

THE AUSCHWITZ ALBUM



The story of a transport

American Society for Yad Vashem

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The “Auschwitz Album” exhibit is based on an album, which is the only surviving visual evidence of the process of mass murder at Auschwitz-Birkenau. It is a unique document donated to Yad Vashem by Lili Jacob-Zelmanovic Meier.

The Exhibition created by Yad Vashem was first presented at the United Nations in New York in January 2005 in observance of the 60th Anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz.

The photos were taken at the end of May or beginning of June 1944, either by Ernst Hofmann or by Bernhard Walter, two SS men whose task was to take ID photos and fingerprints of inmates (not Jews who were sent directly to the gas chambers). The photos show the arrival of Hungarian Jews from Carpatho-Ruthenia. Many of them came from the Berehovo Ghetto, which itself was a collecting point for Jews from several other small towns.

Eighteen-year-old Lili Jacob and her family were among these 3,500 deportees. Upon arriving at Auschwitz, Lili was sent to Dora, a Nazi slave labor camp 400 miles to the west, where she was eventually liberated by the Americans. While searching for warm clothing inside an abandoned German barracks, Lili came across a photograph album.

Upon opening the album, Lili found familiar images of her family and friends, members of the doomed Auschwitz transport. It is extraordinary to think that out of hundreds of thousands of families who arrived at Birkenau, Lili uncovered such personal images of her transport, her family and her friends.



Women and children on the Birkenau arrival platform known as the "ramp". The Jews were removed from the deportation trains onto the ramp where they faced a selection process – some were sent immediately to their deaths, while others were sent to slave labor.





Lili never hid the album and news of its existence was published many times. She was even called to present it at the Auschwitz trials in Frankfurt during the 1960s. She kept it until the famous Nazi-hunter Serge Klarsfeld visited her in 1980, and convinced her to donate the album to Yad Vashem.

In 1994 the album was restored in Yad Vashem's conservation laboratory and information on each one of the photos was typed into the computerized databank of the archive. The staff of the archive was able to compare and match the pictures with aerial photos taken by the US Army Air Force on several occasions in 1944-45. In 1999 the entire album was scanned with highest quality digital equipment.

There are 56 pages and 193 photos in the album. Some of the original pictures, presumably those given by Lili to survivors who had identified relatives in the photographs, are missing. One of these pictures was recently donated to Yad Vashem.

The photos in the Album show the entire process except for the killing itself.



Jews undergoing the selection process on the Birkenau arrival platform known as the "ramp". The selection process began immediately after the Jews were taken off the deportation trains. During a selection, women and men considered "fit for work" were sent for slave labor. The rest of the people were sent to their deaths in the gas chambers.



THE HISTORY OF AUSCHWITZ: 1940-1945

Auschwitz was the site of the largest mass murder in the history of humanity. It has come to represent the most expansive and infamous of the Nazi extermination camps - a factory of death. In the end, 1.1 million people died at Auschwitz.

The Auschwitz complex was unique. It contained all three major elements of the Nazi camp system – a concentration camp, a forced labor camp, and an extermination camp. The initial area was constructed in May 1940, called Auschwitz I, or Auschwitz Main Camp. Auschwitz I was originally intended to house Polish dissidents whom the Nazis considered a threat to their occupation. Toward the end of 1940, Heinrich Himmler visited Auschwitz and ordered that the camp triple its capacity from 10,000 to 30,000 prisoners. Over the succeeding months, a series of plans was drawn up for expansion.

In October 1941, about a mile and a half from Auschwitz, Auschwitz II (Birkenau) was built. Birkenau was intended to hold 100,000 Soviet POWs.

However, by the spring of 1942, Auschwitz began to play a pivotal role in implementing the Final Solution. During 1942, about 200,000 Jews were sent to Auschwitz from all over Europe: France, Holland, Belgium, Norway, Yugoslavia, Poland, the Czech lands, Slovakia, Austria, and Germany. About 70 percent of them were murdered immediately upon arrival. No record remains of those immediately killed.



