



Fatal months: Auschwitz and the end of the Second World War
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Part 1

On 27 January 1945, sometime in the afternoon, prisoners in Auschwitz saw something eerie and strange. It was a bitter cold day, under a leaden winter sky. The day the prisoners had thought about, talked about, dreamt about – during months or years of suffering – was finally here. There were screams of joy as some inmates ran towards the soldiers to hug and kiss them. Others, barely able to stand, emerged from the barracks to convince themselves that it really was true, that they were free and that the SS would never return. “We laughed and cried and could not fathom the joy of our liberation”, one of the survivors later wrote.

At the time, news of the liberation of Auschwitz barely reached the world outside. But Auschwitz was not overlooked for very long. Today, it is hard to image a time when Auschwitz was not a household name, a time when it was not the symbol of Nazi Germany, the concentration camps and the Holocaust. Indeed, Auschwitz has become a global benchmark for judging inhumanity. The UN resolution designating the day of its liberation – 27 January – as Holocaust Remembrance Day warns of the universal dangers of intolerance and prejudice. Some have stretched the significance of Auschwitz even further, using it as a universal emblem. As the historian Saul Friedländer put it, Auschwitz is the “central metaphor for evil in our time”.

As a result, Auschwitz has turned into a site with many meanings, threatening to obscure its often intricate history. As we commemorate the 75th anniversary of liberation this year, I want to take this opportunity place the camp back into history, and reflect on questions like: what was Auschwitz? How did it evolve? What was its role in the Holocaust? Above all, I want to focus on the months before and after liberation, to get a clearer sense of what it is, exactly, that we commemorate on 27 January. Before I do so, though, I want to clear up some common misconceptions about Auschwitz. First, Auschwitz is not synonymous with the Holocaust, the radical persecution and systematic murder of European Jews by the Nazi regime. The SS, which operated Auschwitz, killed about one million Jewish men, women, and children here, more than anywhere else in the Nazi Empire. Still, there was more to the Holocaust than Auschwitz. The great majority of the murdered six million Jews died elsewhere. Up to two million were killed by poison gas in out-and-out death camps – such as Treblinka – which operated independently of Auschwitz and the SS concentration camp system. Other Jewish victims were executed by Nazi killing squads in fields and forests during massacres sometimes described as the “Holocaust by bullets”, or died of illness and starvation in ghettos and forced labour camps, under infernal conditions created by the German forces.

Second, despite the pre-eminence of Auschwitz in Holocaust memory, the camp was not created for the annihilation of European Jewry. Instead, it was established in spring/summer 1940 to terrorise the Polish population and destroy the Polish resistance. Auschwitz was set up as the first SS concentration camp in Nazi-occupied Poland, following the German invasion in 1939 that marked the beginning of the Second World War. And for well over a year, Polish political prisoners made up the vast majority of the victims. Then, in autumn 1941, the surviving Polish inmates were joined by

thousands of others: Soviet POWs, sent to Auschwitz as slave labourers. The main camp's huge new extension at nearby Birkenau, where the SS would later build crematoria and gas chambers to murder the Jews of Europe, was initially earmarked for these Soviet prisoners.

Third, Auschwitz came rather late to the Holocaust. The Nazi war against the Jews intensified dramatically during the second half of 1941. By the end of the year, many hundreds of thousands of Jews had been killed in the newly conquered Soviet territories and the Nazi regime was moving toward the extermination of European Jewry as a whole. Plans were underway for regional gassing facilities on occupied Polish and Soviet territory, targeting eastern European Jews, especially those judged "unfit for work." Chelmno was the first such death camp to operate, in December 1941. But Auschwitz was not yet a Holocaust death camp. This function only emerged during spring and summer 1942: from July onwards, mass deportations from across Europe, and the murder on arrival of those judged "unfit for labour", become routine. But even then, Auschwitz was initially eclipsed by other death camps; in 1942, around 190,000 Jews died in Auschwitz, compared to over 800,000 in Treblinka. It was only later, towards the end of the Second World War, when Treblinka and the other death camps had closed down again and the majority of Jews under Nazi rule had been murdered, that Auschwitz became what the historian Peter Hayes called the "capital of the Holocaust".

