

A black and white photograph of the entrance to the Auschwitz concentration camp. The iconic gate with the inscription 'ARBEIT MACHT FREI' (Work makes free) is visible at the top. Below the gate is a large brick building, likely the main camp administration or barracks. In the foreground, there is a chain-link fence and a group of people standing in the distance. The overall atmosphere is somber and historical.

# Auschwitz

A personal journey

Des Shepherd

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# Introduction

In January 2019, I paid a visit to Auschwitz. This book is a photographic record of my visit to camps. Next year, 2020, marks the 75th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. Along with the end of hostilities and the defeat of Hitler's Nazis, next year also marks 75 years since the liberation of the concentration camps such as Auschwitz.

The allies were aware of these camps and there was some debate of what to do about these atrocities but the full scale was not known until their liberation. Russian troops entered the Auschwitz camp on 27 January 1945, this date subsequently recognised as Holocaust Memorial Day.

## **Holocaust Memorial Day - 27 January**

Holocaust Memorial Day remembers the six million Jews murdered during the Holocaust as well as the millions of people killed under Nazi Persecution and in subsequent genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur.

But how did the world end up allowing such horrors to be committed? Whilst Britain and the Allied forces were seen as the victors of World War One, Germany went through a turbulent period in its history.

Immediately after the end of hostilities, Germany was in a stronger financial position than the Allies, but the Treaty of Versailles forced the Germans to pay compensation.

The admission by Germany of blame and financial responsibility for the War created humiliation amongst the German population leading to increased nationalistic feelings.

This led to social and economic depression. Unemployment soared and inflation made the German currency worthless.

The new German government, called the Weimar Republic, struggled to maintain democracy.

Adolf Hitler was a corporal in the German army and had fought in the war. He was attracted to the National Socialist People's Party, and at their invitation, became their leader. He was a powerful and charismatic speaker and gained wide support from the public. He was appointed Chancellor in January 1933.

Hitler was a racist long before this though. He long believed that there existed a 'master' race of physically fit, racially pure people called Aryans and he saw this group as the future for Europe.

After the first world war, many in Germany looked for a scapegoat and for some it was the Jewish community.

Hatred of Jews goes back to the time of Jesus where, according to certain passages in the New Testament, Jews were to blame for the death of Christ.

Although Jesus' death was ordered by the Romans, many Christians believe that Jews were responsible for his crucifixion resulting in some holding the Jews collectively responsible.

This accusation is behind much of the persecution of Jews by the Catholic church over the years since.

Jews have lived throughout Europe for over 2,000 years. By the time Hitler came to power, there were nine million Jews living in twenty-one countries. The biggest concentration were in the Soviet Union and Poland.

Hitler saw Jewish people as a race rather than a religion and following the Nuremberg Race Laws (1935) being enacted, Jewish people in Germany had their citizenship revoked and had many restriction placed on them. It became illegal for a Jewish person to marry a non-Jewish German. Jews were defined as a person having three or four Jewish grandparents.

In the same way as one can't change one's race, those who renounced their Jewish religion or converted to Christianity were also considered in law to be Jewish.

These restrictions were extended to other countries, such as Poland, after Hitler's invasion.

High ranking Nazis gathered to discuss the "Jewish Problem" with the result of the so called "Final Solution". Hitler's final solution was to rid Germany (including lands he conquered) of all Jews.

This started by rounding up known Jews and housing them in ghettos.

One purpose of the ghettos was to act as a holding area until they could be transported to death and concentration camps.

Adolf Hitler died as he lived. Right to the end, he was consumed with hatred for Jewish people without a hint of remorse

But it wasn't just Jews that Hitler hated. There were the Gypsies, political opponents and the disabled.

The Nazis considered gypsies as racially dangerous.

At Auschwitz, 23,000 gypsy men and women were housed. 21,000 died there mainly from disease, starvation and the gas chambers when the SS liquidated the gypsy camp.

Statistically more gypsies were killed in proportion to their population numbers compared to other groups.

Hitler particularly despised the disabled. Mentally and physically disabled people were sterilised, starved and killed by lethal injection as early as 1939. This was under his euthanasia programme to find a solution for those living a "Life without Hope".

The Nazis also persecuted Jehovah Witnesses. This religious group had little against the Nazi state. They were ideologically opposed to Jews and communists. The problem was that they were pacifists and refused to join German army.

But the Nazi's admired their fanatical faith and they wanted their SS men to show the same fanatical faith in Adolf Hitler.

And why would Hitler be happy to murder Jewish or gypsy children? One former SS guard explained that they were not seen as the enemy as such. The enemy is the blood in them and the danger was their growing up to become a Jew who then could be perceived as dangerous.

The Nazis would use the latest technology in poisonous gassing to exterminate all Jews, Gypsies, dissidents, the disabled and prisoners of war.

Reading of the atrocities is harrowing enough but to visit a place like Auschwitz brings it home. There one can see the actual remains of this gruesome period in history.

By 1945, the tide was turning against the Nazi regime. The Allies were gaining ground in the west whilst the Soviet army attacked from the east.

On 6 January the Soviet army liberated Budapest and in the process liberated over 80,000 Jews. That was followed by Warsaw and by the 27 January 1945 they reached Auschwitz.

The Nazi authorities knew how it was playing out and tried to destroy as much evidence of the holocaust as they could. At Auschwitz the gas chambers were blown up and much paperwork destroyed before the authorities left.

However many buildings, documents and personal possessions of the victims remained which today bears witness to the enormity of the crimes committed there.

After the war, Poland reclaimed much of the land lost to the Germans including the area around Auschwitz. In 1947, the Polish authorities passed a law securing the grounds and buildings at Auschwitz as a memorial and museum.

There was lively discussion at the time about the fate of the site. Some felt it should all be demolished and ploughed up, removing all traces of the genocide, apart from a memorial. Others felt no preservation work should be done and the site simply left to nature.

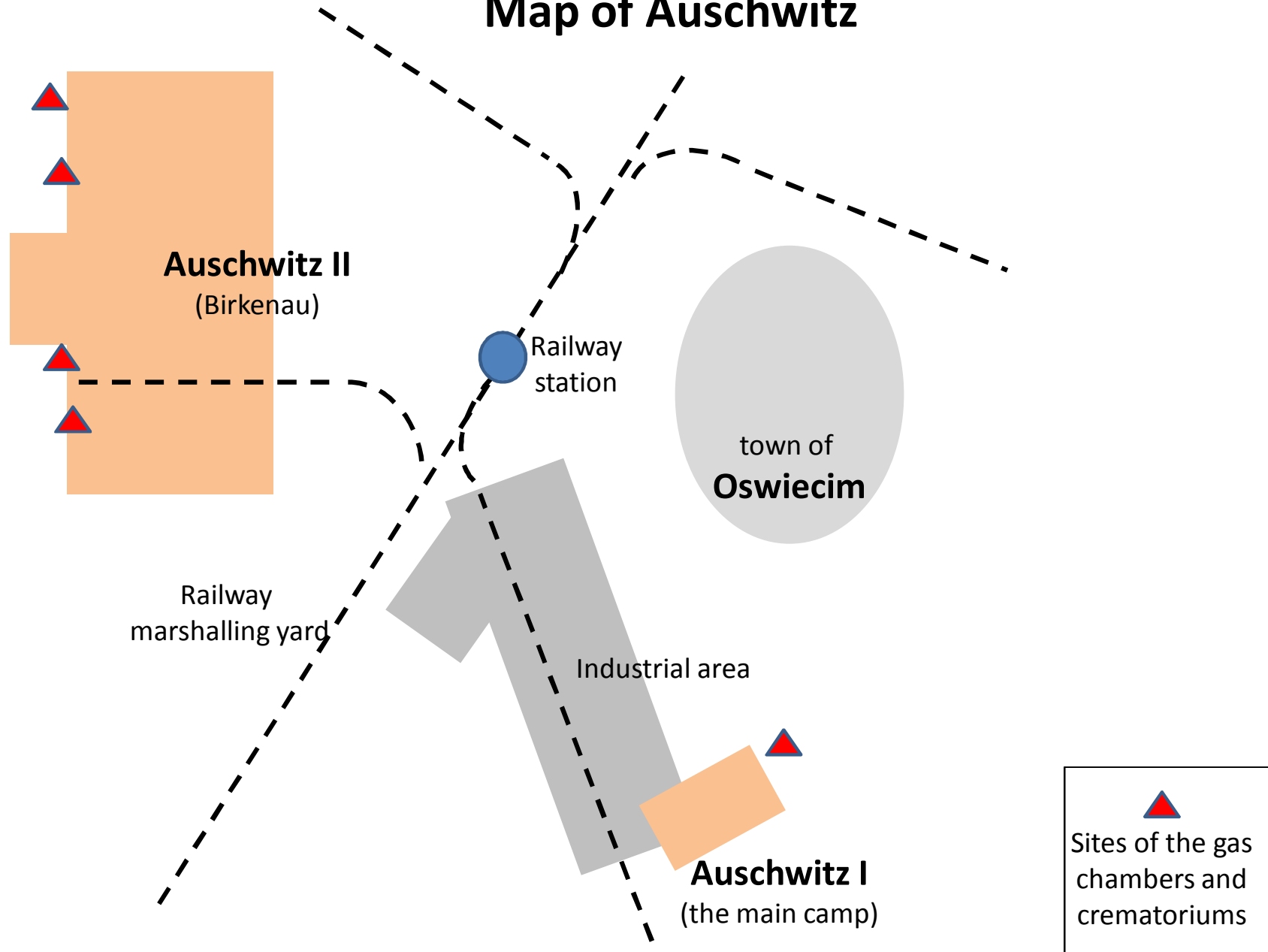
The museum includes two parts of the Auschwitz complex. The main camp (Auschwitz I) in the village of Oswiecim and the larger site at Birkenau (Auschwitz II). In its preservation work, the museum follows the principle of interfering as little as possible with the remains of the camp.

