

The German Occupation

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The German Occupation

Oświęcim Becomes Auschwitz



Aerial view of bombs exploding during a German run over Poland 1939.



Jews are deported from Oświęcim.

The German invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939 shocked the Polish population. The units were ordered by Adolf Hitler to be ruthless and cruel. Oświęcim, like most Polish cities, was heavily bombarded and waves of Polish Christians and Jewish refugees started to escape eastward, away from the front line.

The Soviet Union and Germany had signed a pact agreeing not to attack each other but to instead divide the territories between themselves. On September 17th the Red army started to invade Poland from the east. From October 1939 thirty-five million Poles, among them some 3.2 million Polish Jews, were trapped either under German or Soviet occupation.

German army units entered Sosnowiec on September 4th. Random public executions were regularly organized along with gunfire directed towards apartment windows to generate fear. The occupation of Oświęcim started on September 9th.

Sosnowiec and Oświęcim, which the Germans called Auschwitz, were incorporated into the German Third Reich. Progressing Germanisation and establishment of the Auschwitz camp were the reasons for massive deportations of Polish Christians to eastern occupied Poland and Jews to the central ghetto in Sosnowiec-Środula.

From the spring of 1940 Oświęcim changed forever with the decision to establish the Auschwitz concentration camp. From June 1940 the camp was used as an internment and slave labour camp for political prisoners and prisoners of war. From 1942 Auschwitz II-Birkenau, a sub camp of the Auschwitz complex became one of the mass extermination camps for European Jewry.

The city of Oświęcim in Nazi occupation plans was to become a new “idyllic German settlement”. Architects were employed to redesign the city along Nazi ideas to service the staff of the Auschwitz concentration camp as well as the growing number of German industrial complexes in the area.



The gate of Auschwitz, May 1945.

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In November 1939 Germans had used explosives to destroy the Great Synagogue. They ordered the *Judenrat*, the Nazi-created Jewish Council, to demolish the remains themselves, under threat of strict penalty:

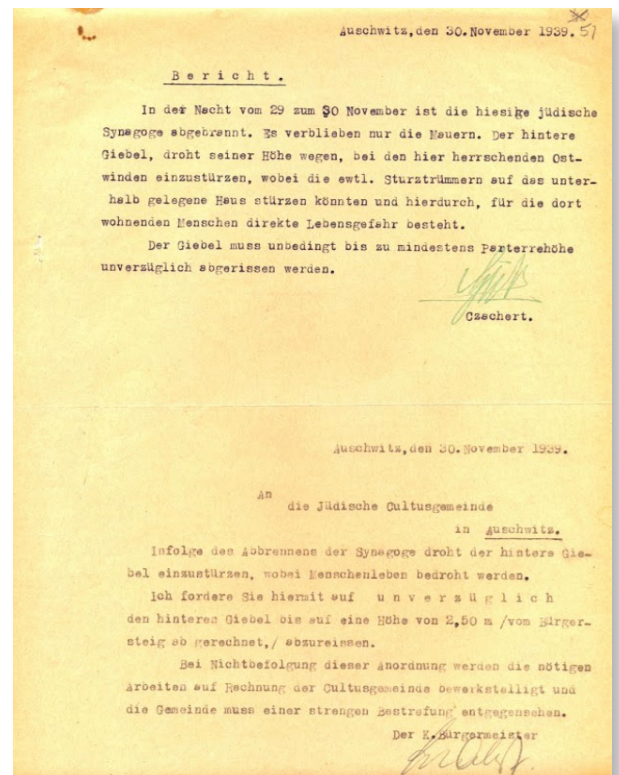
During the night between the 29th and 30th of November, the local Jewish synagogue was burnt down. Only its walls remain standing. Due to its height and the prevailing easterly winds, there is a threat that the synagogue's rear gable will fall onto the house below and this presents a direct danger of death to those people residing there.

The gable must unconditionally and immediately be knocked down to at least the ground floor.

As a result of the synagogue burning down, the rear gable is threatening to collapse and in so doing is threatening human life.

I therefore urge you to immediately tear down the gable to a height of 2.5 metres as measured from the pavement.

Failure to follow this order will result in the necessary works being carried out at the expense of the congregation and the congregation can expect severe punishment as a consequence.



In this document the Germans ordered the Judenrat to demolish the remains of the Great Synagogue.

In 1940, the Nazis forced Auschwitz inmates to clear the debris of the Great Synagogue. The same year the Christian parish house was changed into a Gestapo police station. In the next years the Jewish cemetery was destroyed and its tombstones used for road paving.



Auschwitz inmates are forced to remove the remains.

There was no formal ghetto established in Oświęcim, although the Jews were concentrated in the city centre. From autumn 1940 till spring 1941 they were gradually deported from the centre to different slave labour camps. The last group was sent away in April 1941 to the ghetto in Sosnowiec-Śródmieście.



Deportation of Jews from Oświęcim to Sosnowiec in 1941.

Life in the Ghetto of Sosnowiec

The horror of the new regime was felt from the first days of occupation in Sosnowiec. The Great Synagogue in Sosnowiec was burned down, and a dozen of the city's Christian and Jewish inhabitants were publicly executed.

In the middle of September all Jews were ordered to register at the local magistrate. A sense of terror and fear was needed by the German Nazis to control and exploit the rest of the population. Their harassment and mockery of Jews intensified and became daily practice: To shave the beard on religious men, force Jews to perform humiliating compulsory work, and confiscating of property were just stages on the way to total domination. In November 1939 all Jewish inhabitants were forced to wear an armband with the Star of David.

The growing number of German industrialists and administrators, who were arriving as war profiteers, dominated the city. In order to administer the community, the Nazis ordered the Jews to create a *Judenrat* (Jewish Council) and a Jewish police force.



Jews wearing armbands are forced to sweep a street in the city of Bedzin neighbouring Sosnowiec.



Members of *Judenrat*, the Jewish Council.

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Sosnowiec in the German planning was to become the central ghetto for Jews from Silesia and therefore large numbers of Jews from other parts of the region were deported there. In April 1941 over 6 500 Jews of Oświęcim were crowded into Sosnowiec. The *Judenrat* were ordered to establish a system of work distribution by sending Jews to the labour camps in Nazi Germany or employing them in many primitive workshops in the city.



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Deportation of Jews from southern Sosnowiec to the ghetto.

Overcrowding in the city caused deterioration of sanitary conditions, and food rationing resulted in famine. The old Jewish Sosnowiec was gone forever, replaced with Germanized Sosnowitz.



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Sewing workshop in Sosnowiec ghetto, 1941.

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