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Mauthausen entrance gate.
USHMM WS #74451, COURTESY OF COL. P. ROBERT SEIBEL
MAUTHAUSEN MAIN CAMP

In May 1938, Theodor Eicke, Oswald Pohl, and a technical staff chose a site on a high plateau near the small town of Mauthausen, about 20 kilometers (12.4 miles) from Linz, Austria, for a new concentration camp. The Mauthausen location was chosen because of the proximity to stone quarries and the need for a facility to hold political detainees in occupied Austria. A detail of several hundred prisoners from Dachau began construction there, and by the end of September, they had completed barracks for prisoners and the SS-guards. On February 17, 1939, SS-Obersturmbannführer Franz Ziereis took over as commandant, a position he held until the end of the war.1

Granite walls, built by the prisoners and topped with barbed wire charged with a high-power electric charge, enclosed the “protective custody” camp, a rectangular area 85 × 210 meters (279 × 689 feet). The street leading into the camp passed through two massive stone towers at the southeastern corner and led to the roll-call square. To the right of the entrance were the wash barracks, kitchen, confinement bunker, crematorium, and infirmary. To the left prisoners had constructed 24 barracks, each 45 to 50 meters (148 to 164 feet) long. Block One housed the camp clerk and, beginning in 1943, a brothel. Prominent prisoners were assigned to Block Two. Most of the construction at Mauthausen had been completed by late 1941, but a year later work began on a cluster of barracks for prisoners of war (POWs) outside of the stone walls. At night and on Sundays, prisoners remained in the protective custody camp, and guards staffed the towers along the stone wall. On the other days, shortly after the morning roll call and as the prisoner work details left the protective custody camp, the sentry chain of guards moved outward and was set up around the entire complex. Most of the prisoners worked in the quarry, northwest of the protective custody camp, and by May 1942, their number reached 3,844. Each day they marched down the 186 steps under SS guard into the quarry. Prisoners carried large blocks of stone up the steps: excruciating work in conditions of unimaginable difficulty, because of the inadequate food and clothing and the brutality of the guards and Kapos.

The transfer of large numbers of prisoners from Dachau began in the fall of 1938, and by November, Mauthausen held more than 1,000 inmates. Transports continued to arrive over the next year, and by late September 1939, the number of prisoners reached 2,995; almost all of them came from Germany or Austria. The first large group of foreign prisoners, 448 Polish political detainees, arrived on March 9, 1940. During 1940, when more than 11,000 new prisoners were registered, transports came from Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald and included many “Red Spaniards,” prisoners who had fought in the Spanish Civil War on the Republican side. In 1941, an additional 18,000 prisoners arrived at Mauthausen, and in 1942, that number rose to 21,000.2

Mauthausen held large numbers of Soviet POWs, beginning in the fall of 1941. Separated from the other prisoners, they lived in extremely poor conditions, with minimal or no shelter and little food. One of the first transports of POWs, some 2,000, arrived on October 21, 1941. An additional 5,000 more Russian POWs came to Mauthausen by the spring of 1942. The fatality rate among them remained very high, and by March 1942 only 80 remained alive. According to the official record of the number of POW deaths (maintained in a separate death book beginning on October 21, 1941), 4,588 POWs had died by December 1942. A large number had starved to death or were executed. Many others died of typhus, which swept through the camp in late 1941 and early 1942. The number of POW fatalities at Mauthausen remained low for the remaining years of the war, largely because most had been killed already, with only 15 POW deaths in 1943, 246 in 1944, and 225 in 1945.3

In the fall of 1941, a large number of Czech Jews arrived at Mauthausen. Although not separated from the other Czech prisoners, the Jews were targeted for especially brutal treatment. Beatings, starvation, inhuman work conditions, or electrocution on the barbed-wire fences greatly reduced their number. Throughout the war, Jews continued to be sent to Mauthausen. For example, about 8,000 Hungarian Jews came from Auschwitz in May and June 1944. An additional 4,600 Polish Jews arrived in August. Because at this stage of the war the need for manpower in war-related work was so great, all those Jews who survived the initial selection were sent to subcamps.

In January 1945, as Auschwitz was being liquidated, more than 9,000 of its prisoners, mostly Jews, were shipped to Mauthausen. Many died of malnutrition or exposure before reaching the camp, and others perished during the selection process when, regardless of the weather, they stood along the stone walls for most of the day and night. The last large transport of prisoners to Mauthausen was a group of Hungarian Jews who
arrived in March 1945. Because the camp was already filled beyond capacity with prisoners evacuated from other concentration camps, a tent compound was erected, and by April 9, it held more than 8,500 prisoners; an estimated 3,000 died there. In March, two more large transports arrived, the first with 2,055 prisoners from Gross-Rosen, of whom 2,047 were there. In March, two more large transports arrived, the first with 2,055 prisoners from Gross-Rosen, of whom 2,047 were there.

