

Holocaust

On September 3, 1939 the German troops captured Oświęcim. The town was renamed Auschwitz and incorporated into the Third Reich in October, as part of the Bielsko county (Kreis Bielitz, Oberschlesien) province Katowice. The German occupation authorities called the Christian members of the town council to convene and excluded the Jews. The council itself was soon dissolved and on November 25 German civil commissar Rudolf Skaletz replaced the military administrators. For the Jewish community of Oświęcim and nearby towns, it was the beginning of the most tragic chapter in their history.

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By the Nazi decree all Jewish merchants were banned from operations. As a result, their economical status as well as food supplies and sanitary conditions decreased drastically. The Polish mayor of Oświęcim Dr. Emil Golczewski was ordered by the Germans to issue a decree which allowed Christian stores to remain open but forced down closing of Jewish ones. The peak and most symbolic event of the initial phase of anti-Jewish persecution was the burning of the Great Synagogue in Oświęcim by the Germans on November 29-30, 1939. Less than a month later all Jews were forced to wear white armbands with the blue Star of David.

Every day between 120 and 200 Jews were sent to perform various forced labor. In May 1940, instructed by the future commandant of the Auschwitz camp Rudolf Höss, the mayor of the town ordered the Council of Elders to assign 250 to 300 men to daily cleaning duties on what was soon to become the concentration camp.

In spring 1940 Jewish stores, factories and other businesses were confiscated and rented to German trustees. The same measure was applied to major non-Jewish businesses.

According to the German census from October 1940, the population of Oświęcim was 11,209 and included 7,613 Jews. Chosen by the Nazis as a concentration spot for Jewish residents of nearby towns, between late 1939 and August 1940 the town accepted Jews from Andrychów, Biała, Bielsko, Brzeszcze, Cieszyn, Czechowice, Dziedzice, Jawiszowice, Jaworze, Katowice, Kęty, Królewska Huta, Mysłowice and Żywiec.

Over 1,000 Jewish residents of Oświęcim and those resettled there from other towns were sent to different forced labor camps in 1940 and 1941. The main camps were Reichsautobahnlager in Annaberg, Sacrau, and Ottmuth in Upper Silesia.

The concentration of Jews in the town was also connected to the Central Emigration Office in Oświęcim and plans for mass emigration of Jews from Katowice province drafted by Leon Schönker. In September 1939 the Jewish community office was renamed the Council of Elders of the Jewish Religious Community and Schönker became its president. A month later he was called to report to the German commandant of Oświęcim who relayed the order of his superiors to have Leon Schönker establish a Bureau for Emigration to Palestine in the town. On the same day the Bureau was opened in Shmuel Schnitzer's restaurant, located in the house of the famous Haberfeld family. Its head became Józef Manheimer. Soon after Schönker was appointed head of the delegation of Jewish communities of Silesia to Berlin. He prepared a detailed plan of emigration with a funding scheme, though it didn't come to fruition. Despite a chance to save thousands of Polish Jews, in December 1939 Gestapo dismissed him from the chair of the Council of Elders. The decision was connected to the rising influence of Moshe Merin, a controversial leader of the Jewish community in Sosnowiec. In December 1939 he was made responsible for executing Nazi orders in regard to the Jewish population of Katowice province and a month later designated as head of the Central Authority of Jewish Councils of Eastern Upper Silesia.

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Merin appointed new Council of Elders in Oświęcim and Józef Gross as its chair in February 1940. At the same time the emigration bureau was moved to Sosnowiec only to be closed in April 1940. Leon Schönker's emigration plan never happened because there were no destinations available. The free world in fact was not interested in providing shelter for Jews under German occupation.

The radical change in the position of Jews in Oświęcim came at the beginning of 1941. As a result of the February 18 agreement between Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring and representatives of IG Farben chemical company, Jews from Oświęcim and the vicinity were to be expelled in order to expropriate their apartments for the workers of the neighboring IG Farben chemical plant in Monowice.

The final expulsions took place in March and April 1941. The deportations started on March 9 and the first transport went to Chrzanów. The last group of 5,000 people was sent to Będzin and Sosnowiec during the week before Passover in April.

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Between May and July 1942 first mass deportations from East Upper Silesia took place. The Nazis sent 15,000 Jews to KL Auschwitz and annihilated numerous small communities including those from Olkusz, Zator, Jaworzno, and Trzebinia. In the largest deportation on August 12, 1942, 19,000 Jews from ghettos in Będzin and Sosnowiec were sent to KL Auschwitz. Both ghettos were liquidated on the night of July 31 and August 1, 1942. Until August 7, 30,000 Jews were sent to KL Auschwitz, including Jewish residents of Oświęcim, of whom the vast majority was murdered.