

Reading 9B

BACKGROUND TO AUSCHWITZ

First, read the questions that precede the essay “Background to Auschwitz.” Then, read the essay. Finally, answer the question on a separate sheet to paper. The assignment should be handed in the following day.

Questions

1. Why was Auschwitz chosen as a site for a concentration camp?
2. How many camps were at Auschwitz, and how did they differ from each other?
3. Why were doctors important at the arrival of the trains at Auschwitz?
4. What was Zyklon B?
5. Approximately how many Jews were killed at Auschwitz?
6. Why were Jews and Gypsies murdered at Auschwitz?

BACKGROUND TO AUSCHWITZ

The small town of Oswiecim {*os-svee-chem*}, called Auschwitz in German, was located in Upper Silesia, Poland. During World War I, stables were converted into Polish army barracks just outside the town. Late in 1940, the Reichsfuehrer SS, Heinrich Himmler, decided to make use of the already constructed army barracks and selected Auschwitz to serve as a concentration camp—a place to concentrate “enemies of the Reich.” From a relatively small area located on a swamp, Auschwitz would be expanded to 440 acres, housing close to 200,000 prisoners. It is unlikely that even Himmler foresaw this in 1940. In June 1941, Himmler told Rudolf Hoess, Commandant of Auschwitz, that Auschwitz had been selected as the main operations center for the murder of Europe’s Jews.

Auschwitz was divided into three camps. Each camp housed thousands of prisoners, and each camp had a different function. Auschwitz I remained a concentration camp, housing political prisoners and “criminals” as defined by the German authorities. Auschwitz II-Birkenau was constructed between the end of 1941 and the middle of 1942 and became the death camp. Auschwitz III-Monowitz, where slave laborers were constructing what was to be the largest synthetic rubber factory in the world, was the I.G. Farben Buna plant. (I.G. Farben was the largest chemical-industrial conglomerate in the world. Buna was the name given to the synthetic rubber that was to be produced to make Germany self-sufficient in the war.) Auschwitz also included some 35 smaller labor camps within a 50-mile radius.

Trains arrived regularly at Auschwitz-Birkenau carrying cattle cars crammed with Jews from all parts of Europe. The Jews were driven off the trains onto a long railroad platform, and forced to line up and move toward the end of the platform where several SS men, directed by doctors, would determine who seemed capable of working and who would be “non-productive.” At this selection process, these men sent people directly to their deaths with a flick of the thumb or wrist or a nod of the head. The “non-productive” category automatically included children under age 16 and adults over age 40, cripples, the mentally deficient, those already emaciated from starvation, mothers carrying small children and others deemed “non-productive” for no apparent reason.

Those who survived the selection were forced to do slave labor at Auschwitz III-Monowitz or at one of the smaller labor camps. Some were selected for the *Sonderkommando* (special duty). They were used to clear gas chambers of dead bodies and carry them to the crematoria to be burned. Most of these men were killed after three months when they were replaced by new prisoners. Other prisoners were given jobs in the camp such as kitchen or latrine duty. Those needed by the SS, such as carpenters or physicians, also were spared for a time. All prisoners were underfed and lived under miserable conditions. The SS doctors had calculated the number of calories given to prisoners. They rationed food so that no prisoner would survive more than three months. This led to savage behavior—stealing from other prisoners and secretly trying to steal from garbage heaps—surviving by any means.

The first experiments with a prussic acid gas called Zyklon B, previously used as insecticide, took place in September 1941. Before long, at Auschwitz-Birkenau, there were four enormous gas chambers, which would be used to murder 15,000 people daily. Their attached crematoria were used for disposing of the bodies. By the end of 1944, when Auschwitz was abandoned to the oncoming Russian armies, it is estimated that 1.1 million Jews had died of disease or starvation, or had been worked to death, gassed, shot, hung, injected with lethal drugs or experimentally tortured. Over 30,000 non-Jewish Polish prisoners were also murdered at Auschwitz, along with thousands of other political or national enemies of Germany. More than 250,000 Gypsies were killed by the Nazis, although not all at Auschwitz. Jews and Gypsies were to be annihilated simply because they existed.