were normal people, planning a future for their families.

## Activity Seven – Survival (10 minutes)

### Slide 21

We do not know for certain how many people survived Auschwitz-Birkenau. We know that around 1.3 million people were deported there, and more than 1.1 million were murdered on site. This leaves around 200,000 people. Some of these people were transferred to other camps, and some were taken on death marches. It is safe to estimate that less than 10% of the people deported to Auschwitz survived the Holocaust. The number may actually be far lower.



For those who did survive, they were often weak, unwell, traumatised, and in many cases large numbers of their family members had been murdered. They didn't have a home or family to return to.

Survivors were often transferred first to a 'Displaced persons camp' where they received food and basic medical care, and were supported to either return to their home country, or if that was unsafe, to move to a new country.

Look at the images on the slide. You will see that many of the people featured on the page have letters after their name. This means that they have received an award through the British honours system. These reward an individual's service to their country. Many Holocaust survivors who settled in the UK went on to devote much of their time to sharing their story, delivering talks, and educating people about the Holocaust.

**Discussion:** What would you like to say to these people, after what you have learnt?

**Plenary (10 minutes)** – skip to slide 27 and page 12 to complete the plenary discussion.

## Level Two – Introduction (10 minutes)

### Slide 22

Hand out the 'Auschwitz-Birkenau information sheet' to students in pairs or small groups. This will help them with the activities that follow. If you think your students may need reminding about the history you can look at Level One and choose some of the activities from there as a refresher.

Tell students that today we are going into more detail in our learning about Auschwitz-Birkenau. They know some facts about the camp already – ask students to contribute facts to a flipchart sheet so everyone is reminded of what they have already learnt.

### Activity One – Timeline (15 minutes)

(To be done after the introduction and starter activity on page 3, slides 1-3, unless the class has completed Level One recently)

### Slide 23

Using the timeline worksheet (provided at the end of this resource), cut out and distribute the second column to your students – one set per small group. Do not give them the dates, and make sure you keep a copy of the full table for yourself.

Ask students in their groups to put the landmark moments in the development and use of the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp in chronological order.

This activity is designed to be challenging, and students shouldn't worry if they get some facts in the wrong order, or need to take a guess.

Reveal and discuss the correct order. Which facts surprised your students? Why?

### Activity Two – Resistance (20 minutes)

### Slide 24

After years of being stereotyped, dehumanised and persecuted, and despite many challenges and the danger to their lives, there were those in Auschwitz-Birkenau who resisted the Nazis, and tried to do something to help stop them.

Read Rudolf Vrba's life story (provided at the end of this resource) as a class and discuss:

- What actions did Rudolf take?
- What was the impact of his actions?
- Did he achieve everything he set out to do? How did he feel about that?
- Give three examples of how Rudolf used his intelligence and bravery to escape Auschwitz.
- What can we learn for today's society from stories of resistance?

## Activity Three – Liberation (10 minutes)

### Slide 25

In January the Nazis knew that Soviet troops were advancing from the East. They began destroying evidence and murdered thousands of people in advance of evacuating the camp. 60,000 people were forced on 'death marches', with the aim of either killing them or transporting them to other camps in Germany. More than 15,000 people died during the death marches from Auschwitz-Birkenau, due to the cold, exhaustion, starvation, or being shot by guards.

On 27 January 1945 the Soviet army entered Auschwitz-Birkenau and liberated the prisoners who had been left behind because they were ill or dying. More than 7,000 prisoners remained in the camp. The troops also discovered the smouldering remains of the gas chambers and crematoria that the Nazis had attempted to destroy.

### Discuss: the quote from Iolo Lewis

Auschwitz-Birkenau was liberated by the Soviet Army, and another camp, Bergen-Belsen, was liberated by the British Army. Some of the British soldiers involved in that liberation have shared their reaction to what they discovered, such as Iolo Lewis. You can read his full story at [hmd.org.uk/iolo](http://hmd.org.uk/iolo).

