The Holocaust was an unprecedented genocide, total and systematic, perpetrated by Nazi Germany and its collaborators, with the aim of annihilating the Jewish people, culture and traditions from the face of the Earth. The primary motivation for the Holocaust was the Nazis’ antisemitic racist ideology.

Between 1933 and 1941, Nazi Germany pursued a policy of increasing persecution that dispossessed the Jews of their rights and property, and later branded and concentrated the Jewish population into designated areas. These policies gained broad support in Germany and across much of the continent.

By the end of 1941, the policy had developed into an overall comprehensive, systematic operation that the Nazis called ‘The Final Solution to the Jewish Question’. Nazi Germany designated the Jews of Europe and eventually the rest of the world for total extermination. Alongside the mass extermination of millions by shooting, millions of Jews from all over Europe were rounded up and deported on freight trains to extermination camps - industrial facilities in which the Jews were gassed to death. During the entire process of registration, rounding-up and boarding the trains, the Germans deceived the victims as to the real purpose of their journey.

By the war’s end in 1945, some six million Jews had been murdered.

Yad Vashem was established in 1953, as the world center for Holocaust commemoration, documentation, research and education. As the Jewish people’s living memorial to the Shoah, Yad Vashem safeguards the memory of the past and imparts its meanings for future generations.

The exhibition was curated and produced by the Traveling Exhibitions Department, Museums Division, Yad Vashem.

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www.yadvashem.org
Auschwitz was the largest extermination center of European Jewry during WWII. Originally established in 1940 as a concentration camp for enemies of the Nazi regime, during 1942-1944, the Germans erected at Birkenau (Auschwitz II) four murder facilities, each with undressing rooms, gas chambers and crematoria. Jews were sent to Birkenau in transports from all over Europe. Most were exterminated upon arrival. Only a few survived the selection and remained alive temporarily as camp inmates and slave laborers.

Auschwitz-Birkenau is remembered as the ultimate symbol of the Holocaust, of absolute evil and human suffering, of appalling humiliation and systematic murder. Approximately 1,120,000 persons were murdered at the camp, of whom some one million were Jews, including more than 200,000 children.

"[Auschwitz] - That meant nothing to me. It was the name of one of many towns in Poland. I didn’t know how deeply Auschwitz would be engraved into my very being, so indelibly that it could never be erased."

Ruth Elias, deported to Auschwitz from the protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia in 1943.
The Auschwitz Album is the only known visual documentation of the process of absorption and selection of Jews deported to Birkenau. The photographs depict the arrival of a transport from Carpathian-Ruthenia, Hungary at Auschwitz-Birkenau toward the end of May 1944. The transport included some 3,500 Jews, many from the Berehovo ghetto, which had been used as a gathering point for Jews taken from various small towns in the area.

The Germans invaded Hungary on March 19, 1944, as they were being defeated on many fronts. Until then most Hungarian Jews had lived in relative security, despite Hungary’s antisemitic legislation and the conscription of approximately 100,000 Jewish men into slave labor battalions in which tens of thousands perished.

After the occupation, the Germans and the Hungarian regime, first under Admiral Miklos Horthy and later under the fascist Arrow Cross party, implemented an extermination policy that killed some 565,000 Jews. Mid-May to early July saw the peak of the murder, when in only eight weeks about 437,000 Jews were deported from Hungary to the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp. Most were murdered immediately upon arrival.

The photographs in the album were taken by Ernst Hofmann and Bernhard Walter, two members of the SS generally assigned to fingerprinting and photographing the incoming inmates selected to remain in the camp temporarily. The reason they took the photos is unknown. The album had no propaganda purpose. It may have been produced for some senior Nazi official to serve as formal documentation, similar to albums prepared in other concentration camps.

The 56-page album contains 193 photographs, capturing numerous stages in the process to which Jews were subjected upon their arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau. No photographs depict the actual murders. The photographs, arranged by the Nazis, are accompanied by captions, written by one of the photographers, describing the process from the Nazi worldview.

Translation of German caption: Resettlement of the Jews from Hungary - Euphemism used for the sending of the Jews to extermination camps.
The transports reached Auschwitz after a long, traumatic journey.

Upon arrival, the deportees were forced to quickly disembark from the boxcars, while leaving all their belongings behind.

The process was often accompanied by violence and terror that the Nazis inflicted upon the deportees.
The train stopped and everyone searched for members of their families. It’s impossible to describe; when I remember [the scene] I want to cry. Fear clutched everyone who had survived because several adults and babies, too, had died along the way. Upon arrival we were so happy to finally leave that hell. As we stepped down, we saw young men dressed in striped clothing.

Leah Feuerstein, deported to Auschwitz from Hungary in the spring-summer of 1944
After stepping onto the train platform, the Jews were divided into two groups: one of men, and the other of women and children. The groups then passed before SS doctors and guards, who further sorted the arrivals by age and physical condition, and picked the few who could be assigned to slave labor. The vast majority - the elderly, mothers, children, pregnant women, the infirm and the disabled - were sent to immediate extermination. Among the 1.1 million Jews deported to Auschwitz, some 900,000 were murdered upon arrival.

