The main gate at Gross-Rosen, taken shortly after liberation.
USHMM WS # 73197, COURTESY OF IPN
The history of the Gross-Rosen concentration camp began on May 11, 1940, when the SS concern Deutsche Erd- und Steinwerke GmbH (DESt) bought the quarry near the village of Gross-Rosen (present-day Rogoźnica) in lower Silesia from Margareta Hay for 500,000 Reichsmark (RM). To provide the cheap manpower needed to work the quarry, a subcamp of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp was set up nearby in the summer of 1940, under the name “Labor Camp Gross-Rosen.” The first transport of 100 prisoners arrived from Sachsenhausen on August 2, 1940; another 100 probably arrived before the end of September. There is no accurate information on subsequent transports. These early prisoners had been registered and assigned numbers in Sachsenhausen. Initially, they worked in two detachments, Steinbruch and Barackenbau, stone quarrying and barracks construction.

Gross-Rosen became an independent concentration camp on May 1, 1941, according to a May 1 decree from the Reich Security Main Office (RSHA). The former subcamp prisoners automatically became the first prisoners of the new camp. There were 722 of them initially, including 255 German “professional criminals,” 271 Poles, 110 German and Czech political prisoners, and 73 so-called asocial prisoners, among others. We do not know exactly why the subcamp was converted into an independent concentration camp, although the plans to expand DESt probably played a major part in the decision. The DESt representatives were not satisfied with the progress in starting up the quarry their company had purchased, and they attributed the delays primarily to the small number of prisoners in the camp. Separating the subcamp from the distant Sachsenhausen main camp would make prisoner procurement and further expansion easier.

The first camp commander, from May 1, 1941, to September 15, 1942, was SS-Obersturmbannführer Arthur Rödl. SS-Hauptsturmführer Wilhelm Gideon became his successor, from September 16, 1942, to October 10, 1943. After him, from October 11, 1943, until the camp’s evacuation in February 1945, SS-Sturmbannführer Johannes Hassebroek commanded.

Just as was the case at other camps, the Gross-Rosen headquarters staff consisted of five branches (with their heads as of October 1941): I, the aide-de-camp’s office (SS-Oberscharführer Eugen Tillig); II, the political office (Kriminalsekretär Richard Treske); III, the protective detention camp (SS-Untersturmführer Anton Thumann); IV, administration (SS-Oberscharführer Willi Blume); and V, health services (SS-Untersturmführer Friedrich Entress). In addition, a sixth—the training division—was run by SS-Oberscharführer Johann Ziegler.

Branch III, which oversaw the camp itself, played the most important part in the prisoners’ lives. Thumann, who had held the post of Lagerführer (camp leader) of the Gross-Rosen labor camp, was the Schutzhaftlagerführer (leader of the protective detention camp) until February 1943, when SS-Obersturmführer Walter Ernstberger took over. The Schutzhaftlagerführer supervised a camp staff consisting of a Rapportführer (SS-Rottenführer Walter Schwarze until 1942, followed by SS-Oberscharführer Helmut Eschner), an Arbeits einsatzführer (work assignment supervisor) who directed the prisoners’ employment, and several Blockführer (barracks block supervisors).

Because of the camp’s expansion and the accompanying need for increased administrative effort, the Schutzhaftlagerführer and Rapportführer gained more and more power and thus greater license to act. This trend reached its peak under Commandant Hassebroek, who inspected the subcamps frequently; when he was absent, his subordinates had almost unlimited power over the prisoners.

The political branch played a special role. It took its orders directly from the RSHA but also worked with the Breslau (Wrocław) Gestapo office; it was under the camp command only on an administrative level. The branch chief, Treske, interrogated prisoners, was responsible for maintaining prisoner files, and oversaw the various jobs of the political department, which included registering, discharging, and executing prisoners.

It is difficult to estimate the prisoner population, since we have no original camp records. Studies done at many institutions, based mainly on prisoner numeration, have shown that from May 1941 to the end of that year the population almost doubled to 1,487 prisoners. By July 15, 1942, there were 1,890 prisoners. Beyond that point, there are no accurate counts. We know that 5,293 more prisoners were registered in 1942; 25,167 more in 1943; 73,367 more in 1944; and 5,180 more from January 1945 until the evacuation—for a total of more than 110,000. However, some categories of prisoners, such as Soviet prisoners of war (POWs) and transferees from Auschwitz, were not included in the Gross-Rosen records at all; when we include those, the consensus is that the total number of prisoners who passed through the Gross-Rosen concentration camp was approximately 120,000. Still, that figure does not tell us how many were present in the main camp at any one time, since many of the prisoners, including all of the 25,000 women who were sent to Gross-Rosen, were sent from there on to the subcamps.

