

# Gas Chambers and Crematoria

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## **Crematorium I**

The so-called old crematorium in Auschwitz, later designated as crematorium I, was initially designed for burning the bodies of prisoners who died a natural death or were killed or executed. The crematorium also was used to incinerate the bodies of prisoners from Birkenau and the satellite camps. Construction began in early July 1940, when a building that had served as a depot before the war was remodeled. The crematorium was put into operation in September 1940. Until that time, the bodies of dead prisoners were shipped off to Gliwice and incinerated in the municipal crematorium.

The extant plan, dated September 25, 1941, shows that the crematorium building was 26.57 meters long, 14.61m wide, and about 3m high. It had one entrance on the northwest side and included a furnace room with three two-retort furnaces and a charnel house that was 78.2sq m (17m in length and 4.6m in width). The concrete roof was flat. The building had earth embankments on three sides with openings for the window of the coke plant (through which coke was thrown inside). There were two windows in the furnace room that were probably used to lower the temperature inside the building. An external chimney was connected to the furnaces by underground flues. The entrance to the building was camouflaged by a concrete-slab wall several meters high that enclosed a courtyard. Two massive gates, made of wooden beams, led to the courtyard. In front of the entrance were meticulously kept flowerbeds. The crematorium was screened from view from the camp by a one-story building that housed the SS hospital. The east and north sides were screened by the barracks of the political department and camp workshops. According to official German figures, the “capacity” of the expanded crematorium was 340 bodies in 24 hours. Crematorium I operated until July 1942, with an interlude at the turn of 1941-1942 for the construction of a third furnace.

The gas chamber attached to crematorium I operated until fall 1942. The last victims were several hundred prisoners of the Sonderkommando in Birkenau who were employed in the killing operations. They were gassed in early December 1942. Their murder was but one of a series of mass murders of Sonderkommando prisoners, doomed as witnesses and executors of Nazi crimes. One of the handful of Sonderkommando prisoners who survived the successive hecatombs, Mueller, serviced crematorium I from May 1942 to July 1943. He concluded on the basis of personal observation that several tens of thousands of Jews from Upper Silesia, Slovakia, France, Holland, Yugoslavia, and the ghettos of Theresienstadt, Ciechanow, and Grodno perished there.

## **Bunkers – Provisional Gas Chambers**

In the first months of 1942, the gassing operation was extended to nearby Birkenau owing to the small capacity of the gas chamber and ovens in Auschwitz and the difficulties in camouflaging the proceedings. The move signaled the implementation of the Nazi plan to exterminate European Jews and coincided with the arrival of the first Jewish transports. Construction of the new camp had been under way since October 1941.

Initially the victims were gassed in one gas chamber. By mid-1942, the mass murders took place in two provisional gas chambers that were installed in the cottages of two peasants, Harmata and Wichaj, who had been evicted earlier.

The building in which the first gas chamber was installed, called bunker 1 by the SS men, had been earmarked for that purpose the previous year, when Eichmann first visited Auschwitz. It was an un-plastered brick building with a tile roof (which explains its nickname, the “little red house”). It measured 15m long and 6.3m wide. As part of the remodeling, its windows were bricked up. Only small openings remained, which could be closed with flaps sealed at the edges with felt. The number of inner rooms was reduced from four to two. Each had only one door with a sign “Zur Desinfektion” (To Disinfection). The doors were made of wooden beams and sealed at the edges with felt. There were no peepholes. The doors could be shut by tightening two bolts that doubled as door handles. The interior walls of the two rooms were painted white, and the floors were strewn with sawdust. The building was surrounded by fruit trees. Nearby stood a barn and two barracks that were constructed during the conversion work.

Bunker 2 was brought into operation several months later. It was housed in a brick building that was thatched and plastered (and therefore nicknamed by the prisoners the “little white house”). It was bigger than the first building, measuring 17.07m by 8.34m. Like the first building, its windows were bricked up, with only small openings covered with wooden flaps. It had four rooms of different sizes, each with its own entrance and exit. The doors were the same as the doors in bunker 1. As part of the conversion work the wooden ceiling was replaced with concrete.