Regina Widawsaka, deported to Auschwitz from Poland in August 1944
One of the bullies asked me whose child was standing next to me; my sister, who was standing close by, wanted to save me, and she said the child was hers. When I yelled out that the child was mine, I was beaten for lying. Then they took away my child, and my sister also went....

Batya Druckmacher, deported to Auschwitz from Poland in August 1944
SELECTING SLAVE LABORERS

Jews who had passed the selection process and were assigned to slave labor were subjected to a series of steps before completing their absorption into the camp.

They were ordered to undress, were disinfected, and all their body hair was brutally shaved. At the end of the process, a serial number was tattooed on their forearms.

Prisoners were then assigned to slave labor battalions at Auschwitz; some were transferred to other concentration camps.

The majority of Jewish inmates selected to be slave laborers did not survive more than a few months due to the inhuman living conditions, which included ceaseless violence, strenuous physical labor, starvation and disease.

Then for the first time we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offense, the demolition of a man... Nothing belongs to us anymore: they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair... They will even take away our name...

My name is 174517... we will carry the tattoo on our left arm until we die...

Primo Levi, deported to Auschwitz from Italy, in February 1944.
LOOTED BELONGINGS

The belongings that the Jews had been ordered to leave in the freight cars or on the platform were gathered and sorted by Jewish prisoners. These were then sent for use by the German Reich.

It was an unbelievable scene... a mountain of suitcases, boxes, handbags, rucksacks, and packages, tightly piled in the middle of the yard. At that first moment, I didn’t think about where their owners were. To my left I saw hundreds of baby carriages.

Rudolf Vrba, deported to Majdanek from Slovakia in June 1942 and a week later to Auschwitz.
The Jews not chosen for slave labor were forced to walk toward the gas chambers.

With the accelerated transports from Hungary, the pressure on the gas chambers grew to the point where the victims were forced to wait in a small grove located behind the crematoria, often for many hours. The victims had no idea that they would soon be murdered.

The gas chambers were designed to deceive the victims. They were told that before they could be sent to work, they had to go through a process of shower and disinfection.

The Jews were forced to undress and then packed into chambers into which Zyklon B canisters were emptied. Upon contact with the air, the solid chemical was transformed into a gas that choked to death everyone inside the chamber in a matter of minutes.

In 1943, the Jewish slave laborers were ordered by the Nazis to stop burying the victims' bodies, and instead to burn them in large crematoria.
Everyone was suspicious. They clearly felt that something was wrong, but no one in their worst nightmares could have imagined that within three or four hours they would be turned into ashes.

Filip Müller, deported to Auschwitz from Slovakia in April 1942
In April 1945, the US army liberated the Dora-Mittelbau concentration camp in Germany. Lilly Jacob, an inmate who had been transferred to the camp only a few weeks prior to its liberation, went out to greet the liberators and collapsed. When she returned to consciousness, she found herself in an abandoned barrack that had been used by the camp’s German staff. While searching for a blanket in the closets, she found a photograph album. When she opened the album, Lilly recognized, on the first page, her hometown’s rabbi; in the following photos she recognized her family, other members of her community, and even herself.

Lilly, who was born in the town of Bilke, was 18 years old when she was deported to Auschwitz together with her grandparents, parents, and five siblings. They arrived in a transport departing from the Berehovo ghetto. During the selection process, her father and older brothers disappeared in the chaos. While being beaten, Lilly was separated from her mother and younger brothers, and then dragged into a group of women selected for slave labor. She was the only member of her family to survive the Holocaust.

The album originally contained some 200 photographs. After the news of its discovery spread among the survivors, many came to Lilly in order to try to identify relatives amongst those photographed. She gave the few survivors who managed to recognize their loved ones some of the photographs as a final memento.

In the 1960s, Lilly was summoned to testify in Germany at the trial of Nazis who had served in Auschwitz. The album was presented as evidence and served to identify one of the Nazi officers.

In 1980, Lilly donated the album to Yad Vashem for eternal safekeeping.
“UNTIL EVERY PERSON THERE IS A NAME”

Some of the men, women and children identified in The Auschwitz Album

Rabbi Leib Weiss
Elki Feig
Miki Swartz
Naftali Zvi Weiss
Moshe Leib Pinkas
Yehezkel Kornfeld
Lena Egri
Ruth Hoffman
Rivka Gutmann and daughter
Iren Klein
Henchu Falkovics
Chava Spiegel
Armin Riter
Tauba Mermelstein
Gerti Mermelstein
Moshe Vogel
Sarah Rosenreich
Rivka Gutmann and daughter
Iren Klein
Henchu Falkovics
Sarah Rosenreich
Auschwitz is not only the unmistakable symbol of the Nazi concentration camp system, but also of the depths to which humanity fell during the Nazi period in general.

We utter and write “Auschwitz” and mean the center of unfathomable torture and atrocities, the essence of evil and horror that human beings perpetrated during World War II.

In a world in conflict, lacking humane insight and restraints, the evolution and legitimization of evil is liable to lead to the self-destruction of the human race.

Israel Gutman, Historian, Auschwitz survivor