

**Bearing Witness:  
The Nazi Preparation, Deportation, and Genocide of Hungarian Jews**



The railroad leading to the Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration Camp

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30 March 2022

The Barstow School

Word Count: 988

**“For evil to flourish, it only requires good men to do nothing.”<sup>1</sup>**

Despite the long and gruesome conflict of World War II seemingly winding down by 1944, the Nazis, led by party leader Adolf Hitler, continued with their evil and criminal plans to fully implement the “Final Solution,” the answer to the Nazi’s Jewish Question. The Kingdom of Hungary, up until that point, had been somewhat of a safe haven for Jewish peoples. Hungary, an Axis power since 1940, remained semi-autonomous under the rule of Prime Minister Miklós Kállay and regent Miklós Horthy. This arrangement, therefore, exempted Jews from deportation, but not discriminatory laws and oppression. In 1944, Hungary had the largest remaining intact Jewish population in Europe, around 825,000, many of whom had fled from elsewhere in Europe to the relative safety of Hungary. Kállay sought peace negotiations with the Allies while fighting the USSR, increasing Germany’s suspicion of Kállay’s loyalty to their alliance. Hungary had also resisted Hitler’s earlier demands. Germany, hence, invaded Hungary on March 19, 1944, and installed a Nazi puppet government led by Döme Sztójay, but permitted regent Horthy to stay in power. Sztójay quickly legalized the Arrow Cross Party, known for its anti-Semitic and extremely nationalist views, similar to the Nazis. He also empowered many politicians known for their hatred of Jews and the Roma people, such as like László Endre and László Bakó who were given control of the Ministry of the Interior. These domestic preparations laid the foundation for the deportation and genocide of Hungarian Jews. However, greater preparations were needed to create a Jewish “hell on Earth,” a place that attests to man’s inhumanity towards his fellow people: Auschwitz-Birkenau.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Wiesenthal - Holocaust survivor

<sup>2</sup> “German Troops Occupy Hungary.” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accessed March 27, 2022. <https://www.ushmm.org/learn/timeline-of-events/1942-1945/german-troops-occupy-hungary>

Such an organized killing campaign did not occur by chance: it took extensive planning, building, and negotiations on the part of the Nazi Party. The yellow Star of David identification was implemented in Hungary, as well as ghettoization laws, in as few as eight weeks. Adolf Eichmann began supervising deportations that began on May 14, 1944. Agreements were made with the Kassa Railroad company to transport Jews from Budapest. Meanwhile, in Poland, preparations began in the Auschwitz camp. Exterminatory machinery was revamped and expanded “in anticipation of the daily arrivals of 12,000 to 14,000 Jews from Hungary.”<sup>3</sup> In the Spring of 1944, a railroad spur was added which led directly to the camp for a more efficient “selection” process of prisoners’ fates. About 80% of prisoners were gassed upon arrival.<sup>4</sup> The electric fence surrounding the camp was now left on during the day, while previously just at night, to counter any attempts of escape. SS Staff was reinforced and Rudolf Höss was given control of Auschwitz with a goal of accelerating the killing of Hungarian Jews: Operation Höss was underway.<sup>5</sup> This major undertaking reveals how many people took part in this genocide as these crimes could not be committed by one man alone. The amount of preparation required for the killing of hundreds of thousands of people affirms the true evil of the Nazi Party.

One Jewish prisoner, Filip Müller, testified about Auschwitz’s brutal conditions forced upon labor prisoners. He particularly cited “the daily indications of impending disasters” that occurred in preparation for the arrival of Hungarian Jews.<sup>6</sup> Müller and his fellow working prisoners were instructed to dig large pits in order to burn the bodies from the gas chambers, as the crematoriums were too small. Other prisoners, he noted, were “laying railway tracks right up

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<sup>3</sup> Excerpts from Gutman, Yisrael and Michael Berenbaum. “Hungarian Jews” in *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*. Chapter 20 “Hungarian Jews” by Randolph L. Braham. Pages 462-463.

<sup>4</sup> Frances Sternberg. “The Auschwitz Album.” Midwest Center for Holocaust Education, Leawood, KS.

<sup>5</sup> Excerpts from Czech, Danuta. *Auschwitz Chronicle 1939-1945: From the Archives of the Auschwitz Memorial and the German Federal Archives*. 1989.

<sup>6</sup> Filip Müller. *Eyewitness Auschwitz: Three Years in the Gas Chambers*. Chicago; Ivan R. Dee, 1979.

to [the] crematories... in order to provide a direct link between the death factories.”<sup>7</sup> All preparations were made under the time constraint of an approaching two-prong war: the Soviets were quickly approaching Romania from the east while the Western Front Allies had successfully landed on the beaches of Normandy on June 6, 1944. Müller and other prisoners were part of a secret resistance network. Two prisoners, Mordowicz and Rosin, escaped to report about the Nazi crimes and plans to murder Hungarian Jews. Their report was later combined with the famous Vrba-Wetzler report to form a brochure entitled *German Extermination Camps - Auschwitz and Birkenau*.<sup>8</sup> The contents of this report, published in many Allied countries, along with an Allied bombing of Budapest, convinced regent Horthy to stop the deportations of Jews. However, these efforts were all too late, as by this time, hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews had already been deported, most subsequently gassed upon arrival to Auschwitz. Müller’s testimony displayed the degree of Nazi cruelty by forcing prisoners to dig massive graves for the burning of victims’ bodies. However, the individual work of resistance groups, as well as the bravery of camp escapees to share information, reminds us that even in the worst circumstances the human spirit perseveres in the hopes of ending evil.

Today, the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp still stands in Poland as a memorial and museum. Despite reminding visitors of this tragic part of human history, Auschwitz’s preservation is crucial to future generations in remembering these atrocities. Keeping these memories alive are key to humanity’s hopes of never repeating such crimes, but also to pay respect to the millions of lives lost. As time progresses, the generation of Auschwitz survivors is slowly disappearing, making it our responsibility to preserve its meaning to ensure a different and better future. By preserving the camp and its artifacts, visitors are forced to grapple with the

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<sup>7</sup> Müller. *Eyewitness Auschwitz: Three Years in the Gas Chambers*. Chicago.

<sup>8</sup> Rudolf Vrba and Alfréd Wetzler. “The Vrba-Wetzler Report.” *Auschwitz Protocols*. The FDR Library and Museum, Hyde Park, NY.

true evils of the Nazis while asking themselves questions about human rights, anti-Semitism, and a history of hostility towards those different from themselves. Auschwitz teaches visitors how extremism can quickly consume society and how a group of people can be scapegoated through no fault of their own. As humans, it is our shared responsibility to remember and completely acknowledge all aspects of our dark past; although we can not unlive it, we must face these truths in order to prevent its repetition. As Auschwitz survivor Henry Appel once said, “There is only one thing worse than Auschwitz itself...and that is if the world forgets there was such a place.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Henry Appel: Auschwitz Survivor - The Responsibility of Auschwitz-Birkenau: Our Responsibility for Future Generations. The Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation, Warsaw, Poland.

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