

The First Prisoners of KL Auschwitz

On 14 June 1940, the Germans sent the first transport from Tarnów prison to Auschwitz Concentration Camp – a group of 728 Poles and a small group of Polish Jews. Since 2006, 14 June has been the National Day of Remembrance for Victims of the German Nazi Concentration Camps and Death Camps.

They were still on the train. Several hours earlier they had been in the prison in Tarnów. Perhaps they thought they were going to another prison? Maybe a camp? They couldn't have known what was going to happen to them soon. Even less could they have foreseen the future – it was particularly difficult during the war. Nevertheless, they were headed for a destination – one that was not chosen by them but by the Germans. This is how Kazimierz Albin [born 7 June 1920; camp number: 118] remembered this moment: “The train slowly took a large turn and suddenly stopped”. The first impressions were striking: “From the windows of the wagon we could see a large building surrounded by a barbed-wire fence and guard booths” – recalled Jerzy Bogusz [27 September 1921; 61] – Two strangely dressed men were standing on the main road. They wore striped trousers and shirts, and they held bars in their hands”. Stanisław Kobylański [3 May 1923; 575] reacted differently – he found this strange similar to pyjamas. “They brought us to a hospital or a mental institution, he continued. The second thought seemed more probable to me as before the war such white and blue striped clothes were worn in hospitals by the mentally ill”. The train with the prisoners stopped just on the outskirts of Oświęcim. They were separated from the buildings of the former military barracks by barbed wire and railway tracks leading to the buildings. Perhaps fear and anxiety were born in the minds of the convicts: the insecurity of the present and the uncertainty of tomorrow. Perhaps they subconsciously sensed their validity. They reached the camp...

Did they have to? In the opinion of the occupant, they were a threat to the “German order” being forced on Polish soil. They were called “political prisoners”. Was it a right term? They were mostly young people. They were teenagers. Some of them were just finishing schools, gaining qualifications. They didn't manage to reach adulthood. As one of the prisoners, Bogumił

Antoniewicz [10 June 1915; 517], recalled, “in terms of social background, education and profession, we weren't a uniform group”. Some were neighbours. Others knew each other from town suburbs or neighbouring villages in Małopolska. There were several Jews in that transport. One of them was Sack Naftali: “He took his final high schools exams with me – remembered Jerzy Korczowski [20 November 1920; 166] – and he was on the same list as Poles, his schoolmates”. Regardless of how different these people were, there was one thing they certainly had in common – Polish citizenship.

The “action” started to gain momentum, and the space was filled with German screams and curses. This is how Kazimierz Tokarz [12 November 1920; 282] remembered the first words he heard: “Cursed Poles. Bandits. Pig dogs. Everybody out!” Concerned about the pace of events Jerzy Bielecki [28 March 1921; 243] stated: “Hell has begun. It cannot be described otherwise”. [12; 206-207] Those people, dressed in strange uniforms, having been as if in lethargy a while before, woke up and, with the support of the SS men, set off in the direction of those getting off. Those moments were recalled by Wiesław Kielar [12 August 1919; 290]: “Quickly, the shirts and trousers turned into sweat and blood-soaked rags”.

There was supposed to be an order. Everyone lined up. Stand at attention: listen to the speech of the camp director, SS man Karl Fritzsch. Its content left no doubt: “You have not come to a sanatorium, but to a German concentration camp from which the only way out is through the chimney. If anybody doesn't like it, you can go throw yourself on the barbed wire right now. If there are any Jews in this transport, they have the right to live no longer than two weeks, priests a month, and the rest—three months.” [11;44-77] After the “assembly”, the prisoners were deprived of all property, shaved, and registered. Their age didn't matter anymore. Names have been replaced by numbers. They could no longer write their own stories. They have become a human material kept (temporarily, as the nearest future showed) in the most atrocious German concentration and extermination camp on Polish soil: KL Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Particularly heavy traffic started in the spring of 1940. The first ones to appear were the so called “SS experts”. They were to assess the value of the place and the sense of creating a camp there. They found that the buildings of the military barracks were in ruin and the nearby riverside land