This introduction is a brief look at the history of the holocaust and there are many books that give a far more detailed account of the atrocities.

I visited Auschwitz towards the end of January 2019 - 74 years, almost to the day, after it was liberated. It was a sombre visit and seeing the place and the artefacts, brought to life the horror of that time in a way a book or television documentary can't.

**Des Shepherd February 2019**

# Map of Auschwitz



This illustration shows the layout of the two main camps, the network of railway lines and the town of Oswiecim. There were around 45 sub camps in the surrounding area. These provided slave labour to factories.

# Auschwitz I – the main camp

The Auschwitz camps are located in a region of Poland called Upper Silesia. This area of Europe had passed between the Poles and Germans a number of times. Immediately preceding World War One, the area had been part of Germany only to be lost in the Versailles settlement. The Nazi reclaimed it in during their invasion of Poland.

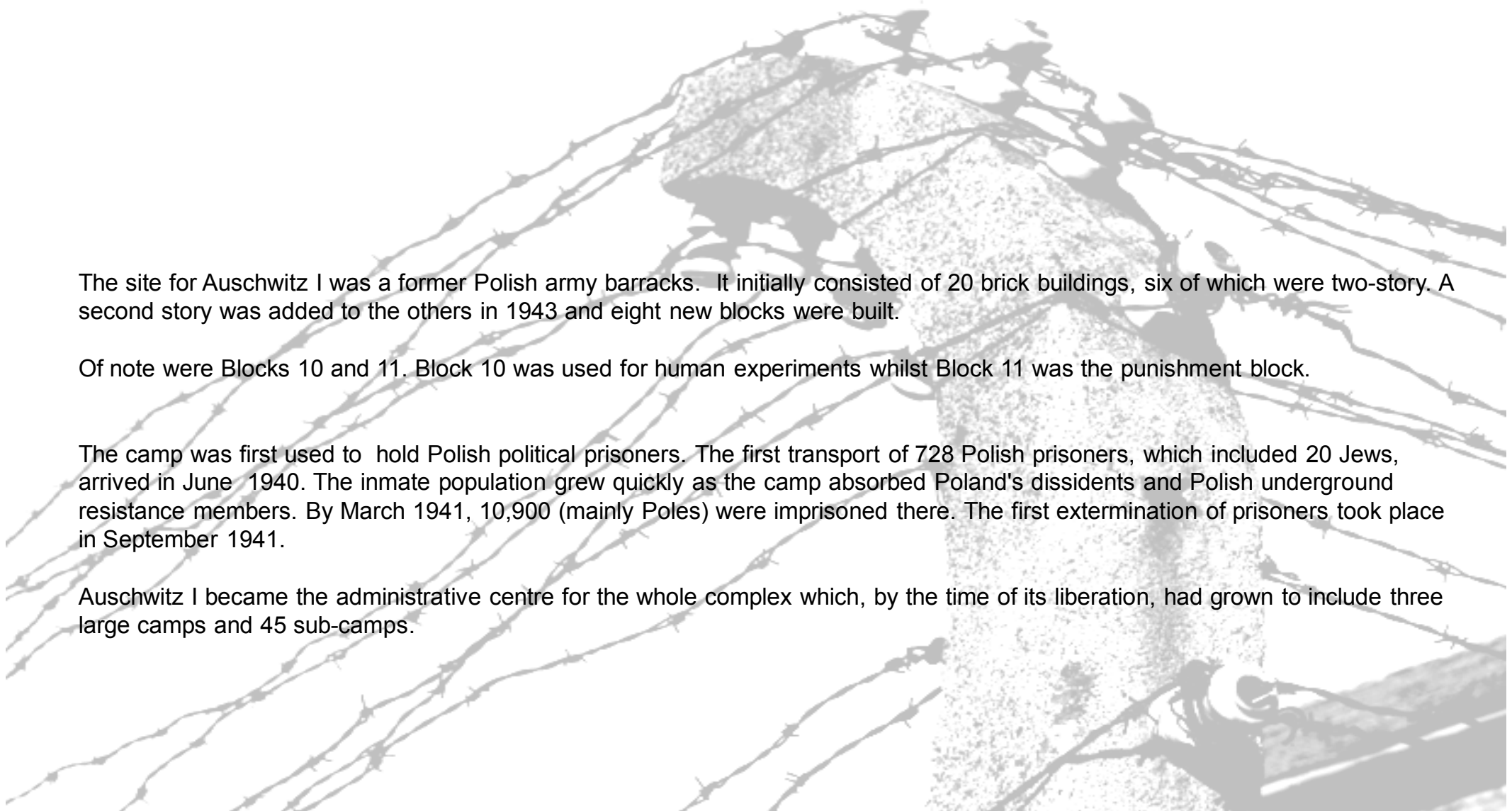
Unlike other areas reclaimed and 'Germanised', Upper Silesia was heavily industrialized. This meant that local Poles remained as slave labour and a concentration camp was thought necessary to subdue the local population.

The site for Auschwitz I was a former Polish army barracks. It initially consisted of 20 brick buildings, six of which were two-story. A second story was added to the others in 1943 and eight new blocks were built.

Of note were Blocks 10 and 11. Block 10 was used for human experiments whilst Block 11 was the punishment block.

The camp was first used to hold Polish political prisoners. The first transport of 728 Polish prisoners, which included 20 Jews, arrived in June 1940. The inmate population grew quickly as the camp absorbed Poland's dissidents and Polish underground resistance members. By March 1941, 10,900 (mainly Poles) were imprisoned there. The first extermination of prisoners took place in September 1941.

Auschwitz I became the administrative centre for the whole complex which, by the time of its liberation, had grown to include three large camps and 45 sub-camps.



The sign over the main Auschwitz gate is one of the most recognizable symbols of the holocaust.

The words 'Arbeit Macht Frei' ('Work Sets You Free') were coined by the 19th Century linguist and author Lorenz Diefenbach. The phrase later became part of the Nazis' deception for the real use of the concentrations camps. Ultimately for most, the freedom referred to could only be achieved in death.



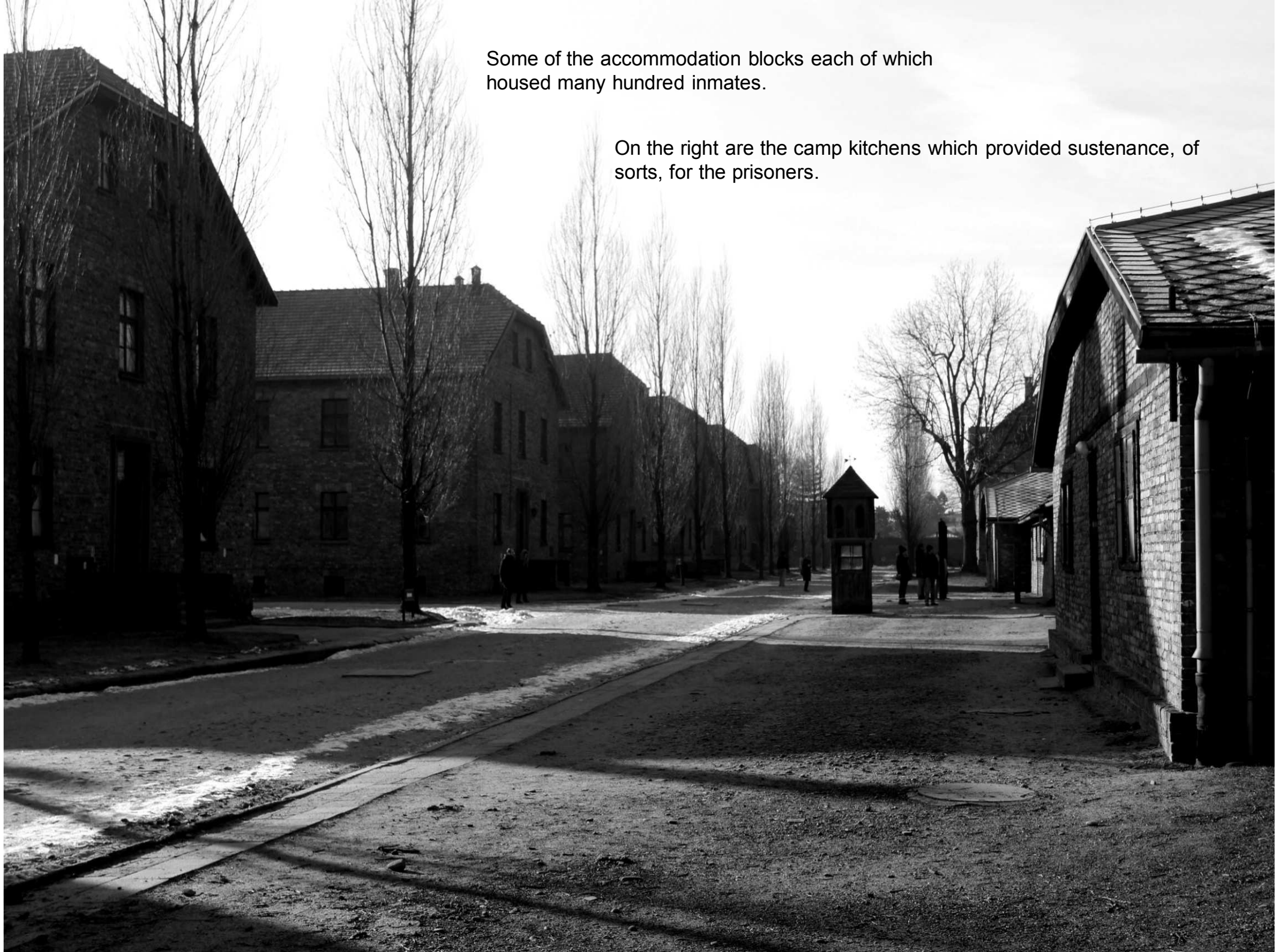
The sign was made by prisoners in the metalworking department under Jan Liwacz, a master blacksmith. It is believed that, in an act of defiance which went unnoticed, the prisoners reversed the B in Arbeit, giving it the appearance of being upside down.