Prisoners drag earth-laden carts for the erection of the "Russian camp" at Mauthausen, April-May 1942. USHMM WS #12359. COURTESY OF NARA

Daily life at Mauthausen and its subcamps was characterized by continuous brutality at the hands of the SS guards and the Kapos and the deliberate lack of the most fundamental elements of human existence. Palatable food and rudimentary sanitary facilities were lacking, and disease ran rampant. The brutalization of the inmates began upon their arrival at Mauthausen and continued throughout their imprisonment. The first stop was the Political Section, where beatings and killings were routine. Once in the camp, daily life was characterized by deprivation and mistreatment. Each morning and evening the prisoners had to stand, sometimes for hours and regardless of the weather, on the roll-call square and be counted. From there, they were assigned at the start of the day to work details, many of which took them outside the camp. Because of the nature of work at the quarry, where the weakened and malnourished prisoners did strenuous manual labor and hauled heavy rock, a large number of prisoners died or were killed there. Such treatment was in line with Reich Security Main Office (RSHA) chief Reinhard Heydrich’s January 2, 1941, decree classifying the concentration camps into three levels, grading them by the severity of conditions. Only Mauthausen was in level three, and it was reserved “for the heavily burdened, especially those with a criminal record, and asocials, that is, those who have hardly any chance for rehabilitation.”

Death books recorded the fatalities at Mauthausen and its subcamps (except Gusen, which maintained its own death books), listing in detail the causes of death (with date and time of day) and biographical information on the victims. These provide information on the patterns of deaths, even though some prisoners were killed before ever being registered at the concentration camp and therefore were not recorded. The victims of the Mauthausen system came from virtually all of the nations of Europe. According to the death books, 30 prisoners died in 1938, with the number increasing to 445 during 1939. Following the outbreak of war, fatalities rose sharply, with 2,312 registered in 1940; 1,494 in 1941; 4,392 in 1942; 3,209 in 1943; 7,076 in 1944; and 15,630 for the first four months of 1945. The bodies of those who died were taken to a crematorium in the city of Steyr until May 1940, when the camp’s own crematorium began operations.

The patterns of death reflect the changing policies and Nazi conquests. Between May and October 1941, for example, most of those who died at Mauthausen were Jews, the first time large numbers were represented there, and the patterns of death indicate a deliberate policy of annihilation. In May and June 1941, almost every recorded death was that of a Jew, and from June to October, most were Dutch Jews, recent arrivals at Mauthausen. In the last two months of 1941, there was once again a marked shift in deaths; now mostly political detainees from Spain, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia were killed. Numerous executions also took place in late 1941 at Mauthausen.

During 1942, most recorded deaths were of political detainees, many of whom were Czechs. Most had died of natural causes, but the incidence of those killed during an escape attempt or by execution rose. A mass execution took place on October 24, 1942, when 263 Czech prisoners were shot. According to the record of the execution in the death book, the killing began at 8:30 A.M. and ran through 5:42 P.M., a victim every two minutes. In November, more than 30 prisoners were shot during escape attempts; most were Dutch Jews.

In 1941, an installation for shooting prisoners with a small-caliber pistol was set up in a building just off the roll-call square. Prisoners accused of specific offenses were hanged or executed by firing squad. Those prisoners unable to work were killed by lethal injection of benzine or phenol to the heart. Prisoners were killed by poisonous gas in the gas chamber constructed in the crematorium building in late 1941, in the gas vans that carried victims to and from the Gusen subcamp, or at Hartheim, a “euthanasia” center. Invalids, the chronically ill, and prisoners unable to work were selected by
a team of physicians at Mauthausen and Gusen beginning in August 1941, part of the so-called Aktion 14f13. An additional killing program, Aktion K (K meaning Kugel, or bullet), included POWs who had attempted to escape and officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) who were unable to work. They were to be sent to Mauthausen and executed shortly after their arrival.7

In late 1942 and 1943, work in the quarries slackened as war-related industrial production grew in importance. At the same time, there was a massive increase in the number of prisoners sent to Mauthausen. For example, in March 1943, Mauthausen and Gusen held about 14,800 inmates. By December, that figure had risen to 26,000, and by the spring of 1945, it had reached 45,000. The increase in 1943 resulted in large measure from mass arrests in Poland, France, Yugoslavia, and the Soviet Union. Additional prisoners came from Greece and Belgium. In 1943 alone, more than 21,000 new prisoners arrived at Mauthausen. In 1944, more than 38,000 new prisoners were registered at Mauthausen, mostly individuals evacuated from concentration camps in the Balkans and Poland.