Fourth, Auschwitz was singular in the Third Reich. It was the only SS concentration camp that also operated as a major Holocaust death camp. Other death camps like Treblinka only had a single function: to kill as many Jews as possible, as quickly as possible. Auschwitz, by contrast, had more than a single purpose, and held Jewish and non-Jewish prisoners alike. Auschwitz was always a site with multiple purposes, including murderous slave labour. It was this singular nature – Auschwitz as a hybrid concentration camp and major death camp – that gave rise to the notorious SS "selections" of Jewish prisoners on arrival, which started in summer 1942. Some would be registered as slaves, together with non-Jewish prisoners, and worked to death; the great majority – the young and old, the weak and sick, mothers with children – would be sent straight to specially-constructed gas chambers.

Part 2

Let us return to the 27 January 1945. As we have seen, the day of liberation has become the day we commemorate the Holocaust. But the camp Soviet soldiers encountered that day was very, very different to what it had been just a few months earlier. By January 1945, Auschwitz was no longer a huge Holocaust death camp, where thousands of Jews were murdered on a daily basis. Neither was it a vast concentration camp, where many tens of thousands of Jewish and non-Jewish prisoners toiled daily for the German war effort. The camp the Red Army liberated on 27 January was, in many ways, an empty ruin.

The SS had spent months preparing for the evacuation of the camp. If Auschwitz had to be abandoned, nothing of use was supposed to be left behind. As a result, many buildings were dismantled or destroyed. This included the big warehouse compound, next to the Birkenau gas chambers, where the belongings of murdered Jews were stored. The SS also demolished the crematoria and gas chambers. Dr Miklós Nyiszli, a Jewish pathologist, who had been forced to work as a prisoner doctor in Birkenau, watched as prisoners tore down the crematoria. "Seeing the red brick walls tumble", he later recalled, "I had a presentiment of the Third Reich's own destruction". The SS carried on its demolition job until the end. During the night of 25-26 January 1945, with the Red Army already in striking distance, it blew up the last remaining crematorium.

This was part of larger attempt to cover up the Holocaust, just as SS troops had done at other sites of Nazi mass murder. The Auschwitz SS destroyed not only the machinery of mass murder, but also

incriminating records, like deportation lists. Prisoners also had to dig up pits full of human remains, crush the bone fragments, and dump it all into a nearby river.

But the Auschwitz SS in late 1944/early 1945 was not all about camouflage and destruction. It was also determined to salvage goods, to reuse them elsewhere. This might seem absurd, given that the Allies were fast closing in on what remained of Hitler's Germany. But SS leaders could never openly acknowledge that the war was lost. And some fanatical SS men still believed that the tide would turn. And so the SS shipped out many items toward central Germany, including piles of clothes of Jews gassed in Birkenau. It also moved away building materials and technical equipment, including parts of the crematoria, which were shipped westward. Their final destination was a location near Mauthausen concentration camp, where the SS planned to rebuild at least two Birkenau crematoria.

This rebuilding process was supposed to be supervised, it seems, by Auschwitz specialists in mass murder, who were transferred to Mauthausen in January 1945. Their transfer was part of an exodus of Auschwitz staff towards the end. On 15 January 1945, the SS still counted more than 4,500 staff across the complex. These men and women oversaw the winding down of operations and the last murders in the camp, and they also still found time for fun and diversions. On 19 December 1944, less than six weeks before liberation, a Berlin dance band performed in the Auschwitz SS service club. These men and women oversaw the winding down of operations and the last murders, though they also still found time for fun and diversions: in early January 1945, senior SS officers, led by the last commandant Richard Baer, shot dozens of rabbits during a hunt in the snow, followed by food and drink in the officer mess. But when the Soviet troops arrived just a few weeks later, the SS had gone.

Almost all of the prisoners were gone as well. There were just 7,500 inmates left, only a fraction of the over 135,000 inmates who had been held across the complex the previous summer. Most of the remaining prisoners were sick and weak, and had been abandoned during the final evacuation of the camp in mid-January, when the SS forced tens of thousands onto the icy roads outside, facing a forty-mile march followed by gruelling train transports. Among the evacuated prisoners were 16-year-old Elie Wiesel, who was just skin and bones after months inside the camp, and his father Shlomo, who walked next to him, utterly exhausted. It was only because of his father, Wiesel later wrote, that he did not give up and let himself sink into the snow. Many others did, or were shot by the SS. Overall, an estimated fifteen thousand men, women, and children from the abandoned Auschwitz complex perished during these death transports in January 1945.