When Gross-Rosen was being set up, the policy for sending prisoners there was different than at other camps. National police units could not send prisoners to the camp directly; until the end of 1941, only prisoners from other concentration camps were to be sent to Gross-Rosen. In the following years, however, the number of prisoners sent to Gross-Rosen from Gestapo or Sipo (Security Police) units constituted approximately half of the entire population. About
one-third or more of the prisoners had come from other concentration camps. Of that number, the majority were from Auschwitz (about 20,000), Plaszow (about 2,500), and Flossenbürg (about 1,400), while smaller transports came from other concentration camps.

The prisoner population was quite varied in its makeup. German prisoners made up the largest nationality group at Gross-Rosen in 1940–1941. Starting in 1942, those proportions changed, and German prisoners gradually became a minority; Poles and Soviet citizens became the most numerous, followed by French, Dutch, Hungarians, Austrians, and many others. Most of the Poles were arrested as suspected partisans, while most Soviet prisoners had been forced laborers who had somehow violated regulations. All the non-German prisoners were classified as political opponents and were labeled with a red triangle; they were the largest prisoner category because of the large numbers of prisoners from every corner of Europe. Germans continued to dominate the prisoner hierarchy; but not all the prisoner-functionaries were German. Most of the Germans were classified as “professional criminals,” “asocials,” or political prisoners.

Starting in 1941, Soviet POWs from various stalags were transported to Gross-Rosen. The largest such transport, consisting of 2,500 to 3,000 prisoners, arrived in October 1941. Most of the POWs were killed by the camp medical personnel within a few weeks, using lethal injections; later, the same technique was used to kill other prisoners who were unable to work. The SS personnel who took part in executions received awards and extra pay for their roles. Other Soviet POWs died as a result of neglect and abuse. They were given no bedding and barely half the normal rations.

Jews were the most badly treated group of prisoners at Gross-Rosen. Up until October 12, 1942, at least 285 Jews passed through the camp. They were often kept at work after the other prisoners had been dismissed. They received none of the privileges that other prisoners did, and the others were forbidden to aid them in any way. They received the most beatings, were given the hardest work, and were often denied medical care. Under these circumstances, the Jews succumbed quickly, committed suicide, or were selected for killing as part of the 14f13 program. On October 12, 1942, the last 37 living Jewish prisoners were sent to Auschwitz. From then until the camp’s evacuation, there were no Jews at the Gross-Rosen main camp.

A new category of prisoners appeared in the camp, beginning in 1944: prisoners from the Nacht- und Nebel operation. The “Night-and-Fog” Decree issued by the chief of the Armed Forces High Command, Wilhelm Keitel, was designed to use arrests to stop the growth of the resistance movement in Western Europe, especially in France. In the autumn of 1944, approximately 1,575 French, Belgian, and Dutch prisoners arrested in the Night-and-Fog operation were sent to Gross-Rosen. More people arrested in the operation wound up in the camp in January 1945; the total was at least 1,730 people.

Teenage prisoners were also put in the Gross-Rosen camp. In the early years they were a small group, but starting in 1943, many young Poles and Russians and, later, young prisoners of other nationalities wound up in the camp. They were all put in one barrack and used for lighter labor.

Starting on December 1, 1943, a separate unit, a so-called Arbeiterziehungslager, or work education camp, was formed within Gross-Rosen. The prisoners of that unit were a totally different group; they lived in a separate barracks (Barracks 22) and received numbers beginning with 0, with no indication of nationality. The Breslau Gestapo was in charge of sending prisoners to the education camp, as well as releasing them. Although the term spent in the camp was short—in theory it could last up to 56 days—it was a very hard time for the prisoners. At least 163 of them did not survive their terms. Additionally, prisoners frequently had to stay in the concentration camp after their terms were up in the education camp. During the camp’s existence, at least 275 prisoners suffered that fate.

