



Preparations for the first transport to KL Auschwitz at the railway station in Tarnów, 14 VI 1940. Photography from the collections of the Institute of National Remembrance

ARTYKUŁ

They became numbers from 31 to 758

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In the first months of German occupation, the repressions against the Polish population were much greater than against other national groups of pre-war Poland. This was due to a large-scale campaign of the German security apparatus directed against the Polish intelligentsia.

Within the General Government, as part of *Operation AB*, numerous arrests of members of the elite, primarily teachers, doctors, priests, lawyers and academics, took place. Most of them were transferred to German concentration camps in the Third Reich, although an estimated number of 3.5 thousand of them were killed in mass executions.



Polish lands taken by the Third Reich and USSR (source: Wikipedia)

For organizational reasons, a decision was made to build a camp complex in Oświęcim. On the one hand, it was supposed to depopulate prisons from the Katowice region. On the other, because of its location in the pre-war Polish territory, near the border between the Reich and the General Government, it could become a concentration camp for Poles from this German colony-province.

KL Auschwitz

The need to create a camp mainly for the Polish intelligentsia, members of the underground resistance and other persons detained in round-ups and other preventive actions was noticed at that time. For organizational

reasons, a decision was made to build a camp complex in Oświęcim. On the one hand, it was supposed to depopulate prisons from the Katowice region. On the other, because of its location in the pre-war Polish territory, near the border between the Reich and the General Government, it could become a concentration camp for Poles from this German colony-province.

Oświęcim had good transport connections both with the Reich and Polish territories outside the German state.



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In the spring of 1940, the first works initiating the establishment of the camp began. The first commandant was SS-Hauptsturmführer Rudolf Höß, who was entrusted with building a camp in the former Polish Army barracks in Oświęcim. He organized the camp personnel, brought in German convicts to serve as prisoners-overseers (they were given numbers from 1 to 30). After six weeks, the first transport of Poles who were classified by the Gestapo as particularly dangerous political prisoners arrived.

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The first mass transport

In April and May 1940, among the arrested young people from the region of Nowy Sącz, Tarnów and Podkarpacie there were many university students, scouts and high school students. Most of them had mounted strong resistance to the occupiers by acting in spontaneously established underground structures.

After a few week investigation, they were transported to the prison in Tarnów. From there, on 13 June 1940, they were taken to a Jewish ritual bathhouse, where after the so-called “bath” they spent the night.

“We were all pretty unanimous about tomorrow,” Kazimierz Szczerbowski recalled. “The following day we would be free. It was to happen because we all wanted it. Why the bath? Why give us our deposits back? Is it not to send us home relatively clean and free from lice?”

Over time, the circumstances of their release from prison worried them more and more. In the morning they were escorted to the train station, “where on the ramp we were efficiently loaded onto a train of passenger cars, ten people in a compartment,” which surprised Kazimierz Albin. The train moved slowly west. To Cracow? To the Reich for forced labor? They were supposed to be free ...

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After a long stop on the border of the General Government and the Third Reich, the train moved deeper into the German state to turn south and stop at the station in Auschwitz. Someone explained that it was Oświęcim. But what is here?, they wondered, discussing this among themselves. "At that time, the name Auschwitz was not familiar to anyone," recalled Bronisław Gościeński. The train began rolling on a siding. It reached the ramp surrounded by SS men and people in uniforms resembling pajamas or sailor suits. High watch towers loomed in the distance, towering over the barbed wire fence. A new life began for 728 Poles from the first transport (in the camp they were given numbers from 31 to 758). About 200 of them survived Auschwitz.



**Statue at the Prisoners of KL
Auschwitz Square in Tarnów (fot.
Wikipedia/CC BY-SA
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