was waterlogged. Ultimately, however, the location – the nearby railway junctions and the appropriate distance from the town – gave the place a special value: it made it possible to conceal the actual role of the place. From the first days of April, work began to adapt the area to serve as a concentration camp. The first supervisors also appeared – fifteen SS men. Shortly afterwards, in the first days of May, the first forty Polish prisoners were transported from KL Dachau to Auschwitz. Temporarily. As a slave labour force, they erected barbed-wire fences surrounding the buildings of the former barracks. In the third quarter of this month, thirty Germans joined the group of prisoners: criminals who had previously been in KL Sachsenhausen. They were ready. They were expecting the first transport of prisoners. Polish prisoners. In the end, they were to be the proof and justification of the functions assigned to German criminals. At the same time, they were an extension of the power of the camp SS men: “They identified their position with that of the SS men, which led to the elimination of all moral scruples towards the subordinate prisoners.” [6;12] They proved this on June 14 1940, when the Polish prisoners arrived. On that day, the Poles who were to return to KL Dachau thought: would it be worth staying with our own? This determination was quickly undermined by SS man Beck who supervised them, and who revealed the future of this place: “There will be hell on earth in this camp.” [6;15]

There was another group of people in Oświęcim – Jews. At the end of the 1930s, they constituted at least half of the town’s population. From 4 September 1939 (the entry of German troops and the taking over of the town), until 9 April 1941 (forced deportation of the last Jews), this population was repressed, starting from slave labour (several hundred people deported to camps in Germany; from April to June 1940 “the SS men took 100 – 200 Jewish men to work on the renovation of the barracks”) [5], through internal resettlement and looting of property, ending with physical and mental abuse of the victims (“The SS men ordered the Jews to kneel, put their beards on bricks and cut them off, while beating and kicking them at the same time”) [4]. Although since the outbreak of the war there has been a constant movement of people in general, especially Jews – aware of the Nazi threat – seeking shelter in the territories of the USSR, their numbers have not changed significantly. This is due to the fact that the places of those who left Oświęcim were taken by Jews from nearby, smaller centres. The future of those who had “always” been in the town, as well as the future of “war” newcomers, was characterised by temporariness. At first, when the idea of creating the camp turned into action, the Germans

ordered the Jews to leave the suburbs, the so-called Zasole. A year later, in April 1941, all Jews living in Oświęcim were displaced to Upper Silesian centres. [1-5] Paweł Gliksman, who lived in Oświęcim at the time, wrote: "On 9 April, Oświęcim was Judenrein [cleansed of Jews]". [5] Tauba Grunn was one of the last to leave the town. Years later, she recalled: "It was hard for us to leave our family home and go on a wandering trip, but at the same time, a certain feeling of relief took hold of everyone when the train set off from this terrible town, to which some returned, but already after death". [1]

The first, "political" prisoners transported to KL Auschwitz on June 14, were made aware of why they had been brought there from the very beginning. They got a foretaste in the first days. The prisoners subjected to the authority of the Germans – SS men and Kapos – were forced to carry out their orders: "fall", "rise", "frog jumps", "crawl" (referred to as "sport"), learn German marching songs, forms of reporting, the way of putting on and taking off caps at the command. [6;16] Violence was the means to encourage obedience. The basis for their further existence was supposed to be work: "It serves to teach you order and absolute rigour" – announced Karl Fritzsch – "There are no sick people here, you are either alive or dead". [11;50] After the so-called quarantine, prisoners were directed to the proper camp. Above the entrance gate they saw a sign: "Arbeit macht frei [work sets you free]." The deceptive, mocking and false nature of this slogan was proved by the ruthless treatment of prisoners. For it was not work, but terror used against them from the very beginning that served to break the ability to resist. [8;217. Also: 9;230-233] Although in modern times KL Auschwitz is one of the symbols of the Holocaust, it was originally founded with the idea of fighting the disobedience of the defeated: the citizens of the defeated Second Polish Republic...

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Also: <http://www.auschwitz.org/>, <http://www.chsro.pl/>

Photo: Tarnów railway station 14 June 1940 (public domain)

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