The final year of the war was catastrophic for the prisoners held at Mauthausen. Because of the camp’s location well behind the advancing front lines, large numbers of prisoners were evacuated from other concentration camps and sent to Mauthausen. Between July and December 1944, the number of inmates rose by more than a third, and the gain continued into March 1945. Most of those arriving were in desperate condition, having hiked for several days or even weeks or having been transported in open railway cars.

Even though many of these prisoners were dispatched directly to the subcamps, conditions at Mauthausen remained seriously overcrowded. In 1944, a tent camp of 14 military and circuslike tents was set up outside of the main camp. Here, the prisoners slept directly on the ground, and sanitary facilities were virtually nonexistent; disease and death were rampant. Many of these prisoners, especially those who died shortly after arrival, were never recorded in the death books. Of the 6,000 prisoners who survived the trek from Sachsenhausen to Mauthausen in January, only several hundred made it through the first couple of days. Upon arrival the prisoners had been forced to strip and remain outside of the main camp for several days, exposed to the elements and beatings from the SS.

On May 3, 1945, members of the SS guard units fled, and a police unit from Vienna and a military unit from the Vienna fire department took over as guards. On May 5, 1945, units of the U.S. Army arrived at Mauthausen and Gusen, liberating about 21,000 prisoners. Former commandant Ziereis fled but was captured later in May by American troops. He died of gunshot wounds inflicted during the capture. Investigations into the crimes committed in Mauthausen began almost immediately after liberation and culminated in a series of U.S. Army trials held in 1947–1948 at Dachau. Beginning in the 1960s, West German prosecutors initiated dozens of investigations into crimes committed at Mauthausen, and several major cases went to court.

**Sources**

Several dozen of the U.S. Army trials held at Dachau involved crimes committed at Mauthausen and its subcamps, and these records are available at the NARA, RG 338, Files 000-50-5-Mauthausen through 000-50-5-51. On June 17, 1945, U.S. Army Major Eugene Cohen submitted a report on the crimes committed at Mauthausen, and this report, composed largely of survivor accounts and wartime documents, is an important source (NARA, RG 238, Nuremberg document PS-1176). Other documents captured at the end of the war, such as the Personnel Cards of Inmates (eight microfilm rolls) and Numerical Register (two microfilm rolls, NARA, RG 242, Arolsen, and in 000-50-Mauthausen), the Death Books, Prisoner of War Death Book, and Unnatural Death Book (NARA, RG 238, Nuremberg document 493-A-G-PS, which is available on microfilm, T-490), provide details on individual prisoners. The records of the West German cases, especially the case against Karl Schulze and Anton Streitwieser in LG Köln, include hundreds of survivor statements that begin to reveal the horror of daily life at Mauthausen and the treatment of prisoners by the guards. Commandant Ziereis fled and hid from the liberating American forces that captured him. Wounded, Ziereis dictated a statement (Nuremberg document PS-1515) and was handed over to former prisoners. He died on May 24, 1945, his body stripped and hung on the barbed-wire fence.

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NOTES

5. The seven volumes cover the period from January 7, 1939, to April 1945. There are, in addition, separate volumes for prisoners of war and those who died “unnatural deaths,” NARA, RG 238, Nuremberg document 493-A-G-PS, “Unat. Todesfälle,” NARA, Nuremberg document P-22, identifies those who died at Mauthausen and the subcamps through accidents, suicides, execution, or escape attempts, from October 1, 1942, to April 6, 1945; they numbered 1,023 individuals.
6. These figures come from the seven volumes of death books. The overall number of fatalities at Mauthausen and its subcamps are compiled in Nuremberg document 499-PS. Hans Marsálek estimated that an additional 16,000 unregistered prisoners died in the Mauthausen system in 1945 (Die Geschichte des Konzentrationslagers Mauthausen: Dokumentation [Vienna: Österreichische Lagergemeinschaft Mauthausen, 1995], p. 158); and Gisela Rabitsch puts the number of those who perished at Mauthausen, including POWs, at 85,259 (“Das KL Mauthausen,” in Studier zur Geschichte der Konzentrationslager [Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1970], p. 89).