The living and working conditions at Gross-Rosen were horrible. The rations consisted of a couple of small slices of bread per day, plus a little margarine or horse sausage and watery soup. Prisoners slept on straw sacks that teemed...
with lice and other vermin, as did their clothing. Bathing facilities were limited or nonexistent. Almost all the labor was in the quarry; it was exhausting, dangerous work that broke the prisoners down in short order. The camp personnel, though officially forbidden to abuse prisoners, frequently tortured and humiliated them in any number of ways: beating them, throwing them from the quarry walls, making them carry large rocks at a run, or dousing them with water and making them stand in the cold. Conditions improved somewhat from 1943 on, as the need for the prisoners’ labor increased, but the difference was marginal, and the working hours and tempo actually increased. There are indications that Gross-Rosen was the only camp aside from Mauthausen that the Germans ran as a Category III camp, the most severe classification. All told, conditions in the camp killed at least 7,500 prisoners and possibly as many as double that number.

Aside from the Jews and Soviet POWs, and in addition to those prisoners who died from exhaustion, neglect, and abuse, other prisoners fell victim to killing programs, as Gross-Rosen became a “special treatment” site for people accused of sabotage, refusal to work, attempted escape, sexual relations with Germans, or other such offenses. The local SS brought the prisoners in, at which point most of them were killed immediately: shot, hanged, or given lethal injections. Roughly 375 prisoners died that way. Another 127 fell victim to the 14f13 program.

The brutal conditions at Gross-Rosen led to a prisoner culture that emphasized personal survival above all else. There was little the prisoners, especially the Jews and Eastern Europeans, could do to improve their lot. The Kapos took care of themselves and their friends and brutalized everyone else. Without connections, the most one could do was to try to avoid drawing attention to oneself.

In its initial months, the Gross-Rosen camp did not have its own infirmary. Only in the autumn of 1940 was half of one barracks designated as a makeshift infirmary. Doctor Herum became the first camp doctor in October 1940. Several doctors succeeded him, including the notorious Josef Mengele, who came to Gross-Rosen from Auschwitz in January 1945. The infirmary was moved to a separate barracks in late 1941, due to the growing number of injured and sick. A second barracks was allocated to it in early 1942, and a third in December 1942. Medical care was minimal, in any case; for the most part, the patients were left to live or die on their own.

Initially, the Gross-Rosen camp did not have its own crematorium. In 1941–1942 the bodies of dead prisoners were taken to the crematorium at the cemetery in Legnica (now Legnica). In late autumn of 1942, construction began on a brick crematorium, which was planned for completion by mid-December 1942. A makeshift one, called a field crematorium, operated in the camp in the interim. It was a portable oven run on oil. Two prisoners did the burning, supervised by SS staff members. Up to 10 bodies per day could be cremated in that crematorium.

Conditions in the camp deteriorated even further in the winter of 1944–1945, as evacuation transports from camps farther to the east swelled the population to the bursting point. The rations became wholly inadequate. New arrivals were forced into uncompleted barracks, where they slept on the stone floors without bedding. Barracks were filled with double, triple, or even quadruple their intended numbers. There were no sanitary facilities for the new arrivals, and in any case, the barracks were so crowded and the prisoners so weak that many of them simply relieved themselves where they lay. The work routine broke down; as an alternative, the prisoners were forced to stand in ranks all day, every day. The death rate skyrocketed, and bodies piled up outside the barracks, since the crematorium could not handle the increase.

At the end of January 1945, as the Red Army drew nearer, the camp staff began preparing to evacuate. The evacuation began on February 8 or 9, in stages. The first transport left by train, bound for Mauthausen. The prisoners were packed so tightly into the open freight cars that they could barely move; many of them died on the way from exposure and exhaustion, and the living stood on the bodies of the dead. Some prisoners jumped from the cars and attempted to flee, only to be shot down by the guards. Other transports soon followed the first, and several hundred prisoners also marched out from the main camp on foot. On February 13, 1945, the Red Army liberated Gross-Rosen.

There was never a single trial of Gross-Rosen staff, but several perpetrators were caught up in other trials. The last commandant, Hassebroek, was sentenced to death by a British military court in 1948 for the shootings of British officers in Gross-Rosen, but in 1949 his sentence was reduced to life in prison, then in 1950 to 15 years. He was released in September 1954. Thumann and several other staff members were tried and executed; still others received prison terms of varying lengths.

 Extensive archives exist at the AMGR in Wałbrzych, Poland. Additional records can be found at the LA-B, BA-B, BA-K, BA-L, AG-S, the GARF in Moscow, and the StA-N, among others. Sprenger’s work contains an exhaustive list of relevant record groups.

 NOTES

1. BA-L, Ordner Arolsen 311 c, p. 213.
2. AG-S, R 214 M 55, pp. 21–35.