The new gas chambers were the sites of systematic and unceasing murder of Jews who were brought in mass transports from various German-occupied European countries. On the loading ramp, in the process called “selections”, some of the men and women were picked for work in the camp. But the majority of the prisoners, including all the elderly, the children, and many women, were consigned for immediate extermination.

Bunkers 1 and 2 were surrounded on all sides by woods. Three barracks that served as dressing rooms were nearby. Mass graves, screened from view by hedges, were located several dozen to several hundred meters from both gas chambers. They were later replaced by

incinerating pits. Small trolleys or flat-bed trucks that rolled on narrow-gauge tracks transported the corpses from the gas chambers to the pits.

Upon arrival, the victims were told that before taking up residence in the camp they had to go to the bath and undergo delousing. They were also told to remember the spot where they left their effects. They were told to undress, either in the barracks or outside behind hedges. From there, under a rain of blows and attack dogs, they were chased into the gas chamber. Those who could not be accommodated were shot, or in instances where there were a large number of people, they were held naked in the barracks until the gas chamber was emptied.

Once the gas chamber was full (according to Hoess, bunker 1 could hold 800 people and bunker 2 about 1,200), the gas-proof doors were screwed shut and the trained SS disinfectors wearing gas masks discharged the contents of Zyklon B cans into each bunker room through vents in the side walls. All the victims were dead within several minutes.

The gas chamber was opened a half-hour after the gas was administered to ensure there were no survivors. When the pace of incoming transports slowed, the bodies of the victims who were gassed at night or late in the evening remained in the bunkers under SS guard until morning. Only then were the doors opened, the premises aired, and the Sonderkommando prisoners brought in to remove the bodies.

In the spring of 1943, with the launching of new gas chambers and crematoria, the two bunkers were shut down. Shortly thereafter, bunker 1 and the nearby barracks were dismantled. The incineration pits were filled in with earth and leveled. The same work was performed on the pits and barracks of bunker 2, but the bunker itself was left intact. It was brought into operation again in May 1944 during the extermination of Hungarian Jews. At that time several incineration pits were re-excavated and new barracks for undressing were constructed.

The bunker was operative until the fall of 1944. It was dismantled when the gassing was discontinued that November. The ashes from the incineration pits were removed, and the entire terrain was leveled.

### **Crematoria II, III, IV, and V – Construction and Operation**

The oldest preserved technical drawings of the crematorium that was built at Birkenau are dated January 15, 1942. They were made by SS-Unterscharfuehrer Ulmer of Zentralbauleitung (the Central Construction Administration), checked by SS-Untersturmfuehrer Walter Dejaco of the same office, and approved by the head office, SS-Sturmbannfuehrer Karl Bischoff (drawing nos. 936,937,938.) More detailed drawings and plans followed in short order.

Situated behind the fences surrounding the Birkenau barracks, the crematoria constituted a separate complex of installations of mass extermination. Crematoria II and III had their own

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barbed-wire fences. Two gates led to the crematorium II compound and one gate to crematorium III. Trees and bushes planted all around functioned as a natural screen, or “greenbelt” (*Gruenguertel*), that hid them from view by unauthorized persons – above all the prisoners who lived in adjoining barracks. A common fence enclosed the crematoria IV and V. The latter was also screened from view by a tall hedge concealing the bodies that were burned outside.

Crematoria II and III were constructed according to nearly identical, symmetrically printed plans. They consisted of three principal parts, two of which were underground – the “dressing room”, with an area of 392.45sqm (49.49 x 7.93), and the gas chamber, 210sqm (30 x 7). The “dressing room” was .3m high, the gas chamber, 2.4m high. The third part, the furnace room, was 337.2sqm (30 x 11.24) and was on the ground floor.

The underground part of the building contained two other rooms in addition to the undressing room and the gas chamber. One was used to store hair, spectacles, and other effects of the murdered victims. The second served as a convenient storage room for Zyklon B pellets. The shaft of the elevator that was used to transport corpses to the furnace room was equipped with doors and adjoined the anteroom. Initially the elevator consisted of a provisional platform (*Pltoaufzug*) that measured 2.76m in length and 1.43m in width.