Jews who were classified as "not fit for work" waiting in a grove outside Crematorium IV before they were to be gassed. At this point, the Jews were exhausted and in a state of shock from the horrors of the journey and the selection process that they had just endured. The vast majority had no idea what fate awaited them.





In 1942, the scope of Auschwitz continued to increase. Reichsfuhrer SS Heinrich Himmler worked diligently to bring I.G. Farben, then one of the largest corporations, to Auschwitz.

Operational in 1942, Auschwitz III (Buna Monowitz) eventually became the center of the Auschwitz network of more than 40 forced labor camps. This new slave labor camp transformed Auschwitz and the economy of Nazi-occupied Europe.

In November 1944, the gas chambers were used for the last time at Birkenau, when the last recorded transport of Jewish prisoners arrived. In November of that year, the SS began the destruction of the crematoria. As the Soviet army approached and the end of the war came closer, the vast majority of Auschwitz prisoners were marched west by the Nazis, into Germany. Those few thousands remaining, who were too ill to travel, were left behind and found by Soviet forces when they liberated Auschwitz on January 27, 1945.

THE LAST EPISODE: HUNGARIAN JEWS AND THE HOLOCAUST

Early summer 1944 was the apex of the deportation of Hungarian Jewry. For this purpose a special rail line was extended from the rail station outside the camp to a ramp inside Auschwitz. Many of the photos in the album were taken on the ramp.

The vast majority of those murdered at Auschwitz in 1944 were from Hungary. Although an ally of Germany, Hungary initially refused to deport Jews with Hungarian citizenship. However, in March 1944, German troops marched into Budapest. With them came Adolf Eichmann, sent to establish special details for implementing the "Final Solution" of the Hungarian Jews.

The deportation of Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz–Birkenau started on May 15 and lasted through July 7, 1944. In less than two months, nearly 440,000 – half the Jews in Hungary – were deported, to Birkenau.

Upon their arrival, the Jews went through a selection process, carried out by SS doctors and wardens. Those considered fit for work were sent into the camp, where they were registered, deloused, and sent to barracks.

The rest were sent to the gas chambers. They were gassed under the guise of a harmless shower, their bodies cremated and the ashes strewn in a nearby swamp. On average, 75% of each transport was gassed immediately upon arrival. The Nazis not only ruthlessly exploited the labor of those they did not kill immediately they also looted the belongings the Jews brought with them.

Even gold fillings were extracted from the mouths of the dead by a special detachment of inmates. The personal effects the Jews brought with them were sorted by inmates and stored in an area referred to by the inmates as "Canada": the ultimate land of plenty.



On July 7, 1944, with the war turning against the Nazis, the Hungarian Head of State, Admiral Miklos Horthy, informed the Germans that the deportations of the Jews would cease - all transports came to a halt.

However, on October 15, 1944, Horthy's regime was overthrown by the Nazi-backed Arrow Cross militia and the Jews of Budapest, who had largely escaped deportation, now became Eichmann's target.

They were not to be sent to Auschwitz, but to Austria, where they would be used for slave labor. During November tens of thousands of Jews were forced out of Budapest. Due to a train shortage, they were forced to walk and thousands died en route.

In the end, out of the 6 million Jews who perished in the Holocaust, nearly one tenth of the victims were Hungarian, approximately 550,000 people.

To order the Auschwitz Album: The Story of a Transport,
please call the American Society for Yad Vashem
at 1-800-310-7495

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Founded in 1981 by a group of Holocaust survivors, and spearheaded by Eli Zborowski, the American Society for Yad Vashem works in partnership with Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority in Jerusalem to support their efforts in the areas of commemoration, education, research, capital improvements and special projects.

The Society draws support from more than 150,000 individuals nationwide. Their contributions range from a few dollars to large donations from major philanthropists, to a whole cadre of volunteers who give us the gift of time.

Yad Vashem was established in 1953 by the Israeli Parliament (Knesset), and was entrusted with the task of commemorating the six million Jews murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators. It mandates Holocaust remembrance, commemoration, and education, to ensure the lessons of the Holocaust are secured for posterity.

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