

The history of Auschwitz is exceptionally complex. It combined two functions: a concentration camp and an extermination centre in gas chambers. Nazi Germany persecuted various groups of people there and the camp complex continually expanded and transformed itself. In the podcast „On Auschwitz” we discuss the details of the camp’s history and our contemporary memory of this unique place.

One of the most important sources on Auschwitz prisoners is black and white registration photographs taken in three characteristic positions. What was the reason for these photographs, and were they taken from the very beginning to the end of the camp?

Personal photographs of prisoners were taken on the orders of the political department, the camp Gestapo. They supplemented information contained in a prisoner’s file. The reason for this is that, when a prisoner was transported to a camp and registered under a number, they had to enter all their data into a special form, a kind of personal card, which contained their entire data. Naturally, in addition to the name and surname, place of birth, date of birth, information about the spouse, it even included a description of their appearance, which though brief, included the colour of the hair and eyes, information about height, cavities in the teeth, etc. For example, it also contained information on whether the individual was married or not and what languages they spoke. So, as can be seen, it was quite a comprehensive information dossier, the kind that could for some reason be useful to the camp Gestapo. And this information was indeed complemented by camp photography. It is worth drawing attention here to a rather important distinction; one can clearly see that in the camp’s reality, it was primarily non-Jewish prisoners and non-Jewish female prisoners who were photographed. They were photographed. Of course, this does not mean that Jewish male and female prisoners were not photographed because there are also such surviving photographs. However, there must have been some specific reason these people were photographed. For instance, Soviet POWs were not photographed, police prisoners were not photographed, and with a few exceptions, educational prisoners were not photographed. There is only one photograph of an educational prisoner and three photographs of Roma female prisoners.

And what were the reasons these groups of prisoners were not photographed?

It was undoubtedly related to the fact that in the inventorying of these categories of prisoners, excuse me for using this term but we are now stepping into the very conceptual scope inevitably imposed by the reality created in this concentration camp. Regarding prisoners from these groups, we can see that there was a different and moderate way of creating documentation about them, e.g., in the case of Soviet POWs, it was definitely because they probably had to be eliminated very quickly. They were to be dead very soon. The educational prisoners and police prisoners stayed, had to remain, in any case in the camp, for quite a short time, since they were sentenced to a specific time. They were convicted for a defined period in the camp, which probably meant it was pointless photographing people who would be released or transferred soon to another Kommando or prison. However, we must remember that, for a long time, there was no administration in the Roma camp in terms of keeping records of prisoners until they identified a significant number of deaths and consequent difficulties in daily reporting of the number of prisoners. It was only then that Polish prisoners, under Tadeusz Joachimowski, were ordered to systematise the administration in the Roma camp and started to keep the record books and other related documents. We must, of course, also point out that there are approximately 39,000 of these photographs in our collection. Only this much survived, and we cannot say for sure how many of these photographs were destroyed and how many were taken. Nevertheless, it was undoubtedly connected with the introduction of camp number tattoos, which is not from the outset of KL Auschwitz but roughly from 1941, when the population increased considerably, and it became necessary to photograph prisoners and supplement the camp's political department documentation with pictures.

Where were these pictures taken, and who took them?

The work of this unit, known as the Erkennungsdienst, i. e., the reconnaissance Kommando, was supervised by SS men. SS men supervised the work of the unit. Bernard Walter was the head of this unit in the Gestapo camp. However, this work was assigned to prisoners who were photographers by profession. It was a group of several, perhaps five or six people who worked under the German Kapo Franz Maltz who was also associated with a legendary, or maybe an

anecdotal story. Prisoners who knew and worked under Franz Maltz's supervision, among others Wiktor Brasse and Pysz, recalled that on one occasion, even in the presence of supposedly SS men, he told them that he had a dream in which he saw Hitler in the concentration camp and as such was relieved of his duties immediately and then executed. But whether this was the case is hard to say, but there was indeed such a unit. They had a dedicated studio. Mr Brasse even gives a detailed account of this unit in his post-war reports, describing the photographing process. He says that there was a sort of studio with a neutral background, where the photographed person was seated on a special swivel stool and photographed. Generally, according to Mr Brasse's account, it was a swift process, and several hundred of these photographs had to be taken every day. Practically, it seems that all members of the kommando had their hands full, and it should therefore be acknowledged that considerably more than the 39,000 surviving photographs were taken, but most were probably destroyed.

Why did the Germans issue an order to stop photographing prisoners in Auschwitz?

At the outset of July 1943, an order was sent to the commanders of concentration camps by Heinrich Himmler with the comment - due to the increased war efforts of the Third Reich, photographing of prisoners in concentration camps should be significantly curtailed to economise on photographic materials and chemicals. Given that our collection contains photographs of female and male prisoners with high camp numbers, it is safe to assume that this order was not fully respected at Auschwitz, as female and male prisoners were still photographed until the second half of 1944. It, therefore, seems that notwithstanding the order, the personal documents may have been supplemented with photographs of the prisoners on the camp authorities' express command.

In preparing to leave the camp, the SS removed evidence of the crime, including documents produced in the camp. How many registration photos were preserved, and what were the circumstances?

We cannot say for sure how many photographs were destroyed because, as I already mentioned, only 39,000 photos survived, in rather peculiar circumstances, as they were meant

to be destroyed. The negatives were even found in a tiled stove on the premises of a block, here at Auschwitz I. Apparently, a fire was even set under them, and here I am referring to what Wilhelm Brasse, a former prisoner, told us after the war. As he later said, Brasse was a professional photographer and took most of these photographs with his friends. But the very moment the negatives were set on fire, the SS man supervising the destruction of the pictures was summoned to some other place. The prisoners hurriedly put out the fire, and later the destruction of the photos was never resumed. The 39,000 negatives were discovered after the war when the furnace was dismantled for renovation works and the creation of exhibition space for the future museum. Upon development, some of the pictures had traces and stains, suggesting that they were caused by fire or the effects of fire. So, this story told by Wilhelm Brasse seems highly probable. They are extremely important and very moving photographs. It must be remembered that these photographs were taken in particular conditions when the female and male prisoners had already gone through the whole camp registration process, i. e. had encountered the brutal reality of the camp and subjected to dehumanising conditions. Instead of a name and surname, they had a number. Instead of the clothes they arrived in, they wore striped uniforms. Most of them already had their hair shaved. Many of them had spent a long time in prison, sometimes very brutally and tortured. It is repeatedly seen in faces that bear the marks of a beating. The most touching photographs are those of children, especially if we refer to the transports of civilians from the Zamość region in the late autumn and winter of 1942. There, photographs were taken of 13-, 14-, 15- and 16-year-olds among the deportees.