The furnace room occupied the largest interior space on the ground floor of the crematorium. It housed five furnaces, each with three retorts (about 2m long, 80cm wide, and 1m high) that were used to push the bodies into the furnace. There were two generators of coke gas on the opposite side. The fumes were funneled to a single chimney through flues under the floor. Initially the furnace of crematorium II were equipped with a forced-draft installation. The draft was produced by three intake ventilators situated between the furnaces and the chimney. Within a short time, however, they burned out. Similar ventilators were not installed in the remaining crematoria.

To the left of the entrance to crematorium II was a room described in the plans as a dissecting room (*Sezierraum*). It was in this room that prisoner-physician Miklos Nyiszli conducted dissections of bodies of twins for SS Dr. Josef Mengele. According to Dr. Nyiszli, a similar room in crematorium III housed a melting pot to melt gold teeth.

In addition, crematoria II and III were equipped with special furnaces for incinerating less-valuable articles, such as personal papers, women’s purses, books, and toys, that were found in the luggage of the murdered victims. Incriminating camp documents were also incinerated there, particularly in the last stage of the camp’s existence. The furnaces, designated as “garbage incinerators” (*Muellverbrennungsofen*) in the technical plans, were housed in an outbuilding that adjoined the crematorium chimney. The disinfected hair of gassed women was dried in the attic. And in the summer of 1944, Sonderkommando prisoners who serviced the crematoria resided in the attics of crematoria II and III.

Crematoria IV and V were similar to the other two in that they consisted of three basic components: dressing room, gas chamber, and furnace room. But the components were arranged differently. To cut costs, both the gas chamber and the dressing room were on the ground floor instead of underground. The entire structure measured 67.5m in length and 12.87m in width (not counting an outbuilding that served as the coke storage room). Near the crematorium entrance were lodgings of Sonderkommando prisoners and a kitchen. To the left of these structures sat three gas chambers: one with an area of 98.19sqm (11.69 x 8.40); the second 95.34sqm (12.35 x 7.72), and the third 43.25sqm (11.69 x 3.70). The combined area of the three gas chambers was 236.78sqm. Sometime later, the smaller chamber was further divided into two, and gas-proof doors, nearly identical to those in the gas bunkers, were constructed.

In addition to the interior doors, the two largest gas chambers had doors that led directly outside. The doors were used to air the premises and to remove the corpses for cremation in incineration pits. Instead of windows, the exterior walls of the gas chamber had openings 30cm wide and 40cm high, which were covered with gas-proof flaps. The preserved original plans indicate that the first chamber had three such openings, the second two, and the remaining smallest chambers one each. Plans provided for the construction of a waste-disposal system in the two largest chambers, as well as heating furnaces to facilitate quicker evaporation of the Zyklon B gas pellets. Although signs reading “Zum Desinfektion” were posted in the chambers, neither automatic ventilators nor dummy showers were installed. The part of the crematorium building that housed the gas chamber was lower and looked like an outbuilding.

The extermination process and cremation of the corpses in crematoria II and III went as follows. After selection for death, the Jews who could walk were marched from the loading ramp to the crematorium. The weak, the invalid, and the sick were transported on trucks. In the crematorium yard, the SS men told the prisoners that they would undergo a disinfection that consisted of delousing and bathing. The victims were led down the staircase to the dressing room in the basement, where they could see the signs (in German) “To the Baths” and “To Disinfection”. Similar signs were posted on a portable board in the native language of the victims.

When the chamber was full or the entire transport was inside and the personnel had left (two SS noncommissioned officers always stayed until the end), the doors were shut, the bolts were slid into place, and the screws were tightened. On order of the supervising SS doctor (the job was assigned to, among others, Josef Mengele, Hans Koenig, and Hans Thilo), the SS disinfectors (Scheinmetz, among others) opened the Zyklon B cans and poured their contents into the vents down the induction shafts into the chamber.

About a half hour after the induction of the gas, the ventilation was turned on, the door was opened, and Sonderkommando prisoners wearing gas masks began dragging the corpses out of the chamber.

It took about four hours to empty the gas chamber. Initially the corpses were delivered to the furnaces on small trolleys that ran on rails, as was done in the main camp. The trolleys also served to load the corpses into the furnace retorts. This arrangement, however, did not last long. On the initiative of the *Kapo* August Bruck, special corpse stretchers, which could be rolled into the retorts, were introduced. To facilitate the loading, the corpse stretchers were lubricated with soapy water.

