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KL AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU LIBERATION COMMEMORATIONS

PRESS RELEASE

THE AUSCHWITZ CONCENTRATION CAMP

The idea to build a concentration camp in Oswiecim was proposed in late 1939 at the SS and police headquarters in Wroclaw (Breslau) headed by SS Gruppenfuehrer Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski. It originally came from one of von dem Bach's subordinates, security police inspector and SS Oberfuehrer Arpad Wigand.

The idea was further enhanced by the Nazis' growing concern about reports of overcrowded prisons in Upper Silesia and the Zagłębie Dąbrowskie industrial basin. Resistance in those regions was on the rise and the only remedy appeared to be mass detention. The existing concentration camps, however, were insufficient to house all prisoners.

SS Oberfuehrer Arpad Wigand chose the Oswiecim suburb Zasole as the most suitable site for the camp. He stressed that the prisoners could be housed immediately in former Polish army barracks. Besides, the site, located in a fork of the Sola and Vistula rivers, allowed for future extensions of the camp and its isolation from the outside world. Wigand also pointed out the convenient rail connections - passing nearby was a line connecting Oswiecim with Silesia and the General Government.

On February 1 1940 Himmler ordained inspections of several sites with the aim of finally selecting one. Three weeks later SS Oberfuehrer Gluecks reported that after slight reconstruction work the Zasole barracks would make a good detention camp.

On April 27 1940 Himmler ordered the camp's erection. The work was to be carried out by prisoners, the project's supervisor was Rudolf Hoess. On May 4 1940 Hoess was appointed commander in chief of Auschwitz.

Preparing the site took from May to mid-June. The first step was the resettlement of around 1,200 people from its vicinity. The site was cleared by 300 Jewish camp inmates, a group of Poles also worked on the construction.

On May 2 1940 Rapportfuehrer Gerhard Palitzsch brought 30 German criminals from a prison in Sachsenhausen to Auschwitz. They received the numbers 1 to 30, which were tattooed on their arms. These convicts were the nucleus of the camp's personnel.



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June 14 1940 is considered the camp's opening date. On that day the first group of Polish political prisoners arrived (728 persons), sent by the security authorities in Cracow. Among them were Polish soldiers who had fought in the 1939 campaign against Germany and subsequently tried to flee to Hungary, members of underground resistance groups, school youth and students, as well as a small group of Jews. They came by train in second-class passenger cars.

When they arrived the prisoners were tattooed with the numbers 31 to 758 and quarantined in buildings formerly belonging to the Polish Tobacco Corporation near today's Auschwitz Museum. The lowest number, 31, was given to Stanislaw Ryniak. The camp's commander, SS Obersturmfuehrer Karl Fritsch, greeted the new prisoners with the following words: "The young and healthy may survive three months. The way out from here is through the chimneys".

According to Irena Strzelecka from the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum, who studied the history of this first transport to the camp, 239 of the inmates survived the war, including Ryniak, who died in 2004 in Wroclaw. The rest perished in the camp or their fate is unknown.

Five days after the first prisoners arrived in Auschwitz the Nazis began resettling people living close to the camp, the resettlements soon embracing the entire area. In the course of this action many local Poles lost their entire property. The thus-created 40-square-kilometre zone was "restricted for camp purposes".

At its opening the Auschwitz camp numbered 20 brick buildings. Almost 11,000 people, mostly Poles, were incarcerated there between May 20 1940 and Himmler's first inspection on March 1 1941.

By November 1943 Auschwitz had become a huge and efficient death factory in which hundreds of thousands of people - mainly Jews - were imprisoned and slaughtered. (PAP)