It is occasionally removed by officials for conservation work and a replica is used as a substitute. Several months of conservation were done in early 2006 ahead of and after a visit by Pope Benedict XVI in May of that year.

The surface had deteriorated and was treated with extra preservation materials. The replica was made in the workshops of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum.

Some of the accommodation blocks each of which housed many hundred inmates.

On the right are the camp kitchens which provided sustenance, of sorts, for the prisoners.





**Images around the camp**  
These pictures show the substantial buildings on the site.





The site is surrounded by a double fence which was electrified.

There were guard towers to watch over the boundary.

Apart from the barracks, there was a kitchen block for inmates, the crematorium and administration blocks.





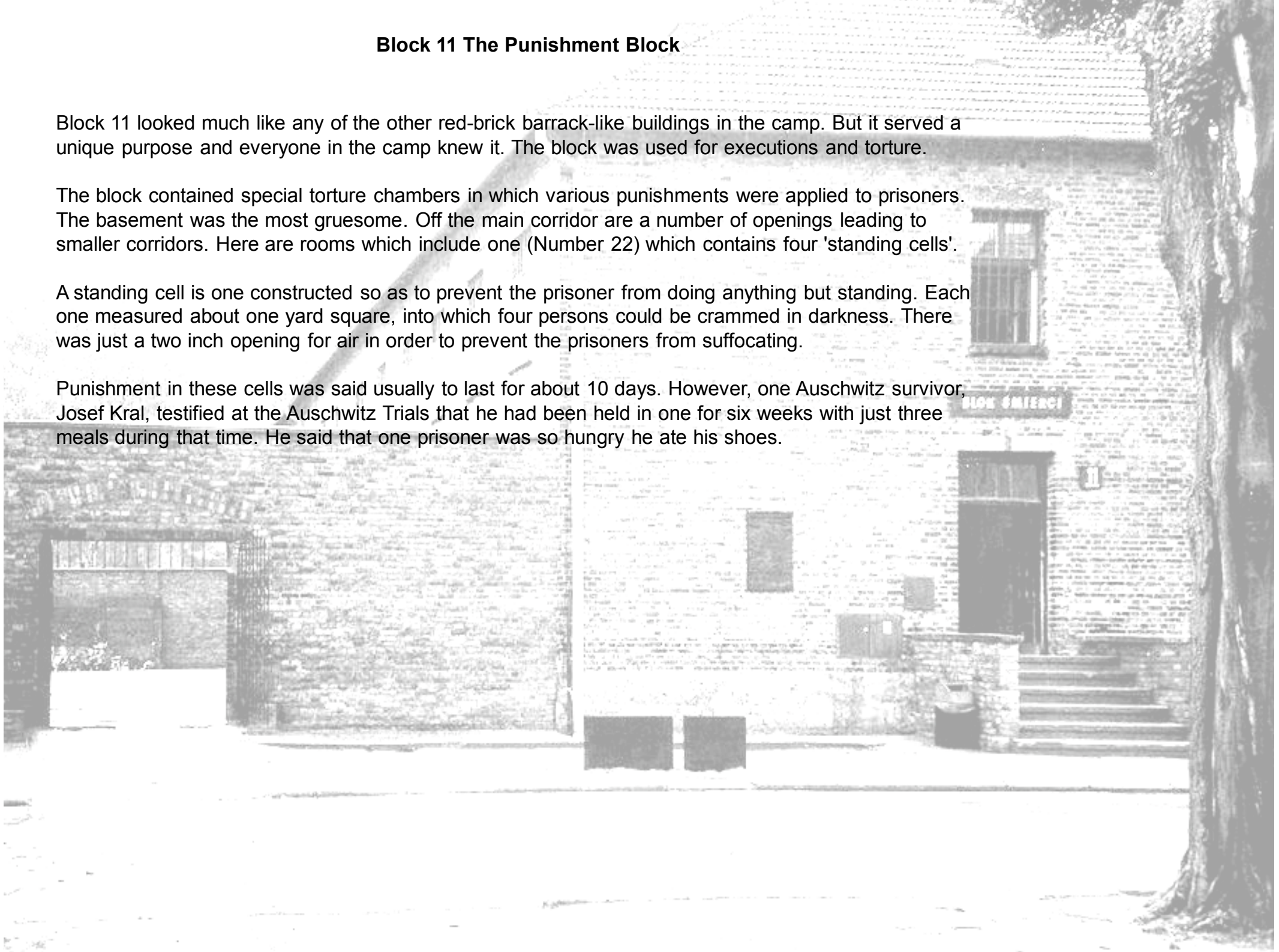
## Block 11 The Punishment Block

Block 11 looked much like any of the other red-brick barrack-like buildings in the camp. But it served a unique purpose and everyone in the camp knew it. The block was used for executions and torture.

The block contained special torture chambers in which various punishments were applied to prisoners. The basement was the most gruesome. Off the main corridor are a number of openings leading to smaller corridors. Here are rooms which include one (Number 22) which contains four 'standing cells'.

A standing cell is one constructed so as to prevent the prisoner from doing anything but standing. Each one measured about one yard square, into which four persons could be crammed in darkness. There was just a two inch opening for air in order to prevent the prisoners from suffocating.

Punishment in these cells was said usually to last for about 10 days. However, one Auschwitz survivor, Josef Kral, testified at the Auschwitz Trials that he had been held in one for six weeks with just three meals during that time. He said that one prisoner was so hungry he ate his shoes.



Execution by starvation was a particularly horrific punishment. In the event of a prisoner escaping from Auschwitz, the camp commandant would, during roll call, choose ten or more prisoners from the block in which the escapee had lived.

They would then be locked up in one of the cells in the basement of Block 11. Having been given nothing to eat or drink they would normally die within a few days but could survive up to a fortnight.

In July 1941 a man living in one of the barracks managed to escape. This prompted the camp's deputy commander to choose ten men from the same barrack to be starved to death in Block 11 in order to deter further escape attempts.

One of the men chosen, Franciszek Gajowniczek, became extremely upset and the Franciscan Father Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish missionary, stepped forward and asked that he be included instead of Gajowniczek in the group intended for death by starvation.

After surviving nearly two weeks in cell No. 18 in Block 11 and also seeing the deaths of most of his nine companions, Father Kolbe was killed on 14 August with a phenol injection.

He was later canonised by Pope John Paul II in 1982, although there is some controversy about his anti Semitic views.

