7. Auschwitz-Birkenau

MYTH: All concentration camps tattooed prisoners upon their entry.

The Auschwitz Concentration Camp Complex (including Auschwitz I, Auschwitz-Birkenau, and Monowitz) was the only location in which prisoners were systematically tattooed during the Holocaust. Prior to tattooing, several means of identifying prisoners, both by number and by category, had been implemented; serial numbers were the main method. When they arrived at the camp, prisoners were issued serial numbers which were then sewn to their prison uniforms. These serial numbers were often accompanied by different shapes, symbols or letters which identified the status, nationality, or religion of the prisoner. This practice continued even after tattooing was introduced (Rosenthal).

Beginning in 1941, prisoners arriving at Auschwitz would be tattooed on the left breast. Later, the tattoo location was moved to the inner forearm (Jewish Virtual Library).

The sequence according to which serial numbers were issued evolved over time. The tattoos included a letter that identified the prisoner’s “crime.” This system was used from May 1940 – January 1945.

AU: Soviet Prisoners of War

Z: Zigeuner (the German word for Gypsy)

EH: Erziehungshaftlinge (Prisoners that had been sent for "reeducation")

A & B: First issued in May 1944 to Jewish prisoners. In each series, men and women had their own separate numerical series, ostensibly beginning with number 1. The A series was to be completed with 20,000; however an error led to the women being numbered to 25,378 before the B series was begun. The intention was to work through the entire alphabet with

... We had to walk in rows of five, and they took us away, and the others, they pushed in a different corner... inside the concentration camp, we had to completely disrobe, and everything was working just like clockwork. One girl came and she shaved us everywhere, another girl came and she tattooed a number on our arms, and then they took us to wait in sub-zero temperature outside, naked we were standing like monkeys, without hair, without nothing...

— Anne K., a Holocaust survivor currently living in Washington in the video "Never Again I Hope." Produced by the Washington State Holocaust Education Resource Center.

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MYTH: All concentration camps were killing centers.

A killing center (or death camp) is a concentration camp with special facilities specifically designed for systematic murder. Six such camps existed: Auschwitz-Birkenau, Belzec, Chelmno, Majdanek, Sobibor, and Treblinka. All were located in Poland.

By WWII, the Nazis had in place killing centers, concentration camps, labor camps, penal settlements, Jewish camps, resettlement centers, camps for foreign workers and POWs, transient camps for those waiting, and ghettos.

Konniyl Feig, in his book “Hitler's Death Camps,” explains, “Hitler established the camps when he came into power for the purpose of isolating, punishing, torturing, and killing Germans suspected of opposition to his regime. From 1933 – 1938, the Nazis considered the camps primarily as places for the protective custody of political enemies of the state, not as the death pits, labor extractors and medical research stations that they became” (23).

The concentration camp system was constantly in a state of flux and expansion. According to Feig, the exact number of camps is not known, but they numbered in the thousands (26). Nineteen primary camps existed: the thousands of others were attached to, or under the supervision of these 19.

These 19 camps can be divided into four major categories:

**Killing Centers**

Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka. All are located in Poland. These centers were intended to be secret and were only for killing.

**Killing Center and Slave Labor Camp (combined functions)**

Auschwitz-Birkenau and Majdanek. Located in Poland. Although both of these camps had full extermination facilities, this was not their only goal. A majority of an incoming group would be killed. The

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Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, p. 28

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Source:

- **Jewish Virtual Library**: jewishtorahlibrary.org

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Source:

- **Jewish Virtual Library**: jewishtorahlibrary.org
Nazis would profit from the remainder by providing private and SS industries slave labor.

- Concentration Camps
  - Dachau, Sachsenhausen, Ravensbruck, Buchenwald, Flossenburg, Neuengamme, Gross-Rosen, Natzweiler, Mauthausen, Stutthof, Dora/Nordhausen
  Concentration camps were designed to hold large numbers of people in a limited and defined area. Prisoners were used for both labor and experimentation.

- Official Reception and Holding Center
  Bergen-Belsen

**Resources for Educators:**

  “A monumental reference that records — day by day, month by month — the events and developments of the concentration camp from its planning ... to its liberation in January 1945 ...”
- Photo gallery: wshrc.org
  Photos may be used for educational purposes.

- “Auschwitz: Inside the Nazi State.”
  PBS documentary. Aired in January and February, 2005. To borrow, please contact the Washington State Holocaust Education Resource Center at info@wsherc.org or 206-441-5747.
- For a comprehensive timeline, maps and plans of Auschwitz, visit pbs.org/auschwitz.
- Map of rail system leading to Auschwitz
  (Florida Center for Instructional Technology): fcit.coedu.usf.edu/holocaust/MAPS/map001b.PDF (reproduced here)
- Map of concentration camps in Europe
  (Florida Center for Instructional Technology): fcit.coedu.usf.edu/holocaust/MAPS/map009b.PDF (reproduced here)
  For additional suggested resources and Web sites on Auschwitz, go to wsherc.org and click on “Teaching the Holocaust.”

**Sources:**

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