About 2,500 corpses could be cremated in 24 hours in each of crematoria II and III.

In the killing process at crematoria IV and V, the prisoners were also brought in cars or were marched to the crematoria, then led to the dressing room. There one of the SS men – the Kommandofuehrer – would stand on a bench in front of them and explain that the healthy would go to work and the sick and the women and children would remain in the barracks. But first, they would go to the bath.

After undressing, the prisoners were led through the anteroom to the gas chamber. When the chamber was full, the SS guards shut the doors, and one of them, wearing a gas mask, climbed a ladder or a chair. When the SS doctor on duty gave a sign, the SS man would pour Zyklon B pellets into the opening. In the summer of 1944, Mengele served most often as the duty doctor in crematoria IV and V, and Kommandofuehrer Scheinmetz, who supervised the Sonderkommando work in the crematorium V, poured the pellets.

Half an hour later, on orders of the same SS doctor, the gas chamber doors were opened, and the Sonderkommando prisoners, who had been locked up in the coke plant during the gassing, went to work. Wearing gas masks, they dragged the corpses to the hallway, where the women's hair was cut. Next the corpses were transported to the dressing room and stacked in layers. The gas chambers had to be emptied as quickly as possible to make room for the next transport. When it was not possible to remove all the corpses from the dressing room before the next transport arrived, the doomed prisoners undressed outside, behind the hedge that screened crematorium V and the incineration pits from the road.

The corpses stacked up in the dressing room were removed to a narrow room, where the Sonderkommando prisoners extracted dentures, crowns, bridges, etc., made of gold and precious metals; removed jewelry that had not been taken during the undressing; and brought the corpses to the cremation furnaces.

Servicing the furnaces and the cremation process in crematoria IV and V did not differ significantly from the practices followed in the two other crematoria. According to the Zentralbauleitung letter, given the normal pace of cremation (half an hour for two corpses in one retort), each crematorium could incinerate 768 corpses in 24 hours. However,

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Sonderkommando prisoners testified that up to 1,500 corpses were burned in 24 hours (three to five within 20 to 30 minutes.)

Thus in the summer of 1944, the combined capacity of all the incineration installations reached the staggering number of 20,000 victims. A few months later, in light of Germany's deteriorating situation on the war fronts, and possibly in connection with negotiations launched on Himmler's instructions, gassing of prisoners was discontinued. The last victims to undergo selection was a transport from Theresienstadt, which arrived at Auschwitz on October 30, 1944. The next transport, from Sered, which arrived on November 3, 1944, was registered in the camp in its entirety.

70 Sonderkommando prisoners worked to liquidate the installations of mass murder. In addition, two special women's labour squads were formed. On December 1, 1944, a special group, initially comprising 100 women prisoners, began dismantling crematorium III. On December 5, 50 more women were incorporated into the squad. At the same time, another squad of 50 women was formed. Its task was to remove the ashes from the incineration pits, fill them in, and cover them with turf.

About the same time, work was completed on dismantling the remains of crematorium IV, which had been burned during a Sonderkommando revolt, and on bunker 2 and the nearby barracks that had served as dressing rooms.

On January 20, 1945, an SS detachment that had been dispatched to Auschwitz shot about 200 Jewish women prisoners and ordered another group of prisoners to move crates with dynamite to crematoria II and III. Both buildings were blown up the same day. Crematorium V, the last to remain in operation, as late as January, was blown up on January 26, 1945, one day before the liberation of the camp.

There was no time to remove the ruins of the destroyed installations, so the Nazis were only partially successful in obliterating the traces of their crimes. The walls and the floors and the underground dressing rooms and gas chambers of crematoria II and III remained relatively intact. The rails built into the floor of the furnace room are clearly visible, and parts of the walls have been preserved. Some of the furnace parts of crematorium V have been preserved. The furnaces of the other crematoria were dismantled and removed before the buildings were blown up. Assorted metal parts were found on the grounds of the camp farmsteads (bunkers 1 and 2).

Excerpts: Franciszek Piper, "Gas Chambers and Crematoria", *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Indiana University Press, Washington D.C., Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1994, pp. 157-182.



With the help of the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, Inc