

ASHES OF HELL

On 27th January 1945, the Soviet Red Army liberated the largest Nazi extermination camp, Auschwitz-Birkenau (Oświęcim-Brzezinka), located near Kraków, Poland. In this "death factory," the final destination for countless transport trains from all across Europe, more than a million people were killed or died during the camp's operation over a span of just over four years. The majority of the victims were Jews, but many other nationalities were also murdered. As such, Auschwitz is often used as a synonym for Nazi concentration and extermination camps, as a symbol of the Holocaust, and as an embodiment of Nazi ideology of evil. According to British historian Tony Judt, "Auschwitz is the most important thing to know about the Second World War."

In the following months, the liberation of numerous other Nazi concentration and extermination camp complexes took place. On 29th April 1945, the Americans liberated the oldest camp, Dachau, and the last camp to be liberated was Mauthausen on 7th May 1945. Mauthausen also had a branch in Ljubelj, on Slovenian territory. The horrors of complete dehumanization, torment, and physical extermination of the camp inmates were revealed. Among the victims were many Slovenians, including women.

The first Slovenians in Nazi concentration camps were Carinthian Slovenians and former Spanish fighters who had been captured in France. During the war, captured members and collaborators of the resistance and partisan movements, along with their families, were gradually sent to concentration camps from Gestapo prisons in occupied Styria and Upper Carniola. In late August 1941, the first large group of prisoners was transported to Mauthausen, and from the autumn of the same year, transports began taking Slovenians to Auschwitz. In June 1942, the first two Slovenian women arrived there, and from then on, the camp became the site of mass deportations of Slovenian women and girls. In August 1942, four transports left Celje for Auschwitz, carrying 394 women and 139 men. More than half of them died in the camp by the end of the same year.

Women were sent in large numbers to the Ravensbrück camp, while the majority of Slovenian men were imprisoned in Dachau, Mauthausen, the Risiera di San Sabba in Trieste, Buchenwald, and Flossenbürg. In these and other camps, over 21.000 men and women from Slovenia suffered. Nearly 8.000 of them died. In Dachau, more than 1.500 died; nearly the same number in Mauthausen and its subcamps; and more than 1.700, including 430 Slovenian Jews, in Auschwitz and Birkenau. They were murdered in gas chambers or died due to direct violence and disease. Their bodies were burned in crematoria, and the ashes were discarded.

Thousands more Slovenian women and men suffered and died in Croatian (Ustaše) concentration camps such as Jasenovac, as well as on the islands of Rab and Gonars, and in other Italian fascist camps.

The Dobrotinšek Family

The Dobrotinšek farm provided shelter to the first partisan fighters in Styria. Three sons were shot as hostages in July 1942, while the fourth son, the mother, and two daughters were deported to Auschwitz a month later. The mother and the eldest daughter died in Auschwitz, while the son was released from Auschwitz in 1944 and later fell in the partisans. Only two daughters survived the war. One returned from Auschwitz, and the youngest was freed from a children's camp in Saldenburg.

The Poljanšek Family

The Poljanšek family moved to Celje from Idrija. The son was shot as a hostage in June 1942 for his involvement in the resistance movement. The father, mother, and sister were taken to Auschwitz, while their five-month-old granddaughter was sent to a children's home organized by the Lebensborn program.

Marija Goručan

Marija Goručan, a worker from Celje, born in 1919, died on 2nd November 1942 in Auschwitz. Her five-month-old son, Vili, was kidnapped and included in the Lebensborn program, where he was adopted. Under the name

Haymo Heyder, he lived in Costa Rica and only saw a photo of his biological mother near the end of his life, in 2022.

The Rode Family

Mother Marica and daughters Marica and Marija Rode from Celje. Members of the resistance movement gathered and hid at their home. All three survived Auschwitz.

"Already the reception at the station foretold a terrible future for us. The guards relentlessly struck us on our dirty and exhausted faces. This is when we first encountered the activity of the trained SS dogs, which they brought for the reception. They viciously lunged at us, so no one dared to move. From the station, we began walking down a dusty road. Our feet sank into the dirty dust up to our ankles. On the road, we encountered work columns dressed in filthy, loose rags, so you couldn't even tell their colour. In fact, they were just skeletons moving at command. Soon, in the distance, we saw the dirty barracks surrounded by double barbed wire. At every corner and every few meters, there were watchtowers with machine guns aimed at us. Above the entrance doors, we saw the sign "Arbeit macht frei." We all shook our heads and exchanged questioning glances, but our German was too weak to understand the meaning of this slogan. After all the camp formalities, we finally entered the proper camp road. Here, too, we were greeted with an unforgettable sight. Some dead bodies lay by the road in impossible positions. They were surrounded by millions of flies. The road was covered with sharp stones and glass, but the prisoners walked barefoot on it. /.../ They stripped us completely and took all our belongings. After several hours of being naked, they dressed us in rough striped uniforms made from nettle fibers. They tattooed numbers on our left arms, to erase the concept of "human" from our minds. /.../ The food was so poor that we quickly lost our physical resistance. We were also horribly tormented by bloody diarrhea, which claimed many prisoners. This disease spread an indescribable stench. There were no medicines. Our numbers rapidly dwindled. Every day, death claimed a few of our companions, especially the elderly and the young. Many were also destroyed by mental illness due to the unknown fate of their children or relatives. Among us were entire families. There were many mothers with one daughter, and these women soon weakened watching their child's suffering. Now I understand that mothers were the greatest sufferers, for I was still a 17-year-old child at that time."

(Ivanka Žagar – Milovanović, Auschwitz, MnZC archive)