



Belzec

Extermination camp, located in the Lublin district of southeastern Poland, along the Belzec railway line. The Nazis commenced construction of Belzec in November 1941, as a result of *Aktion Reinhard* - the Nazi plan to exterminate two million Jews in the *Generalgouvernement*. In total, 600,000 people, mostly Jews and a few hundred Gypsies, were murdered at Belzec.

Belzec was initially run by camp commandant Christian Wirth. He was assisted by 20-30 German SS men, and 90-120 Ukrainian guards who volunteered from among the prisoners of war in the Trawniki. Belzec comprised 886 square feet and was surrounded by barbed-wire fence. Watchtowers were situated at the corners of the camp. Furthermore, the camp was camouflaged so those on the outside could not see what was going on inside. Belzec was divided into two sections, one containing the administration buildings and reception area for arriving prisoners, and the other containing the gas chambers.

In February 1942 the camp's three gas chambers were tested on several groups of Jews. On March 17, Belzec officially commenced functioning as an extermination center. In its first few weeks of operation, 80,000 Jews were murdered, more than half from LUBLIN and LVOV. The camp halted operations in mid-April, but began receiving transports again in mid-May, when thousands of Jews arrived from CRACOW and its surrounding district.

The Jews were transported by freight trains and traveled for hours or even days under intolerable conditions. Many died en route. Each train consisted of 40-60 cars. Upon arrival at Belzec, 20 cars with more than 2,000 Jews were detached from the train and pulled into the camp. The victims were removed from the cars, and told that they had arrived in a transit camp, in order to be disinfected and showered. Men and women were separated, and all were told to remove their clothing, and were forced to hand over their valuables. The victims were chased to the gas chambers by screaming Germans and Ukrainians who beat them along the way. Then they were gassed. At first, this



whole process lasted three or four hours, but as the Nazis gained more experience, they cut it down to 60-90 minutes.

The Nazis, however, were still not satisfied. In mid-June, they halted transports so they could enlarge the gas chambers, in an effort to kill more efficiently. The transports recommenced in July 1942 and continued arriving regularly until December, when they were stopped as most of the Jews in the *Generalgouvernement* had already been murdered. During those five months, 130,000 Jews had been brought from the Cracow district, 225,000 from the Lvov area, and many others from the Lublin and Radom districts.

Not all Jews were immediately killed upon arrival: during the camp's first few weeks, some of the strong young men were selected for forced labor. As time went on, 700--1,000 people were kept alive for longer periods so that they could work. One group worked on the trains: they cleaned the freight cars, assisted those Jews who could not disembark on their own, and removed the bodies of Jews who had not survived the journey. Another group worked on the victims' confiscated property, making it usable for the Germans. This included processing women's hair. Another group of several hundred Jews removed the corpses from the gas chambers and buried them in pits. A group of "dentists" were responsible for the removal of gold teeth from the corpses' mouths. These laborers were also subjected to brutality and selections from time to time (see also *selektion*).

Between late 1942 and spring 1943, the mass graves were opened and the corpses cremated, in an effort to conceal evidence of mass extermination. The camp was then closed, and the remaining 600 prisoners sent to Sobibor. The site was turned into a farm and given to a Ukrainian guard.