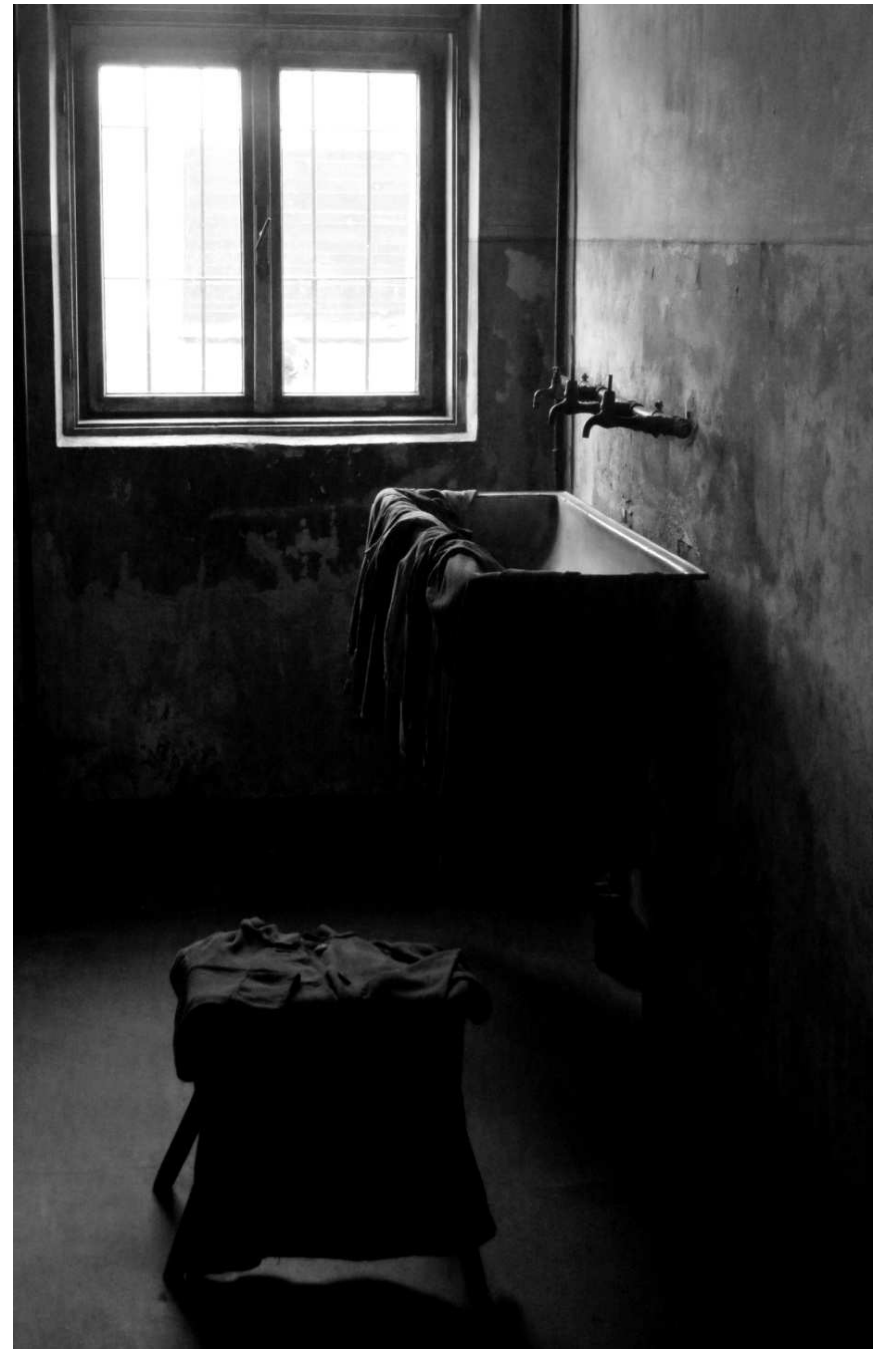
He is remembered with a small shrine in cell no. 18



The upper windows of Block 11 were partly bricked up, to prevent those imprisoned there to see what was happening in the courtyard below.



Inside Block 11 were bunks in the prisoners quarters (left) and below the prisoner's washroom .

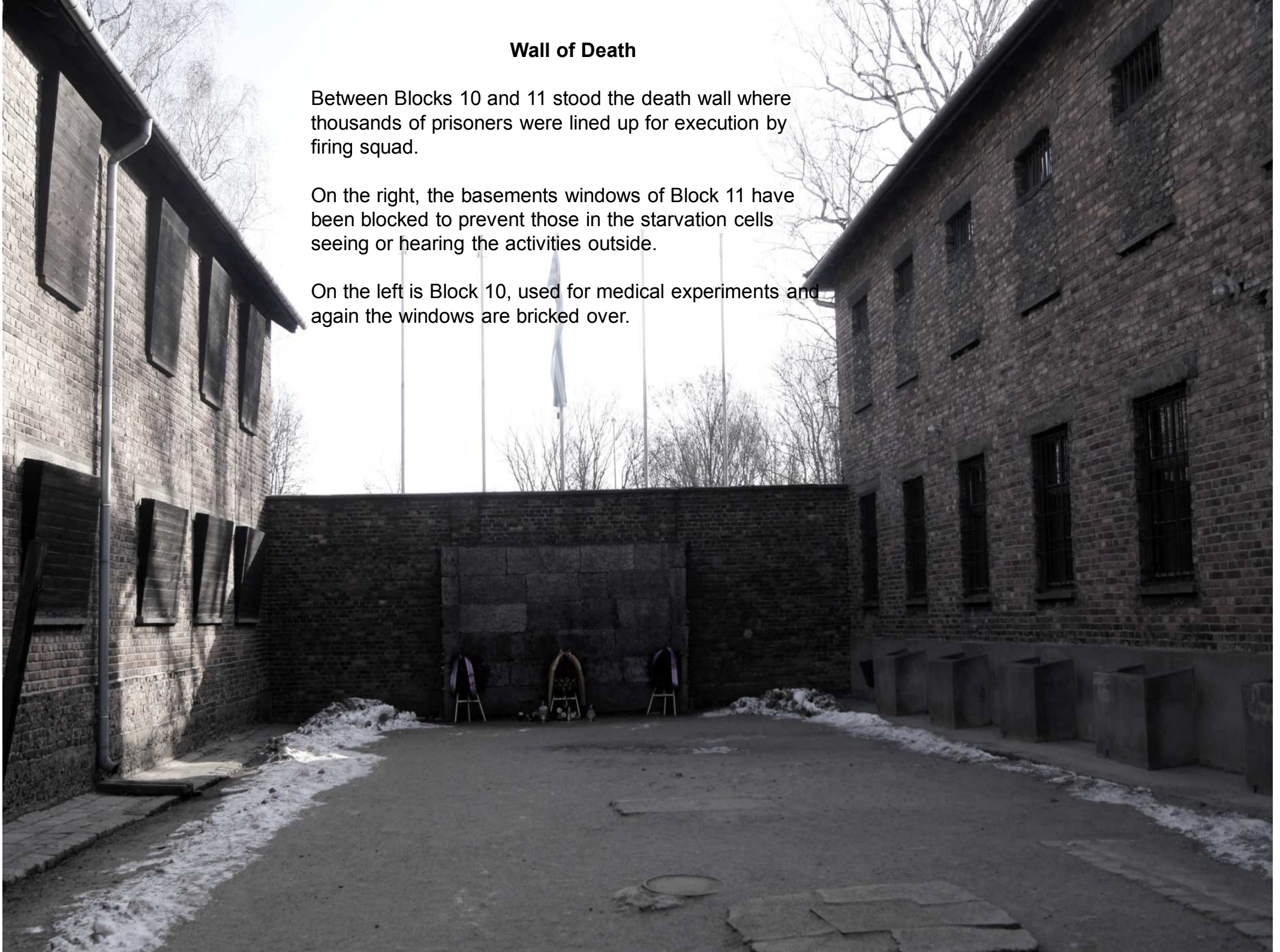


## Wall of Death

Between Blocks 10 and 11 stood the death wall where thousands of prisoners were lined up for execution by firing squad.

On the right, the basements windows of Block 11 have been blocked to prevent those in the starvation cells seeing or hearing the activities outside.

On the left is Block 10, used for medical experiments and again the windows are bricked over.



Hitler particularly despised the disabled. Mentally and physically disabled people were sterilised, starved and killed by lethal injection as early as 1939. This was under his euthanasia programme to find a solution for those living a "Life without Hope".

The first inmates of Auschwitz to be gassed were the disabled under the 'adult euthanasia' programme.

This programme had roots in a Fuhrer decree of 1939 which allowed doctors to select mentally ill or physically disabled patients and kill them. Hitler also authorised selection and murder of disabled children. He argued that such children forfeited their lives as they were weak and a drain on German society.

He did not want them to be able to reproduce, this following his own bleak logic of Darwinian selection.

The exhibition contains a large selection of disability aids taken from prisoners.



## Personal Possessions

On arrival at Auschwitz II-Birkenau a large percentage of prisoners were assigned to be gassed in the Crematoria.



All their belongings were removed from the prisoners on arrival at a Crematorium on the pretext that they were to be showered and given uniforms.

Among the items found by the Russians when the camp was liberated in 1945 were 370,000 men's suits, 837,000 women's garments, and about seven tons of human hair.

Some of the belongings and personal items stolen from innocent human beings are to be found in the museum in Auschwitz I and are displayed here.

In the exhibition located in Block 4 is one of the more shocking displays - two tons of victims' hair, used by the Nazis for the textile industry. It is piled high and stretching from one end of the room to the other.

It is one of the most tangible pieces of evidence of what went on here, but now brittle and fading after so many years, the conservation experts acknowledge it will soon all turn to dust.

It is kept in a darkened display area and (flash) photography was not permitted.