His question '*How could people do this sort of thing to other people?*' is at the heart of many of our reactions to hearing stories about the Holocaust, Nazi Persecution and genocide.

- We learn about this part of history today for a reason – why is it important for people to learn about these events?
- Do you think the world has learnt from what happened? Why/why not?



### Teacher notes:

You can bring up here the fact that genocide has continued to take place around the world since the Holocaust and today. Genocides have taken place in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur, and mass atrocities and identity-based violence is occurring right now in many countries. How can we move towards a world where these crimes no longer happen? Answers might include:

- Challenging prejudice and hatred in our own society
- Remembering all those who have been affected by the Holocaust and genocide, and learning from their experiences
- Learning about current conflicts
- Raising awareness of situations around the world today that are at risk of genocide
- Writing to your MP if there are situations in the UK or around the world where people are being targeted because of their identity, which you think our government should be taking action on

## Activity Four - Auschwitz today (35 minutes)

### Slide 26

In 1947, the site became 'The Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum'. Each year more than 2 million people from all over the world visit the remaining buildings and collections of artefacts to learn about what happened there.

Divide students into two groups to debate the quote and tweet on the slide.

**Debate question:** Does The Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum encourage respectful remembrance, or morbid fascination and 'dark tourism'?

Each group should take one side of the debate:

1. The Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum is important for education and ensuring we learn from genocide for a better future, and should be open for everyone.

(How can the site achieve these goals, why is it important?)

2. The Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum invites people to visit who don't take it seriously, and don't respect the gravity of the site. People should have to prove their interest and respect before visiting.

(How would this work, why is it important?)

Some students may disagree with the argument they are given, but should still participate in the debate with their team.

Each group has 15 minutes to come up with three to five arguments for their statement, or points they want to make in its support. Both sides then take it in turns to present their arguments, and the question will be discussed for 15 minutes.

Have any students changed their views about The Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum following this debate?

## Plenary activity (10 minutes) (To do after either level)

### Slide 27

Today we have learnt about people who were imprisoned, and in some cases murdered, at Auschwitz-Birkenau. How does learning about this make you feel? Answers may include:

- **Sad** – feeling empathy towards people for their difficult experiences
- **Angry** – that there are people being treated badly and killed because of who they are
- **Shocked** – that these things still happen today (for example in the ongoing Genocide in Darfur)
- **Inspired** – to take action and do positive things to help people being discriminated against today

## Discussion: Why is it important for us to learn about Auschwitz-Birkenau today?

### Teacher notes:

- To remember those persecuted and murdered simply because of an aspect of their identity.
- To honour the survivors who have shared their stories and helped us to learn about this history.
- To reflect on what we can do today to combat hatred and discrimination in our communities.
- To share the knowledge we have gained to help others understand and respect the history.
- To aim for a world in which genocide and identity-based hatred no longer takes place.

### Take the learning further:

Your students may be interested in the following additional resources:

- **Animated film** of Auschwitz survivor Ivor Perl BEM's experiences
- Learn about other genocides through our **Tutor Time Activities**
- Teachers or students can take the lead on an **assembly** for all year groups to commemorate HMD
- Our **Creative Activities** for groups are a good follow on for students to do a practical activity to process what they have learnt.
- Our **lesson plan on discrimination** will give students a broader understanding of these issues, historically and today.

You can read more life stories of survivors, rescuers and people who were murdered in the Holocaust and genocide on our website: [hmd.org.uk/lifestories](http://hmd.org.uk/lifestories)

### Important note for teachers - after the lesson:

Share what you and your students have done to mark HMD by emailing [education@hmd.org.uk](mailto:education@hmd.org.uk) or by adding it to our interactive map. You can mark your event as private if it is not open to outside visitors. Visit [hmd.org.uk/letusknow](http://hmd.org.uk/letusknow) to complete the short form.

This helps us to know how our school resources are used, and your school may be featured as a case study when we talk about the range of activities taking place across the UK for HMD.

Feel free to contact us on [education@hmd.org.uk](mailto:education@hmd.org.uk) if you have any questions.