The Auschwitz death march has become part of Holocaust memory, at least in its broad outline. What is less well known is that the process of moving large numbers of prisoners out of Auschwitz had been going on for months. Many of these earlier transports were linked to the Holocaust in Hungary. Following their invasion of Hungary in spring 1944, the Germans quickly put a huge deportation programme in place, and between mid-May and mid-July 1944, trains rolled on an almost daily basis, bringing at least 430,000 Jews to Auschwitz. The great majority of them were declared "unfit for work" by the SS and murdered on arrival. Others, however, were selected for slave labor. Some of them remained in Auschwitz, while others were sent to camps inside the old German borders, after the Nazi regime, facing a growing shortage of labour power, reversed an earlier ban on deploying Jewish prisoners inside the German heartland.

More prisoner transports from Auschwitz followed in autumn and winter 1944, preceding the death march. As a result, the daily Auschwitz prisoner population almost halved in just a few months, dropping to 70,000 by late December. Among the prisoners who had left Auschwitz in this period were Anne Frank and her older sister, Margot, who had been forced on a deportation train, with around 1,000 others selected for slave labour, and taken from Auschwitz to Bergen-Belsen.

As a result of these deportations and the later death march, many Auschwitz barracks stood empty when the Red Army arrived. Soviet soldiers found a largely deserted complex, stripped bare and broken down, without SS staff and with few survivors. This was Auschwitz on 27 January 1945, the day the camp ceased to exist. But as we will see next, the end of Auschwitz does not mean that the Holocaust ended this day, or that the suffering of its former inmates was over.

Part 3

In January 1945, tens of thousands former Auschwitz prisoners were held in other SS concentration camps, following earlier deportations. More joined them as the survivors of the death march arrived. On 27 January, for example, the day of liberation, a transport of male prisoners reached Buchenwald, more than a week after leaving Auschwitz; even the Buchenwald SS doctor conceded that their physical condition was “poor”. These sick and exhausted men from Auschwitz joined more than 100,000 prisoners in Buchenwald, the largest remaining concentration camp complex. Around one in three of these prisoners was Jewish, mostly from Hungary or Poland; and for them, as well as many other inmates, the end of suffering was still a long way off.

The most lethal spaces inside the remaining camps were special compounds for invalids, where the SS left ill prisoners to die. Among the worst such compounds was the so-called “little camp” in Buchenwald, which was desperately overcrowded with starving and sick prisoners, covered in sores, wounds, dirt, vermin and excrement. Between January and April 1945, more than 5,000 prisoners died inside, including recent arrivals from Auschwitz. One of the victims was Shlomo Wiesel, who had survived the death march, only to die in Buchenwald. His son Elie later said that Buchenwald, which had promised to be an improvement on Auschwitz, turned out to be much the same: “At first, the little camp was almost worse for me than Auschwitz.”

Camps other than Buchenwald also became disaster zones. Never before in the history of the SS concentration camps would so many inmates perish from disease and deprivation than in the final months of the war. The deadliest camp of them all was Bergen-Belsen. The camp doubled in size in just eight weeks, to over 40,000 prisoners by early March 1945, and as the camp grew, so did hunger, illness and death. In March 1945 alone, more than 18,000 prisoners perished in Bergen-Belsen, including numerous survivors of Auschwitz. Among them were Anne and Margot Frank.

In addition to death by deprivation, the Camp SS also continued to execute prisoners en masse. In Ravensbrück, for example, the first purpose-built SS camp for women, the SS started to operate a gas chamber around late January/early February 1945. A former SS officer later testified that 150 women were forced into the chamber at any one time. Then the gas was inserted. “After two or three minutes, it was quiet inside...”, the SS officer claimed. This officer was Johann Schwarzhuber, who had recently arrived in Ravensbrück, after having served for several years in Auschwitz. He was surrounded by familiar faces from Auschwitz, killing experts dispatched to help decimate supposedly dangerous and sick prisoners. They were led by none other than Rudolf Höss, the first Auschwitz commandant, who had appeared in Ravensbrück in late 1944.

Former Auschwitz staff also played a prominent role in other SS concentration camps in 1945. Richard Baer, for example, whom we last met on the rabbit hunt across the frozen fields around Auschwitz, was appointed as commandant of Dora concentration camp, where he oversaw an increase of violence. Another new commandant, Josef Kramer in Bergen-Belsen, had arrived via Auschwitz as well, followed by other veterans of the camp.

One day in the previous summer – in July 1944 – Kramer, Baer, Höss and other Auschwitz staff had gathered – all smiles – at the rustic SS retreat *Solahütte*, some 30 kilometres outside the camp, to

toast the mass murder of Hungarian Jews. Several months on, Auschwitz was no more, but these men still served in the Camp SS, presiding over the final cataclysm of violence in camps like Bergen-Belsen and Ravensbrück. Even after its demise, then, Auschwitz still cast a long shadow over the SS concentration camp system.