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## Crematorium I

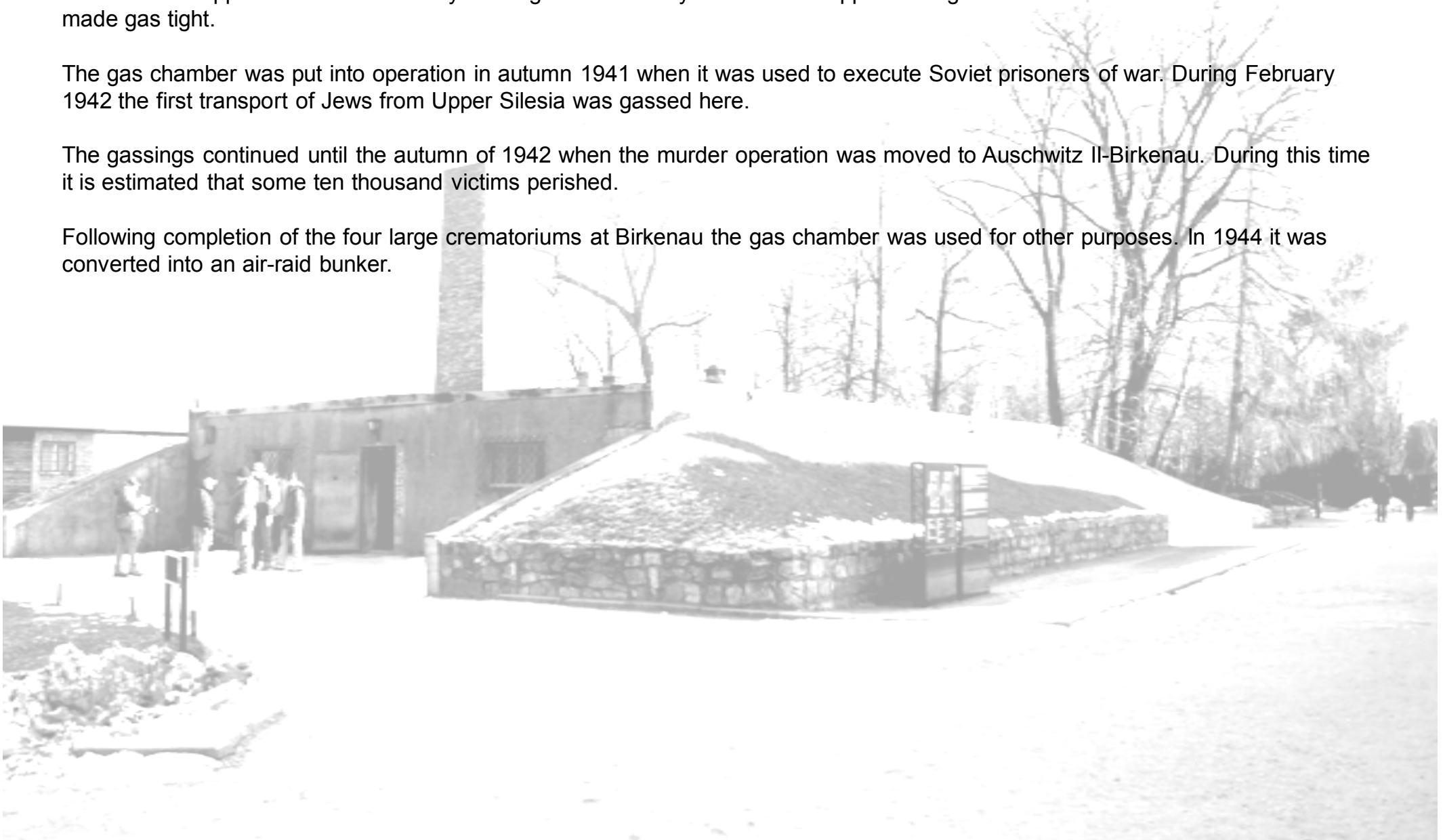
The first gas chamber at Auschwitz was installed in the mortuary of the crematorium at Auschwitz I.

The morgue room was situated beside the furnace room. In late 1941 the morgue room was sealed up, five holes were punched in the roof and capped with small chimneys through which the Zyklon-B was dropped. A large fan was installed and the doors were made gas tight.

The gas chamber was put into operation in autumn 1941 when it was used to execute Soviet prisoners of war. During February 1942 the first transport of Jews from Upper Silesia was gassed here.

The gassings continued until the autumn of 1942 when the murder operation was moved to Auschwitz II-Birkenau. During this time it is estimated that some ten thousand victims perished.

Following completion of the four large crematoriums at Birkenau the gas chamber was used for other purposes. In 1944 it was converted into an air-raid bunker.



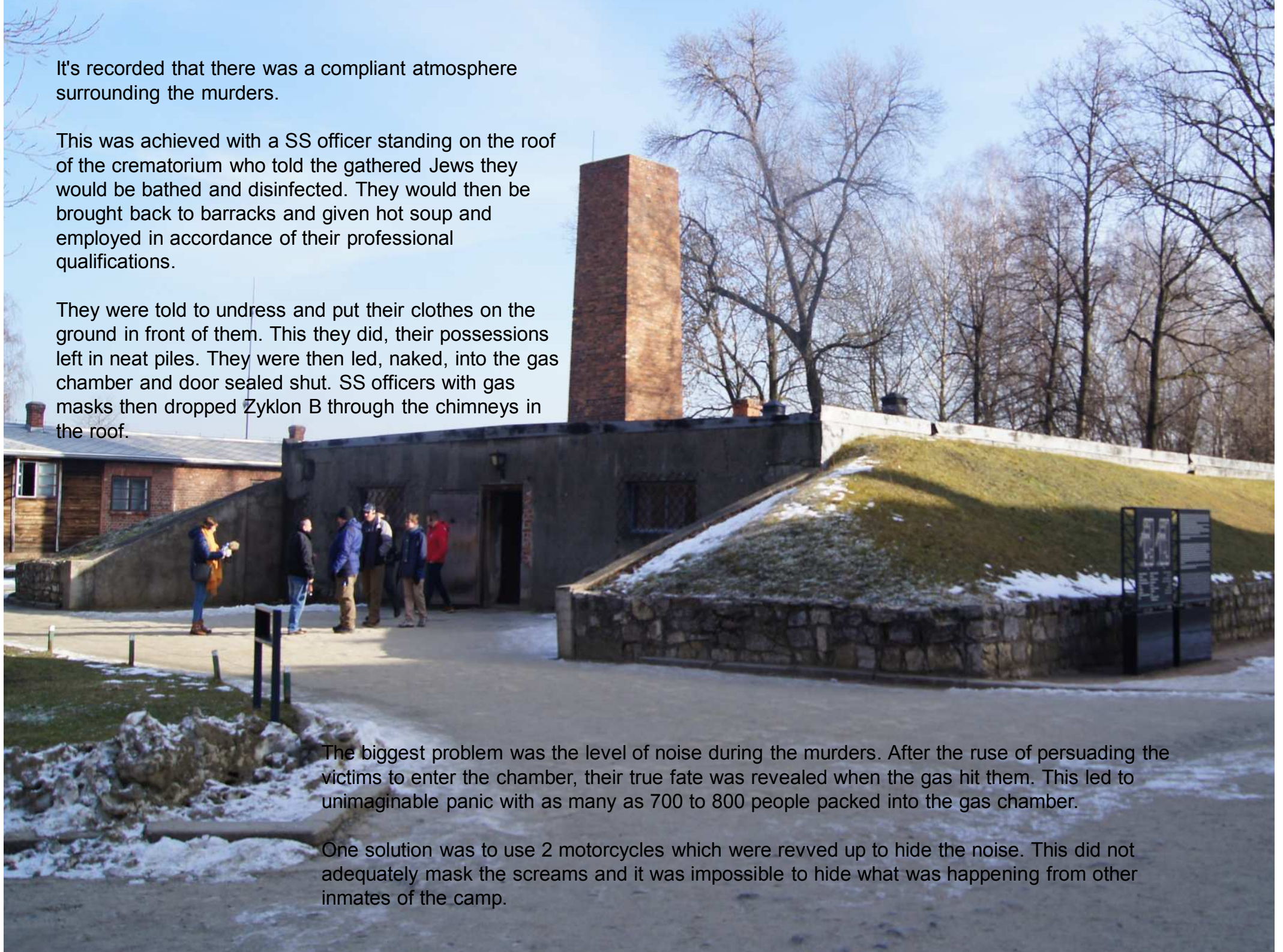
It's recorded that there was a compliant atmosphere surrounding the murders.

This was achieved with a SS officer standing on the roof of the crematorium who told the gathered Jews they would be bathed and disinfected. They would then be brought back to barracks and given hot soup and employed in accordance of their professional qualifications.

They were told to undress and put their clothes on the ground in front of them. This they did, their possessions left in neat piles. They were then led, naked, into the gas chamber and door sealed shut. SS officers with gas masks then dropped Zyklon B through the chimneys in the roof.

The biggest problem was the level of noise during the murders. After the ruse of persuading the victims to enter the chamber, their true fate was revealed when the gas hit them. This led to unimaginable panic with as many as 700 to 800 people packed into the gas chamber.

One solution was to use 2 motorcycles which were revved up to hide the noise. This did not adequately mask the screams and it was impossible to hide what was happening from other inmates of the camp.





Only when you stand inside a gas chamber and see the marks left by thousands of fingernails in the concrete walls as men, women and children blindly struggled for an escape can you even begin to comprehend the level of atrocity and suffering.

It was an eerie and disturbing experience.

## Zyklon B

In early 1942 Zyklon-B pellets, which released poison gas when dropped into the gas chambers, had emerged as the preferred extermination tool of the Nazi regime during the Holocaust.

Rudolf Höess, Commandant of Auschwitz, said that the use of Zyklon B came about on the initiative of one of his subordinates, Captain Karl Fritzsche.

Fritzsche saw a chemical being used to remove infestations of insects. This chemical was crystallized cyanide and sold under the name of Zyklon Blausäure or popularly known as Zyklon B.

He took a logical step. If it could be used to kill lice - why not used to kill human pests? And since Block 11 was already used as place of execution why not conduct an experiment?

Soviet prisoners of war were gathered in the basement and the gas applied. However the gas didn't work that well with many of the inmates still alive the next morning. so they strengthen the dose.





It is recorded that around 340 corpses could be burned every 24 hours after the installation of its three furnaces.

Corpses from the gas chambers were transferred to them on trolleys resting on rails.

Two of the three furnaces survive.

# Auschwitz II – the death camp

The camp at Auschwitz I soon became too small for the needs of the Nazis so a second camp was built a couple of miles away. Auschwitz II - Birkenau went on to become a major site of the Nazi 'Final Solution to the Jewish question'.