## Find out more...

## Auschwitz-Birkenau timeline activity sheet



Date	Event
25 January 1940	The Nazis decide to build a concentration camp near Oświęcim in Poland. They give the camp a Germanised version of the town's name and call it 'Auschwitz'.
20 May 1940	The first 30 prisoners arrive at Auschwitz concentration camp.
1 March 1941	High-ranking Nazi Heinrich Himmler inspects Auschwitz. He orders the expansion of Auschwitz camp facilities, now called 'Auschwitz I' to hold 30,000 prisoners and the building of a second, larger part of the camp three kilometres away, called Auschwitz II - Birkenau.
3 September 1941	The Nazis test Zyklon B gas by killing 600 Soviet prisoners of war and 250 other ill or weak prisoners. These are the first prisoners killed by gas at Auschwitz-Birkenau. It takes place in a makeshift gas chamber in the cellar of Block 11 in Auschwitz I. Zyklon B was the commercial name for an insecticide. The 'success' of these experiments leads to the plan to use Zyklon B in the yet-to-be-constructed Auschwitz-Birkenau killing centre.
25 January 1942	On Himmler's orders, 150,000 Jewish people are deported from Germany to Auschwitz-Birkenau as forced labourers. From this point on, Jews are sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau in large numbers from countries across Europe. In total, 1.1 million Jews were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. 1 million of them were murdered there.
29 January 1943	The Nazis order all Roma people residing in Germany, Austria, and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia to be deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau.
26 February 1943	The first group of Roma people from Germany arrive at Auschwitz-Birkenau. The SS authorities house them in a section of Auschwitz-Birkenau, which becomes known as the 'Gypsy family camp'. By the end of the year 18,000 Roma people are imprisoned there.
2 August 1944	SS camp authorities murder the last residents of the so-called Gypsy family camp in Auschwitz-Birkenau - around 3,000 people.
7 October 1944	Some Jewish prisoners were forced to work removing bodies from the gas chambers and operating the crematoria. They were known as the Sonderkommando. On this day, a group of these prisoners staged an uprising. They successfully blew up Crematorium IV and killed several guards. Female prisoners had smuggled gunpowder out of nearby factories for the uprising. The SS quickly suppressed the revolt and killed all the Sonderkommando members. On January 6, 1945, just weeks before the camp is liberated, the SS hanged four women who smuggled the gunpowder.



Table continues on next page →

18–27 January 1945	<p>Soviet troops approach Auschwitz-Birkenau, and the SS evacuates the camp complex. Tens of thousands of prisoners, mostly Jews, are forced to march to cities to the west of Auschwitz-Birkenau. SS guards shoot anyone who cannot continue. In the cities, the prisoners are put on unheated freight trains and deported to concentration camps in Germany and Austria. Nearly 60,000 prisoners are forced on death marches from the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp system. As many as 15,000 people die during the marches. Thousands more were murdered in the days before the evacuation.</p>
27 January 1945	<p>Soviet troops enter the Auschwitz complex and liberate approximately 7,000 prisoners remaining in the camp.</p> <p>As well as the one million Jews from across Europe murdered at this site, the Nazis also killed approximately 74,000 Polish people, 21,000 Roma people and 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war.</p> <p>27 January is now commemorated internationally as Holocaust Memorial Day.</p>

With credit to USHMM for their resource 'Auschwitz: Key Dates', which informed this timeline – [ushmm.org](https://www.ushmm.org)



## Auschwitz-Birkenau information sheet



### The background of Nazi camps

The first concentration camp was established at Dachau in Germany on 23 March 1933. As the Nazis captured more territory through wartime invasions, the camp system was greatly expanded and used as a tool in the creation of a single-race state. The Nazis created thousands of camps – including forced labour, transit, and extermination camps throughout German-occupied territories.

Camp inmates were often subject to forced labour, overcrowding, poor sanitary conditions, starvation and cruel treatment, with a high death rate resulting from the poor conditions. After initial attempts to commit mass murder through shootings and mobile killing units proved 'inefficient', the Nazis extended the camp system to include six extermination camps: Auschwitz-Birkenau, Belzec, Chełmno, Majdanek, Sobibor, and Treblinka. Their purpose was to carry out genocide – using gas chambers.

