



## Sobibor

Extermination camp, located in the Lublin district of Poland, near the village of Sobibor. The camp was established in March 1942, as part of Aktion Reinhard, and shut down at the end of 1943 after a prisoners' uprising. About 250,000 Jews were killed at Sobibor.

The Germans constructed Sobibor as a rectangle - 1312 by 1969 feet. A barbed-wire fence, woven with tree branches, surrounded the perimeter of the camp. This design was intended to hide from view what was inside. It was divided into three sections: the administration area, reception area, and extermination area. Jews brought in by transport were taken directly to the reception area. The extermination area held: gas chambers, burial trenches, and housing for the Jewish prisoners who worked there. The gas chambers - built to look like shower rooms, could hold 160-180 people each, and were fueled by carbon monoxide gas.

SS-Obersturmfuehrer Franz Stangl, was appointed Sobibor camp commandant in April 1942. His staff included: 20-30 SS soldiers - many of whom had worked on the Euthanasia Program, and 90-120 Ukrainians.

The strongest Jews who arrived in Sobibor were appointed to Jewish work teams. Their job was to serve the camp staff and carry out duties related to the processing of new arrivals. Eventually, about 1,000 prisoners worked in these teams.

However, most of the Jews brought to Sobibor were murdered immediately. Upon arrival by train, they were told that they had reached a transit camp en route to labor camps. Before embarking on the next part of their journey, they were to take showers and have their clothes disinfected. The men and women were separated. Children were sent with the women. The Nazis ordered the victims to remove their clothing and hand over their valuables. The Jews were then marched on the run to the gas chambers. They were beaten, screamed at, and warning shots were fired at them. About 450-550 Jews were forced into the chambers at a time.



The gas chambers were sealed once the maximum potential of victims were inside. Poisonous gas was then piped in. Within 20-30 minutes, all those inside were dead. Jewish work teams – known as Sonderkommando removed the bodies, pulled out any gold teeth, and buried the dead. The whole process, from arrival to burial, took only two or three hours. During that time, prisoners were forced to clean the railroad cars, after which the trains left and another 20 cars entered the camp.

Those Jews who were not sent to the gas chambers immediately underwent a *Selektion* process, which continued daily. Only a few survived for more than a few months.

The murder of Jews at Sobibor commenced prior to the camp's completion. In mid-April 1942, 250 Jews were brought from the Krychow labor camp and killed in the gas chambers. The first stage of the extermination process once Sobibor was complete lasted from early May to late July 1942. Jews were brought in from Czechoslovakia, Germany, Austria and the Polish district of Lublin. Between 90,000-100,000 were murdered. At the end of July the transports ceased temporarily, in order to repair the railway line from Lublin to Chelm. The Germans used the break to build three more gas chambers, as they found the existing chambers could not hold enough people per gassing and were slowing down operations. The new chambers allowed for twice the amount of victims at one time. During that period, Stangl was transferred to Treblinka and Franz Reichleitner took over.

The transports to Sobibor recommenced in October 1942. At the end of that year, the Germans tried to hide the killings done thus far, by digging up the bodies and cremating them. In March 1943 four transports from France arrived carrying 4000 Jews. By June 70,000—80,000 Jews from Lublin and the Eastern Galicia districts and 145,000—150,000 from the *Generalgouvernement* had been deported to Sobibor. About 35,000 Jews from the Netherlands arrived between March and July. They were forced to write letters to their relatives to let them know that they had arrived at a labor camp. However, after writing the letters, they were murdered. By the end of October 1943, 25,000 Jews from Slovakia had been murdered at the camp.



The last victims, about 14,000 in all, arrived in September 1943. They came from the Vilna, Minsk, and Lida ghettos.

During the year and a half that Sobibor was operative, several attempts were made at prisoner escape. Some were successful, but the Nazis executed many prisoners as punishment. In July and August 1943, the prisoners organized an underground group, led by Leon Feldhendler, who had been the head of the Judenrat in Zolkiew. Their plan was to arrange an uprising and mass escape from Sobibor. At the end of September, Soviet Jewish prisoners of war were brought to Sobibor from Minsk. Included in that group was Lt. Aleksandr Pechersky, who was brought into the underground group and made its commander, with Feldhendler as his second-in-command. The group's plan was to kill the SS soldiers, take their weapons, and fight their way out of the camp. The uprising took place on October 14, 1943. The prisoners managed to kill 11 SS men and several Ukrainians. Approximately 300 prisoners were able to escape, but most of them were chased down and killed. Those prisoners who had not joined the escape were also killed. About 50 of the escapees survived the war.

In February 1943, Heinrich Himmler had visited Sobibor and viewed its extermination process. He then decided to transform it into a concentration camp. However, after the October uprising, those plans were changed. The Nazis decided to destroy Sobibor. They plowed the whole area and planted crops. A Ukrainian camp guard moved onto the site.

In 1965 eleven of the SS men who helped run Sobibor were brought to trial in Hagen, West Germany. One was sentenced to life in jail, five were given three to eight year sentences, four were acquitted, and one committed suicide. The Polish government turned Sobibor into a national memorial site.