From early 1942 until late 1944, transport trains delivered Jews from all over German occupied Europe to the camp's gas chambers where they were killed. Auschwitz II was unusual as it was both a concentration and death camp.

AUSCHWITZ WAS THE LARGEST NAZI GERMAN CONCENTRATION CAMP AND DEATH CAMP.

IN THE YEARS 1940-1945, THE NAZIS DEPORTED AT LEAST

1,300,000 PEOPLE TO AUSCHWITZ:

1,100,000 JEWS,

140,000-150,000 POLES,

23,000 ROMA (GYPSIES),

15,000 SOVIET PRISONERS OF WAR,

25,000 PRISONERS FROM OTHER ETHNIC GROUPS.

1,100,000 OF THESE PEOPLE DIED IN AUSCHWITZ. APPROXIMATELY 90% OF THE VICTIMS WERE JEWS. THE SS MURDERED THE MAJORITY OF THEM IN THE GAS CHAMBERS.

At least 1.1 million prisoners died at Auschwitz, around 90 per cent of them Jewish.

Living conditions were brutal, and many of those not killed in the gas chambers died of starvation, forced labour, infectious diseases, individual executions and medical experiments.

Prisoners able to work were transported to and from local factories. Over the period it was in operation, the camp was staffed by up to 7,000 members of the German SS. Only a fraction were later convicted of war crimes. Some, including camp commandant Rudolf Höess, were executed.

In November 1944, with the Soviet Red Army approaching through Poland, the gassing operations ceased across the Reich. The Crematoriums in Auschwitz II were dismantled and blown up, while Crematorium I (in Auschwitz I) was used as an air raid shelter.

The SS were ordered to remove other evidence of the killings, including the mass graves and written records. In January 1945, the evacuation of all camps was ordered.



Camp commanders were ordered to make sure that not a single prisoner from the concentration camps fell into the hands of the enemy.

That month, 58,000 Auschwitz detainees were evacuated under guard, largely on foot. Thousands of them died in the subsequent death march west.

Approximately 20,000 prisoners made it to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany where they were liberated by the British in April 1945.

Around 7,500 weak or sick prisoners were left behind at Auschwitz. They were liberated by the Soviet army on 27 January 1945.

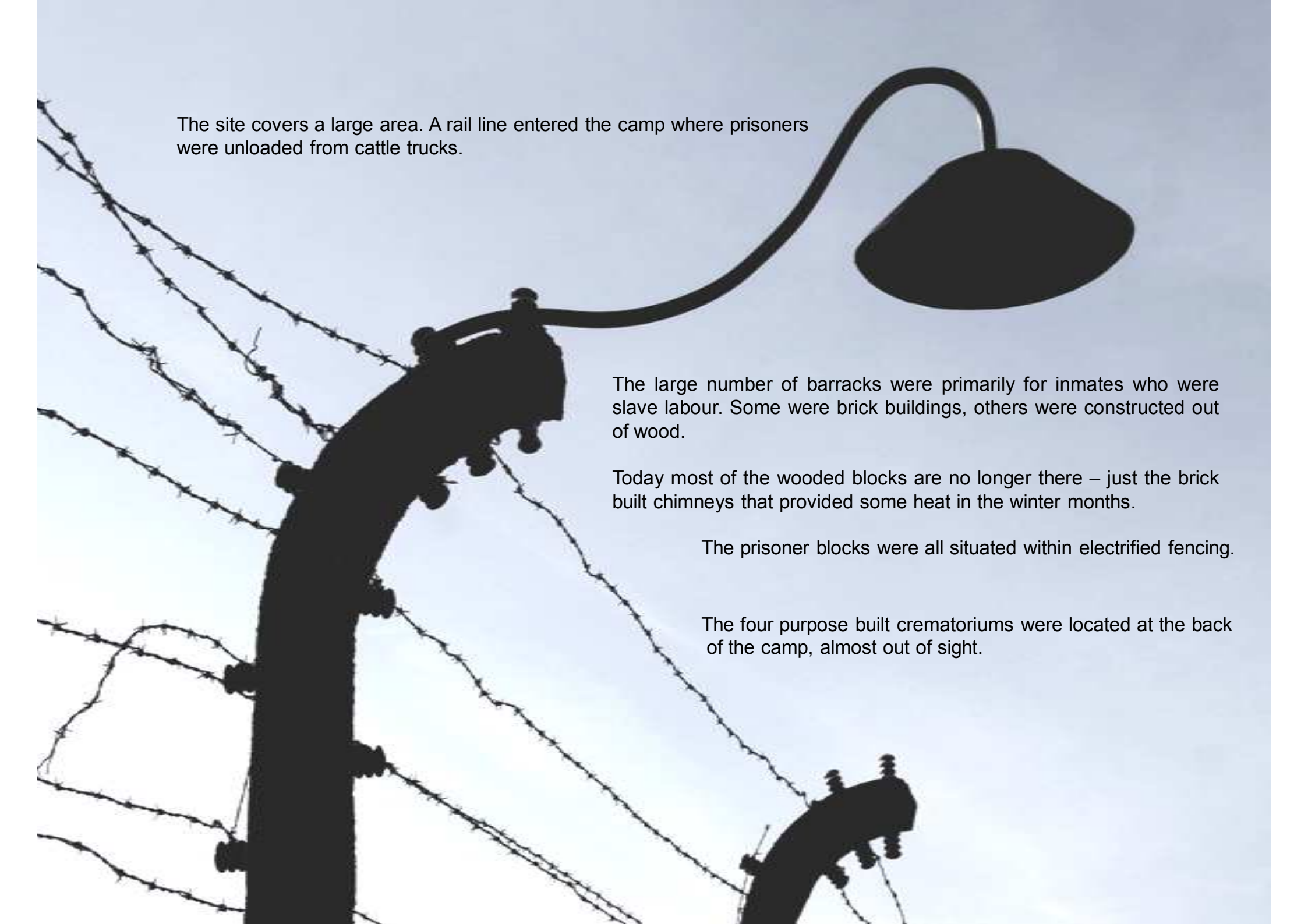
### **Bergen Belsen**

Bergen-Belsen was a Nazi concentration camp in what is today Lower Saxony in northern Germany.

It was originally established in 1943 as a prisoner of war camp. Parts were developed as a concentration camp, initially as an "exchange camp", where Jewish hostages were held with the intention of exchanging them for German prisoners of war held overseas. The camp was later expanded to accommodate Jews from other concentration camps.

At the end of 1944 there were 15,000 inmates at Belsen. By April 1945, there were 60,000, many arriving from camps such as Auschwitz. The SS made no effort to house or feed this massive influx.

The camp was liberated on April 15, 1945, by the British 11th Armoured Division and film footage - appalling pictures of emancipated bodies and walking skeletons - shocked the world.



The site covers a large area. A rail line entered the camp where prisoners were unloaded from cattle trucks.

The large number of barracks were primarily for inmates who were slave labour. Some were brick buildings, others were constructed out of wood.

Today most of the wooded blocks are no longer there – just the brick built chimneys that provided some heat in the winter months.

The prisoner blocks were all situated within electrified fencing.

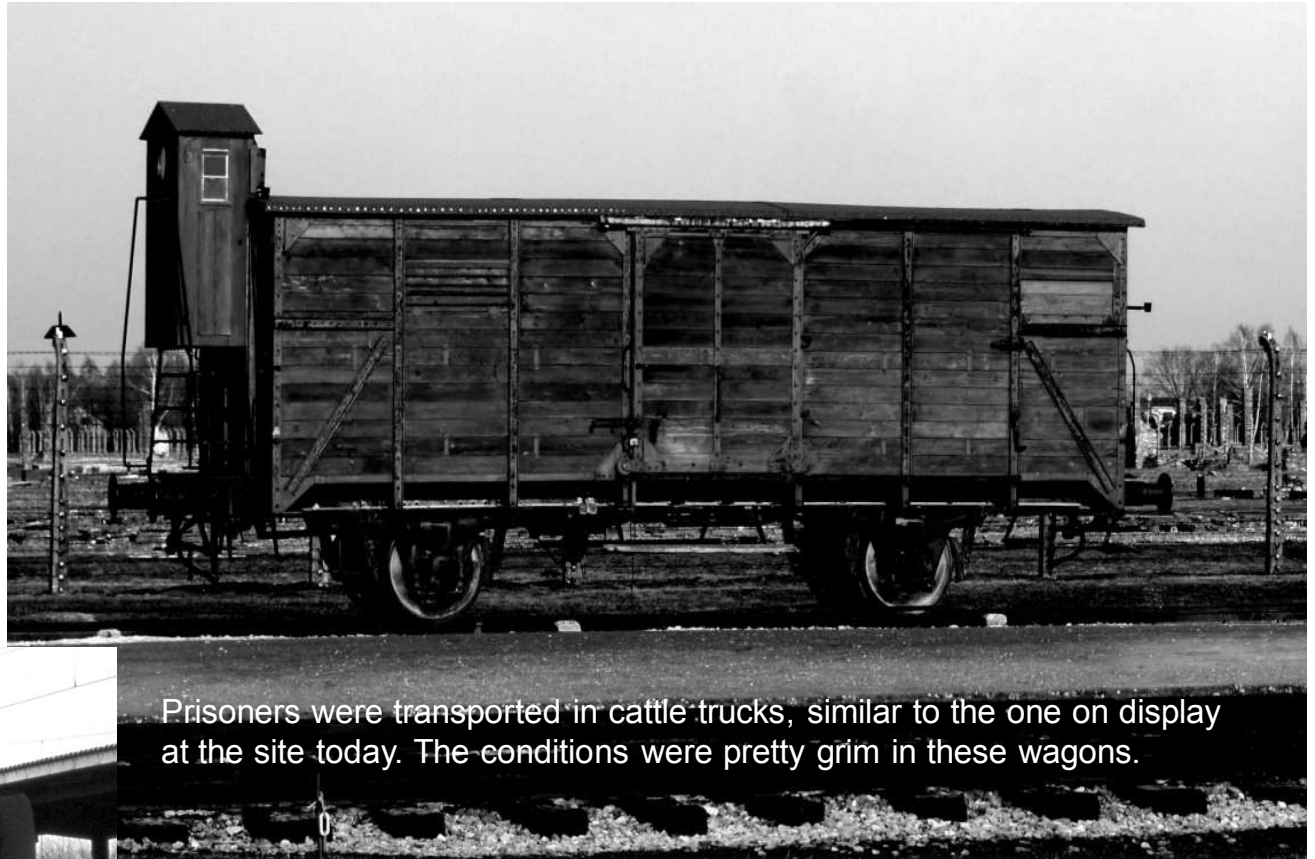
The four purpose built crematoriums were located at the back of the camp, almost out of sight.