### Auschwitz-Birkenau

Auschwitz-Birkenau was established in 1940 near a town called Oświęcim in the south of Poland. It was made up of three main camps – Auschwitz I, Auschwitz II (also called Birkenau), and Auschwitz III (also called Monowitz-Buna). Around 45 subcamps surrounded these sites. Auschwitz-Birkenau combined a concentration camp used for forced labour, and an extermination camp.

SS guards ran the camp. SS stood for 'Schutzstaffel' meaning 'Protection Squad', and they were a major paramilitary organisation run by the Nazis.

Over 1.1 million people were murdered at this site, with over 90% of the victims being Jewish.

- **Auschwitz I** featured a sign over the gate that read 'arbeit macht frei', which means 'work will set you free'. This was a cynical lie. This site was primarily made up of brick barracks and housed prisoners doing forced labour. Conditions were harsh and overcrowded, and prisoners were given very little food. Many people starved to death.



Arbeit macht frei photograph: © Bill Hunt

- **Auschwitz II – Birkenau** was where people arrived first and went through ‘selection’. The majority of the killings took place here, and the crematoria were placed on this site. Forced labourers were also housed here, and there was a ‘Family Camp’ specifically for Roma and Sinti prisoners.
- **Auschwitz III – Monowitz-Buna** was an industrial complex of factories at which prisoners were used as slave labour.

## Zyklon B

In late summer 1941 the Nazis began experimenting with a new killing method – a poison gas called Zyklon B. As the war progressed, larger poison gas chambers were constructed at the camp, leading to Auschwitz-Birkenau being selected as the main killing site for European Jews because of its location and access to the rail network. In 1942 Jews from across Europe began to be transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The peak of the slaughter occurred in 1944, when more than 400,000 Hungarian Jews were killed in just two months.

## Arrival and selection

Arrival in the camp started with a selection process – men, women and children were removed from the trains and had their valuables taken away. Men were separated from women and children. A Nazi physician would quickly assess whether each person was healthy enough to be used for forced labour, and based on this, individuals were sent to the camps or to the gas chambers. Disabled people, pregnant women, babies, young children, elderly people or those with illnesses stood little chance of surviving this selection.



Arrival and Selection at the Ramp at Auschwitz  
Image: Wiener Library

## Selected for death

Those who were selected for death were led to the gas chambers, and, in order to prevent panic, some were told they were going to the showers to remove the lice from their bodies. They were made to hand over any remaining valuables and remove all of their clothes. After being ushered into the gas chambers, the doors would be shut and bolted. The poison took up to 20 minutes to kill those in the chambers. Camp prisoners were then forced by the SS guards to remove the corpses from the chambers and to remove hair, gold teeth and fillings. The corpses were then burned in crematoria.

## Selected for work

Prisoners selected for forced labour had their clothes and belongings taken away, they were showered and had their heads shaved. They were given a striped uniform to wear and tattooed with an identification number. Life expectancy for forced labourers in Auschwitz was less than six months due to starvation, disease and long days of hard physical work.



## Living conditions

Living conditions for forced labourers were awful. There was horrendous overcrowding and people were forced to sleep on three-tier wooden bunks, with often two prisoners sharing each bed. Sanitary facilities like toilets weren't provided in the barracks for most of the time Auschwitz was active, and limited numbers started to be installed in 1944. Barracks were kept almost entirely unheated throughout the winter. The uniforms didn't provide protection from the cold, were often ill-fitting and there were no facilities to wash them. Limited food and hard manual labour led quickly to starvation, exhaustion and disease. Medical care was not available, and when a prisoner became too weak to work they were sent to the gas chambers.

## The badge system

Prisoners were classified by the Nazis with coloured triangles on their uniforms, so Nazi officials could know if they were Jewish, Roma, homosexuals, asocials, political prisoners, for example. Different categories of prisoners sometimes received different treatment, with Jewish prisoners being treated particularly ruthlessly by the SS guards.

