Auschwitz
Oświęcim, Poland

Heritage site, visitors’ experiences.

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Word Count: 2 642.
1. Abstract

This case study explores the audience’s experience when visiting Auschwitz, a Dark Tourism site. Primary research methods include observations during a visit, a questionnaire filled in by a group of tourists, and a 40-minute focus group session with a couple of the attendees a few weeks after their visit. Additional research was conducted through books, articles, videos and blogs. Results of the report demonstrate that numerous internal and external factors that contribute to the visitor’s experience. Amongst those analyzed are; emotional maturity, personal cultural link to the site, being in a tourist state of mind, psycho-geography, skilled tour guides and visual stressors. The study finds that the majority of tourists were profoundly affected by the experience in a way that was in keeping with the aims of the Auschwitz memorial.
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2. Introduction

During WWII, the Nazis set up a series of concentration camps around Europe, the most infamous of which being Auschwitz, Poland. As part of “The final Solution”¹ the site which had originally been used as a prison for corrupt Polish politicians became a death camp where Jews, Gypsies and other “undesirables” died in the gas chamber. The facility was enlarged when Auschwitz 2, otherwise known as Birkenau was built. Stretching over 40 square kilometers, the camps are estimated to have received a total of 1.3 million souls of which 1.1 million died there. In 1945, when the Red Army troops² entered the grounds, they found about seven thousand severely malnourished prisoners, most of them sick and to the breaking point of physical exhaustion. *(Additional History - Appendix1)*

Remarkably, just one year later 1946, the ministry of culture aided camp survivors in preserving the sites and turning them into a museum. The museum is now a memorial site, aiming to give the voiceless millions that perished a chance to be remembered. Amongst the museum’s aims is also education, decreasing holocaust denial and preventing future genocides. According to Dr. Piotr Cywiński, President of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation, “If one place could address the conscience of humanity in the 21st century, this place is Auschwitz-Birkenau.” *(Cywiński 2016)*.

Based on a personal visit of the sites, this report will focus on examining the audience’s feelings and impressions during their visit of Auschwitz and Birkenau. Reactions will be compared with external factors such as the differences in age, culture, and motives for attending the museum. In conclusion, will the stated purposes of the museum be realized in the reaction of the visitors? Or is it possible that other less noble or humane feelings dominate the motives to visit and the reactions to the tour?

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¹ Adolf Hitler’s policy that involved isolating the Jews of Germany and other European countries annexed by Germany in dehumanizing and violent conditions.

² Soviet Army
3. Literature review

Research will focus on cultural experience, the emotional reactions of visitors, the influence of place and modeling on those reactions and the relevance of a sense of authenticity of the Auschwitz memorial. Each of these themes was explored in the literature of Dark Tourism.

“Dark Tourism: the Attraction of Death and Disaster”3 (2010) by Lennon and Foley, provides a general overview of dark tourism and focuses on three significant tourist attractions, amongst which is Auschwitz. It describes the historical significance of the site, its transformation into a memorial and the many aspects of the museum. In addition, John Beech’s contribution ‘Genocide Tourism’ to “The Darker Side of Travel”4 (2009) not only describes Auschwitz but also spotlights the touristic appeal of the sites.

However, where Beech’s reasons are more matter-of-fact, Mike Robinson probes the more emotional side of tourism.

Whereas Beech’s reasons are more matter-of-fact, Mike Robinson probes the emotional side of tourism. In his chapter ‘The Emotional Tourism’ of “Emotion in Motion”5 (2012), he dives into different emotional dimensions: philosophical, perspective and psychological. The author links tourism and emotions by drawing connections between many great philosophers’ work on emotions, such as Spinoza6 and Aristotle7, and the tourism research pioneers like Robert Solomon. Robinson’s work is relevant to this study’s objective as he explains the factors relating to the emotional impact of each tourist’s experience.

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6 Spinoza declared that the majority of our emotions are a passive reaction to our unwarranted expectations of the world.

7 Aristotle argued that our emotions and reactions are marked by our uniqueness.
Furthermore, Chapter 9 entitled “Emotional Memory Formation at Former Nazi Concentration Camps” by Jessica Rapson offers a fresh approach on how visual and physical elements of the landscape impact the audience.

There is no scientific consensus on the origins of our emotions, and the reasons for the differences in reaction to stimuli are often dependent upon personality, character, mood and motivation. However, sharing the same geographical space as past sufferers of atrocities acts as a powerful stimulus, causing a conscious and powerful reaction of horror, indignation, curiosity and sorrow. The hold that dark historical sites have on attendees cannot be disputed, provided that attendees feel the experience was authentic rather than contrived or manipulative. The authors Dallen Timothy and Stephen Boyd in “Heritage Tourism” (2003) discuss the relevance of authenticity over the attendees. The authors make the case that various levels of authenticity result in different reactions.

In consideration of the factors affecting the emotional reactions, including authenticity, this study will evaluate the Auschwitz site tour, the audience, and their experience.

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4. Methodology

This case study adopts a qualitative research method. Since the aim is to understand visitor’s experience when visiting Auschwitz, the information gathered was more descriptive than quantitative.

Primary research consisted of personal observations during a visit of Auschwitz, a questionnaire distributed to a group of visitors and a 40-minute focus group session with a couple attendees. Personal observations and emotional reactions provided understandings of the different aspects of the heritage site and tour. The questionnaire contained the audience’s profile, reasons for attending, expectations and feelings. The focus group session analyzed the impact of the Auschwitz experience.