## The Gate of Death

Trains entered the site through the main gate, known as the Gate of Death.

The railway line to the camp was a spur from the main marshalling yard a quarter of a mile away. It was built as late as March 1944, specifically to deal with the expected influx of Hungarian Jews.



Prisoners were transported in cattle trucks, similar to the one on display at the site today. The conditions were pretty grim in these wagons.



The trains were hauled by steam locomotives, such as the one pictured here in 1974. Many hundreds of the rugged machines were constructed by the Nazis during the war.

To save money, the tenders, holding the water and coal, were converted oil wagons, which led to them being called bathtub tenders.

Once on site, the prisoners were offloaded on a makeshift platform between the tracks.

To the left were the mainly wooden male barracks whilst on the right was the female accommodation. The path on the right led to the gas chambers, which are behind me.





Turning round from the previous picture the picture on the left shows the platforms whilst in the distance, between the trees, the site of the now demolished gas chambers and crematoriums.

The main picture was taken from the site of one of the demolished crematorium looking back towards the watchtower and gate.

Both pictures give an idea of the large area the camp occupied.



The Auschwitz Album is the only surviving visual evidence of the process leading to the mass murder at Auschwitz-Birkenau. This unique document was donated to a charity, Yad Vashem, by Lilly Jacob-Zelmanovic Meier. The photos were taken at the end of May or beginning of June 1944 and show the arrival of Hungarian Jews from the Berehovo Ghetto.

Those considered fit for work were sent into the camp, where they were registered, deloused and distributed to the barracks. The rest were sent to the gas chambers.

The photos in the album show the entire process except for the killing itself. These are haunting pictures and bring to life the horror of the camp as well as the compliance of those arriving but who didn't know their fate.



There were 4 crematoriums on site. Built in 1943 they replaced the two original gas chambers.

Known as the Little Red House and Little White House, they were cottages from the original settlement and converted for use as gas chambers.



The former camp commander, Rudolf Hoess, wrote in his memoirs that the key to successful mass murder on this scale was to conduct the whole process in an atmosphere of great calm. The victims were gassed under the guise of a harmless shower, their bodies were cremated and the ashes were strewn in a nearby swamp.

These pictures show the remains of Crematorium II after it was demolished and blown up. On the left, steps leading into the gas chamber. The picture above are of the remains of the crematorium.

These four gas chambers and crematoriums could kill up to 4,700 a day, or up to 150,000 per month.

Those deemed fit to work were housed in barracks. Whilst most of the wooden ones were destroyed, one line has been restored which gives an impression of their size and interior.





These pictures show the inside of the barracks with the three tier bunk beds. Each bunk was crammed with ten inmates. There was no bedding. Those kept here had to try and sleep on the bare boards.

On the left, the communal latrines. One can only imagine the squalor and smell in these blocks.



### Images around the camp

These pictures show the brick buildings and the foundations of the demolished wooden blocks, all surrounded by the electrified fencing and watch towers.









# Reflections

Auschwitz was not the first concentration camp I have visited.

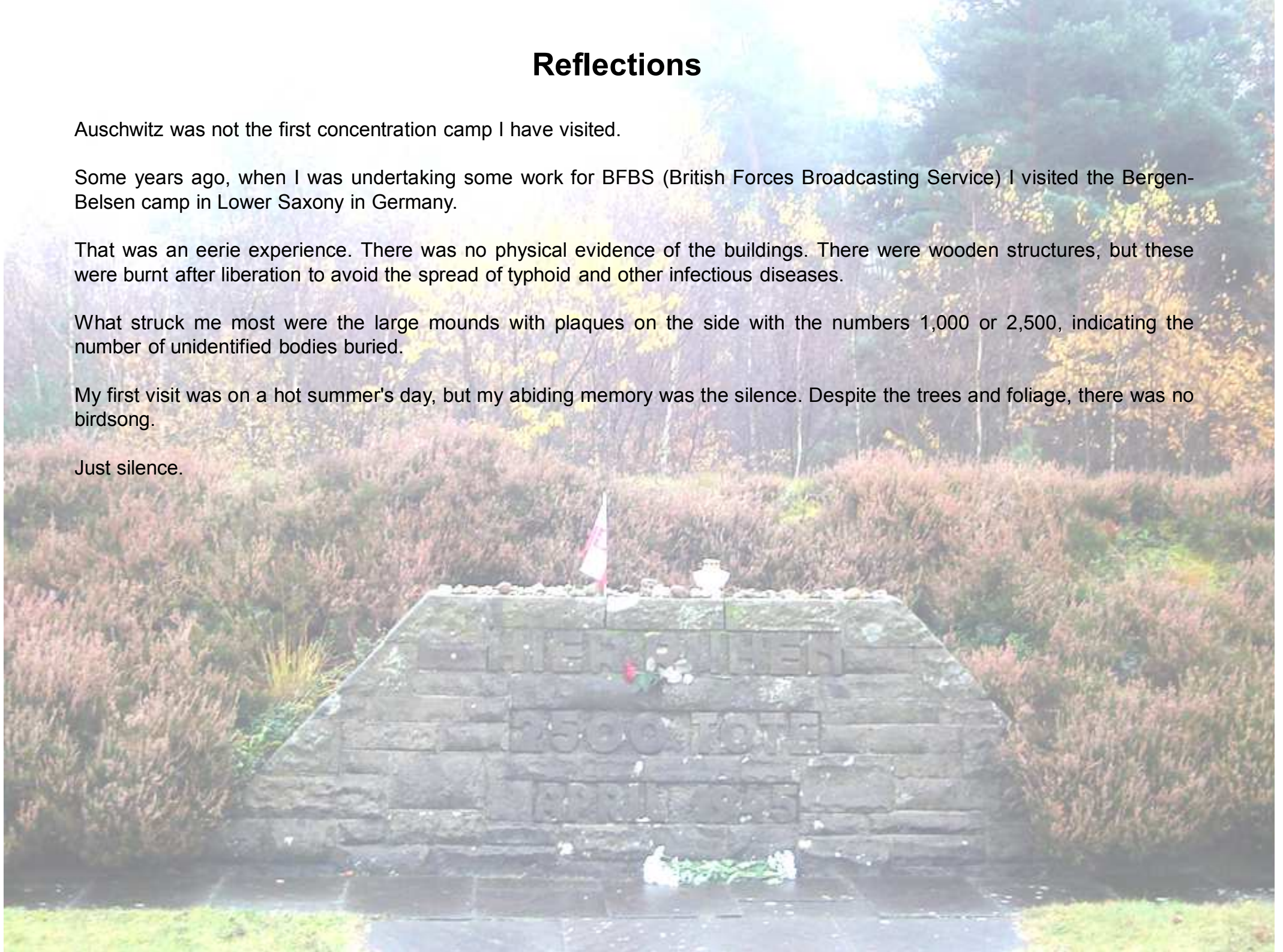
Some years ago, when I was undertaking some work for BFBS (British Forces Broadcasting Service) I visited the Bergen-Belsen camp in Lower Saxony in Germany.

That was an eerie experience. There was no physical evidence of the buildings. There were wooden structures, but these were burnt after liberation to avoid the spread of typhoid and other infectious diseases.

What struck me most were the large mounds with plaques on the side with the numbers 1,000 or 2,500, indicating the number of unidentified bodies buried.

My first visit was on a hot summer's day, but my abiding memory was the silence. Despite the trees and foliage, there was no birdsong.

Just silence.



The visit to Auschwitz was different. I didn't quite know what to expect. Belsen was quiet and deserted whilst Auschwitz was busy with visitors. I deliberately visited in the winter to experience the place in cold miserable weather. Whilst there was some snow on the ground, we had un-seasonal sunshine.

The exhibitions in Auschwitz I were chilling. I had read about what had happened but seeing the 2 ton mound of human hair brought it to life. My pictures in this publication of the personal possessions are just a part of the actual display. For example, the display of the suitcases filled the entire side of one of the accommodation blocks - probably length of two railway carriages.

Only seeing the huge quantities did it make me realise how many people passed through the camp. What is displayed is just a part of that recovered after the liberation.

Block 11, the punishment block, was chilling, particularly the basement. It was hard to imagine the horror of the starvation cells.