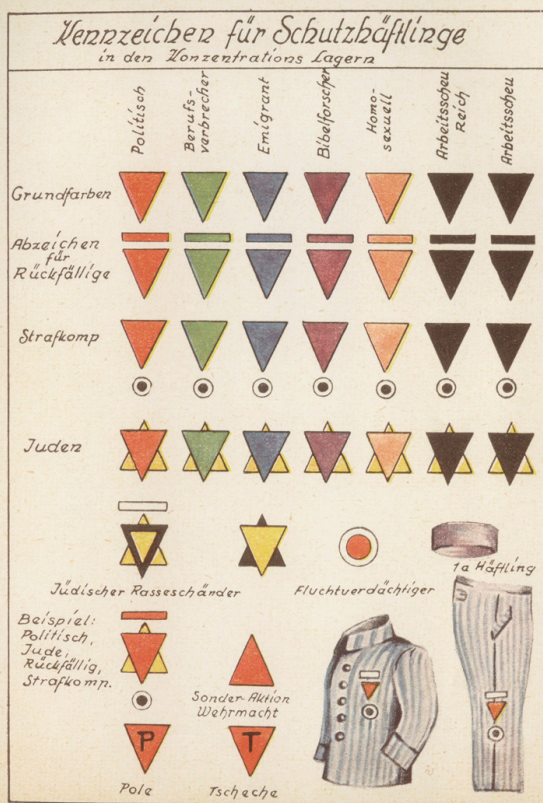


Image: USHMM

## Liberation

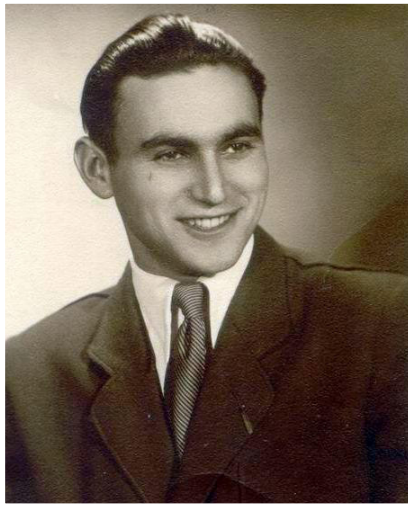
Auschwitz was liberated by Soviet troops on 27 January 1945. Today Auschwitz is a museum and a memorial to those who were murdered there.

# Rudolf Vrba



HOLOCAUST  
MEMORIAL  
DAY TRUST

Rudolf Vrba escaped from Auschwitz-Birkenau so he could warn Hungarian Jews about their imminent extermination.



*'It was particularly urgent because I knew that all was prepared for the murder of one million Jews from Hungary. And because it was close to Slovakia, I thought it would be possible to give the warning.'*

Rudolf Vrba was born Walter Rosenberg on 11 September 1924 in Topolčany in Slovakia (then part of Czechoslovakia). In March 1942 the 17 year old Rudolf demonstrated his unusually determined character by ignoring orders to assemble for deportation to Poland. 'Naturally it didn't come into my mind to obey such a stupid instruction' he later said. Instead he set off to attempt to get to England. He was stopped at the Hungarian border and sent to the Nováky transition camp in Slovakia (where he made an unsuccessful escape attempt), and the Majdanek concentration camp in Poland, before arriving at Auschwitz I on 30 June 1942.

He was assigned to work at Auschwitz-Birkenau. After transports of Jewish people arrived and selections were made (with around 90% of the people being sent to the gas chambers) Vrba's team cleaned the train wagons of dead bodies and sorted through the personal possessions that the people had been forced to leave behind. Vrba's exposure to the process of transport and selection formed his opinion that 'the whole murder machinery could work only on one principle: that the people came to Auschwitz and didn't know where they were going and for what purpose'. Vrba decided that if Europe's remaining Jews had knowledge of the industrialised slaughter at Auschwitz there would be resistance and panic which would hamper the Nazi's orderly killing process.