This shadow was not lifted until the Allies liberated the last camps and inmates in April and early May 1945. SS killings continued until the end, inside the camps and on further death marches and transports, as the SS forced hundreds of thousands of prisoners onto the road once more. Some of the killers had first become mass murderers back in Auschwitz – men like Otto Moll, the former chief of the Birkenau crematorium complex. His superiors clearly valued Moll's expertise in mass extermination and put him in charge, in early 1945, of a mobile killing unit made up of other Birkenau veterans. This unit participated in murders in Ravensbrück and elsewhere, before Moll moved onto to a large Dachau satellite camp complex, where Jewish prisoners knew him as the "henchman from Auschwitz." When Dachau was partially abandoned in April 1945, Moll participated in the death march, where witnesses saw him beat up and shoot numerous prisoners who collapsed from exhaustion.

Part 4

In recent decades, Auschwitz has become the focal point for remembrance of the **Holocaust**. There are very good reasons for this. Because of its singular nature, Auschwitz captures many different facets of the Holocaust. It also highlights the immense scale of the Holocaust, with more Jews murdered inside than in any other single place in Nazi-controlled Europe. And Auschwitz encapsulates the vast reach of the Holocaust: only in Auschwitz did the SS systematically kill Jews from all across the continent.

But the central place of Auschwitz in our commemoration of the Holocaust should not obscure the fate of victims elsewhere: there are other places, and other days, which should also be part of commemoration. As for Auschwitz itself, we should remember that the 27 January 1945, the day of liberation, was only one of well over 1,500 days of degradation, destruction and death. Each single day brought more suffering, and one could easily think of other days that capture the essence of Auschwitz more fully than its last one, when the camp was all but an empty shell, and a tiny fraction of the estimated 1.3 million men, women and children deported to the camp was liberated.

Finally, we must remember that the end of Auschwitz did not mean the end of suffering for Jews and other prisoners in the SS camps. The Nazi regime never abandoned the "Final Solution", and the murder of Jews continued, even after the gassings in Auschwitz had stopped. Indeed, Auschwitz lived on for months after its liberation, elsewhere, through its dispersed staff and prisoners. The great majority of Auschwitz survivors were not liberated in Auschwitz itself, but in other camps, months later, after more indescribable suffering. Only the Allied victory put an end to SS killings. The last major camp to be liberated was Ebensee.

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Further Reading

Histories

Arad, Y., *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka* (1999)

Hayes, P., *Why? Explaining the Holocaust* (2017)

Rees, L., *Auschwitz: The Nazis & the "Final Solution"* (2005)

Steinbacher, S., *Auschwitz: A History* (2005)

Wachsmann, N., *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps* (2015)

Memoirs

Gradowski, Z., *From the Heart of Hell* (2017)

Levi, P., *If This Is a Man/The Truce* (1987)

Sonnino, P., *This Has Happened: An Italian Family in Auschwitz* (2009)

Wiesel, E., *All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs* (1997)

Question and Answers Session

How should we classify Majdanek, particularly when we consider its gas chamber and 'Operation Harvest Festival' in 1943?

Majdanek was the only other camp to operate simultaneously as a SS concentration camp and a Holocaust death camp. It did so for a shorter period of time than Auschwitz, however, and played a lesser role in genocide (an estimated 60,000 Jews were murdered in Majdanek, compared to around one million in Auschwitz).

Could you talk about Witold Pilecki? The man who voluntarily entered Auschwitz?

Witold Pilecki was a captain in the Polish army, who let himself be arrested by the Nazi occupiers in Warsaw in 1940 and later became an important figure in the underground prisoner resistance in Auschwitz. He escaped in 1943, and wrote a powerful early account of Nazi terror inside the camp – only to be executed, under the new Polish regime after the war, for anti-communist resistance.

Many years ago I met a survivor of Auschwitz. He showed me the tattoo on his left arm. Was Auschwitz the only camp that tattooed the worker prisoners?

Yes, Auschwitz was unique in this regard. The Auschwitz SS began to tattoo registered prisoners in late 1941, starting with Soviet inmates, to help the perpetrators identify inmates after their deaths. This practice was later extended to other Auschwitz prisoner groups, though German inmates were not normally tattooed (except for German Jews).

Will you be commenting on the Nazi doctors who carried out medical experiments on Jewish prisoners?

Not in this lecture, but I have written about it in chapter 8 of my history of the Nazi concentration camps, *KL* (2015), in case you want to read more.