And the Wall of Death. It was gruesome thinking about the number of those shot there and the fear they experienced before the trigger was pulled.

But the one place that really brought it home was Crematorium I and the gas chamber. I spent a few minutes alone in there looking at the walls, the dim lighting and it's not hard to imagine the fear of those shoved in after the door was locked and sealed. It was a sobering moment.

Auschwitz II (Auschwitz Birkenau) was surprisingly large. I had seen pictures of the gatehouse and the railway line but that is only a small part of the site.

After my visit to Auschwitz, I discovered the 'Auschwitz Album'. These were pictures of real people who were confused, hopeful for the future but ignorant of their fate. It put some context into the sites I had visited.

Looking at the history of the holocaust, there are many statistics, some numbers of those killed too large to comprehend. However statistics give very little insight into individual experiences. That is why the individual stories told by survivors or recounted in books such as Laurence Rees' 'Auschwitz' are so important.

Visiting the site today it is difficult to visualise the smell, stench, smoke and fear of the place. The remains at both camps do not reveal the wartime reality of endless, uninterrupted fear. The barracks were no more than a shell or a shadow of the past.

## **What did the ordinary German know?**

There was one thing I was curious about. What did the German population know about the fate of the Jews?

After the war ended in 1945, German citizens claimed they did not know the detail of the camp atrocities and at first, this was generally accepted by historians.

However, Robert Gellately, in his book, "Backing Hitler", challenged that claim. He analysed German newspaper and magazine archives since 1933, the year Hitler became chancellor.

The Nazi propaganda was also very effective. They pushed the line that the Jews were the cause of World War One and that there was a worldwide conspiracy. If the people are told a lie enough times, they'll eventually take it as fact. Many ordinary Germans won't take full responsibility blaming the power of propaganda they were exposed to.

So what did the German population know about the fate of the Jews?

It is now generally accepted that they knew Jews were sent away, that bad things were happening to them and they were not coming back. Street markets were held to sell household equipment left behind by Jewish families.

In my own family (on my German side), my grandfather, who lived in Oberglogau (in Upper Silesia), bought a large house and all the furniture at a cut down price from a Jewish family who had to 'move away'.

The majority of the German population, up to the moment Germany started to lose the war, felt so personally secure and happy that they would have voted to keep Hitler in power if there were free and fair elections. So whilst the general population were aware that the Jewish Problem was being dealt with, the actual murderous atrocities were kept a secret.

The killing factories, Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka amongst others, were located in remote forests. The Nazis wanted their names erased from history so once the killing was completed, they could be destroyed and left to nature.

How did the Nazis justify the killing? They saw how bombs were dropped on German cities killing women and children in firestorms. Some claim there was no difference in the death of ordinary German citizens and Jewish families.

The Nazi's could have stopped the bombings by surrendering. However, the German persecution of Jews was policy based on ideology. It should also be remembered that the Germans firebombed British towns and cities first.

Could the Allies have stopped the killing? There has been much academic discussion after the event but information about the extermination of Jews was known by the West in 1941 - Churchill spoke openly of the Nazi policy of mass murder in 1941. The then pope, Pope Pius XII was notable for not speaking out against the atrocities.

There were requests from Jewish organisations - such as World Jewish Congress - that the Allies bomb Auschwitz. In Britain, Sir Archibald Sinclair - Secretary of State for Air - said that it was impossible for Bomber Command to cover such distances on a single night. Britain specialised in night time bombing whilst the Americans bombed by day so it should be their responsibility.

But it never happened. There was a lack of aerial reconnaissance, maps or a detailed plan and the plans were dropped. The Allies also had more pressing matters, such as the Normandy landing and the push on the Western Front.



### **Could it happen again?**

The Holocaust was ghastly. I still can't comprehend how people could be so cruel and think it the right thing to do to eliminate all Jews.

In a way what happened in Germany was the perfect storm. A combination of different events that resulted in the mass murder. Some of those individual events are happening today. Donald Trump bangs his nationalistic drum, demonising Muslims, amongst others.

The anti-immigration views of some who supported the UK's departure from the European Union can be interpreted as prejudice whilst the Labour Party is embroiled in anti-Semitism.

The former Prime Minister, Tony Blair said, "Anti-Semitism and hate did not end in 1945. Unfortunately today some of this poison is back from the political fringe to parts of the political mainstream."

The Jewish MP Luciana Berger's decision to quit the Labour Party over anti-Semitism led to Labour's deputy leader Tom Watson to say she had been "bullied out of her own party by racist thugs". The Derby North MP, Chris Williamson was suspended from the party in February 2019 after suggesting that the party had been too apologetic on anti-Semitism whilst the former Labour MP, Joan Ryan, was threatened with rape and told she should be "shoved right back in the ovens".

It is worrying that some people think it's acceptable to say or act in this way today.

Looking at Europe, there is rising anti-Semitism amongst far-right organisations and for the first time since 1945, some Jewish people are concerned for their future. Looking back to 1945, when they were liberated, many Jews went back to their home countries, such as Poland and Hungary, hoping to avoid any more discrimination. However they still faced the kind of anti-Semitism they hoped they had left behind.

This has not gone away and today, France has reported a 74% increase in the number of offences against Jews in 2018 and Germany said the number of violent anti-Semitic attacks had surged by more than 60%. The French president, Emmanuel Macron, denounced the trend as "unacceptable" whilst Petra Pau, an MP for Germany's Die Linke party, said more and more people felt free to "deny the Holocaust and engage in anti-Semitic agitation".

That is worrying.

A recent survey of public attitudes for CNN found more than a fifth of those polled in seven European countries believed Jewish people have too much influence in finance and politics, while 34% felt they knew little or nothing about the Holocaust.

In Germany, home to Europe's third largest Jewish community after France and Britain, the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party has been widely accused of fomenting hate against refugees, Muslims and Jews. The party's co-leader, Alexander Gauland, described the Holocaust as a "small bird dropping in over 1,000 years of successful German history", while another senior AfD politician, Björn Höcke, called the Holocaust memorial in Berlin a "monument of shame".

Hungary's far-right Fidesz party, led by prime minister Viktor Orbán, has run vitriolic campaigns against migrants and demonised George Soros, the Hungarian-born Jewish financier.

Jean Veil, the son of the late French Holocaust survivor and politician, Simone Veil, told RTL radio that "at bottom, we knew the leprosy was still there". He said this after swastikas were daubed on postboxes that had a portrait of his late mother.

In an interview for the BBC, the holocaust historian, Christopher Browning, said that one thing we've learnt is that we seldom learn from history. He suggested that governments have the power to create an institutional and organisational framework that will harness people to kill. They prey on people's conformity and their deference to those in power.

The current system of international law places important constraints on the power of the state, but it has not stopped atrocity. Mass killings and atrocities did not end in 1945. Around the world there have been terrible events. Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur come to mind.

No continent has been immune from large-scale killings in which great numbers of individuals have been targeted and killed because they happen to be a member of a particular group – racial, religious, ethnic, or political.

People say we learn from history. I would like to think we have learned from what occurred during the Holocaust but the evidence of the rise in far right, anti-Semitic organisations suggests otherwise.

It won't be long before the last survivor will have passed on and there won't be anyone left alive who has personal experience of Auschwitz or the holocaust.

There is the danger that the history of the holocaust will merge into the distant past and become just one more terrible event amongst many .

There have been atrocities before such as Richard the Lionheart's massacre of the Muslims of Acre during the Crusades or Genghis Khan's genocide in Persia. Will Auschwitz and the holocaust be seen in the same way?

I have faith in humanity but I fear that without vigilance and firm action, other atrocities are likely to occur again.

Many politicians want to remember the lessons from the holocaust and that perhaps lies behind the new holocaust memorial planned for Westminster.

At a Holocaust memorial event in Westminster in May 2019, the then Prime Minister, Theresa May said:

"By putting our National Holocaust Memorial and Education Centre next to our Parliament, we make a solemn and eternal promise that Britain will never forget what happened in the Holocaust.

"Seeing this through is a sacred, national mission. In the face of despicable Holocaust denial, this memorial will stand to preserve the truth forever.

"And this education centre will ensure that every generation understands the responsibility that we all share – to fight against hatred and prejudice in all its forms, wherever it is found."





## 6 Biography

There are many books written about World War II, the holocaust and Auschwitz.

The books I consulted for my research, not just for this publication but as background to my visit are listed below.

**Auschwitz – The Residence of Death** Edited by Teresa and Henryk Swiebocki  
Published by Bialy Kruk Studio ISBN 973 – 83 – 6029 – 245 - 7

**The Holocaust** by Laurence Rees  
Published by Penguin Books ISBN 978 - 0 - 241 – 97996 – 9

**Auschwitz – The Nazis & The Final Solution** by Laurence Rees  
Published by BBC Books ISBN 0 - 563 – 52296 - 8

**The Holocaust – Mankind's Darkest Hour** by Judith Sandeen Bartel  
Published by Octopus Publishing Group ISBN 978 – 1 – 84898 – 692 – 3

**Dresden** by Frederick Taylor  
Published by Bloomsbury Publishing plc ISBN 0 – 7475 – 7084 – 1

**Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany** by Robert Gellately  
Published by Oxford University Press ISBN 978 – 0 – 19 – 280291 - 0

**The Auschwitz Album**  
It is possible to view this photographic album on line:  
[https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/album\\_auschwitz/index.asp](https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/album_auschwitz/index.asp)

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