In his role clearing the arrivals ramp, and in a later desk job, Vrba took mental note of the transports arriving, their origin, and estimated the numbers killed.

In early 1944 he learnt that the Nazis were preparing for arrival of Hungary's entire Jewish population of around one million people, who were to be exterminated. Vrba had considered attempting escape from Auschwitz before, but now saw that it was now urgent. He felt the members of the organised resistance movement in Auschwitz were focused on their own survival, and not on provoking resistance from the people who arrived to be gassed.

Vrba worked with his friend Alfréd Wetzler to analyse previous unsuccessful escape attempts, and plan a successful one. Each daytime some prisoners worked outside the main camp fence, within an outer perimeter which was only guarded during the day. Vrba and Wetzler hid in a pile of wood, which they surrounded by strong-smelling petrol-soaked Russian tobacco, which they had learnt would deter sniffer dogs. When the Nazis discovered Vrba and Wetzler had failed to return to the camp they spent three days searching the area between the inner and outer perimeter. The search ended after the third day, and on the evening of 10 April 1944 Vrba and Wetzler escaped Auschwitz and began an 11 night walk south to Slovakia, 80 miles away.

After crossing the border into Slovakia the pair quickly made contact with the local Jewish Council. They were separated and interviewed about their accounts of Auschwitz independently, so the two testimonies could be compared and verified. A report was then written and rewritten, and translated into German and Hungarian, becoming a 40 page document.

The report contained descriptions of the camp, including detailed descriptions of the gas chambers at Birkenau and the process of extermination. Much of the report was devoted to painstakingly-remembered details of the transports which had arrived at Auschwitz – including the nationalities and numbers of those who arrived.

Throughout his life Vrba maintained that the leaders of the Hungarian Jewish community refused to publicise the Vrba–Wetzler Report to local Jews because they did not want to jeopardise negotiations they were having with the Nazis to try to save some of the community. Vrba was appalled as 437,000 Jews from the Hungarian countryside were sent to Auschwitz and murdered between 15 May and 7 July 1944. He believed many could have escaped as the Allied frontline was fast-approaching.

Despite not reaching most Hungarian Jews, the Vrba–Wetzler Report did make it to Switzerland, where it was published in the press. By June 1944 British and American media were reporting the reality of the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp. World leaders made direct appeals to the Hungarian Government to stop the deportation of Jews. The deportations were halted on 9 July. Hitler was furious, but attempts to deport Budapest's 250,000 Jews only resumed after the Hungarian Government had been overthrown by local Nazis in November 1944. By that time it was much more difficult to kill local Jews in an orderly way, with the war in its final stages, diplomats in Budapest working to rescue Jews, and greater awareness amongst Budapest's Jews of what awaited them if deported to Poland.

Back in Slovakia the 19 year old Walter Rosenberg was protected by the local Jewish authorities, and given identity papers for 'Rudolf Vrba' – the name he adopted for the rest of his life. Vrba joined the Czechoslovak partisans and fought with distinction.

After the war he studied biology and chemistry in Prague. He married his childhood friend Gerta, though the relationship quickly broke down. Vrba escaped communist Czechoslovakia by defecting whilst on a visit to a scientific conference in Israel. He left Israel after a couple of years, as he was not comfortable living among some of the leaders of the Hungarian Jewish community who he blamed for failing to raise awareness of the mass killings at Auschwitz. He moved to Britain, and then to Canada, where he remarried.

The Vrba–Wetzler Report was an important piece of evidence at the Nuremberg war crimes trials in 1946. Vrba sent evidence to the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961, and was a witness at a trial of Holocaust denier Ernst Zündel in Toronto in 1985. He died in 2006. Throughout his life Rudolf Vrba was somebody who refused to stand by. In the most extreme and appalling situation he risked his life to try to prevent the killing of hundreds of thousands of people. It can be argued that through their contribution to telling the world about Auschwitz the heroism of Vrba and Wetzler saved the lives of tens of thousands of Budapest's Jews.

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