Dr. Jennifer Otter Bickerdike also assisted in the research by providing her expertise in Dark Tourism and sharing her thoughts on this particular case study.

Secondary research included books, blogs, websites - including Auschwitz’s official website, as well as documentaries and video footage.

Books were used to help broaden the understanding of Auschwitz and the many themes involved in this study. Online sources helped expand the parameters of this case study.

And finally, documentaries and footage, about survivors and people’s visits, added to the depth and realism to the Auschwitz experience.
5. Primary Research

5.1 Observations

The Tour
The museum had simultaneous guided tours within the site. Each tour guide provided his or her group with headsets that allowed us to follow the tours clearly and without much effort as they drowned out all other noise. Whether intended or not, by doing so, the headsets ensured that people didn’t communicate and focused on the truly horrifying story that was being described. If you removed your headset for the briefest moment and all you could hear would be the shuffling of feet which made everything seem really creepy. Adding to the eeriness, the guide made sure that the group stopped at all the places where thousands of fates had been decided and explicitly pointed it out and paused for a few moments of silence as the group stood in contemplation. In retrospect, the tour guide’s explanation and delivery were very effective. In some instances, you could feel the anger and sadness radiating off of her. For example, she used “murdered” instead of “killed,” paused in all the right moments and even changed the tonality of her voice in a way that seemed genuine rather than overly dramatic.

The tour was designed to create the maximum emotional response, starting from the least gruesome and gradually leading up to the horrors of Auschwitz. First was a view of the living quarters, the bathrooms and the medical experimental building that contained piles of stolen belonging from the prisoners, such as pots, pans, clothes, shoes, glasses, wooden members for disabled people, glasses, hair brushes etc… To most visitors, the most horrid was an entire room filled with the shaved hair of the detainees. Then, the tour proceeded to the inhumane prisons and execution locations. Next, two floors were used to put Auschwitz in context. The first displayed images of Jewish culture, showcasing smiling children and warm, welcoming people in their lives before Auschwitz. In stark contrast to those happy images, the next floor was about the rise of Nazism. The group’s reaction was probably exactly what the tour guide designers intended: indignation and anger towards the Nazis as they watched footage of Hitler’s inflammatory speeches, book burnings and brainwashing sessions for German youths. The final stop was the
gas chamber and crematorium, the emotional apex of the tour. Auschwitz’s visit ended with the group walking past the hanging post, were the Nazi general commanding Auschwitz was hung.

Birkenau, which was a bigger scale operation then Auschwitz, was visited next. The group was first taken up the main tower where they could acknowledge the vastness of the site since they could not see the limits of this enormous camp. Due to the cost of maintenance, the museum knocked down most of the barns (many others had been burned by the Nazis at the end of the war to try and dissimulate the camp), instead they built small brick poles to mark the wooden barns where prisoners were kept. From high, thousands of poles dotting the surrounding terrain were visible. The group was then led into Birkenau and followed the train track to the lone coach where the tour guided pointed out in a very grave voice that they were standing specifically where thousands of fates had been decided; they were either condemned to the gas chambers or were taken into the barns. That was the group’s next destination but only after standing in silence for a minute. Next they were taken into a very long walk to the bathhouses that allowed them to absorb the scale of it all. The tour guides explained how prisoners had to walk to the bathhouses entirely naked in extremely cold conditions. The bathhouses were in reality disguised gas chambers, which were adjacent to large crematoriums where the bodies were burnt. The final stop on the tour was the memorial site built in honor of all those who were murdered at these camps. Flowers and candles decorated the monument. The group proceeded to lighting their own candles but not until the organizer did a small speech proclaiming that it was now our responsibility to share with everyone at home the inhumanity of Auschwitz, the group was also left with a warning that this war was not over, that neo-Nazism exists with their anti-Semitic agenda. Then a rabbi canted a Jewish prayer to mark the end of the visit.

The venue

The museum did an excellent job at maintaining the site as well as keeping everything authentic looking. The old stones were kept in the building, walking up stairs was a struggle at times since the stones were so old they were indented. The walls in all the buildings were filled with cracks
and stains and all the coloring was faded giving the rooms and aged appearance. The most obvious was the gas chambers in Auschwitz where you could see scratch marks and greasy stains on the walls. The lighting in those particular rooms was old style yellow lights, adding to its sinister appearance. All signage and text around the site were in Polish, English and Hebrew.

The attendees
On the way to the site, the tourists were joking and smiling and laughing on the bus. However, as soon as they entered Auschwitz, all smiles dropped and no one made an effort to talk to each other. Communication was isolated during the tour which gave everyone a chance to be free of conversation and absorb the experience. In Auschwitz, all attendees reacted in the same manner; quiet, keeping to themselves and unsmiling. Between Auschwitz and Birkenau, the group chatted but very few engaged in conversation about what they’d felt and seen. A few declared that they still didn't know what to make of it and could hardly believe it. Birkenau had a similar effect on everyone. However, in Birkenau, there were groups of teenagers laughing, talking, posing for pictures and running around the site. They had more or a tourist approach to Birkenau as opposed to our group’s somber one.
5.2 Questionnaire Results

The questionnaire was used to understand the group’s profile, background and therefore better understand their experiences.

1. What is your age and how did you come about visiting Auschwitz?

![Fig 1a](image1.png)

![Fig 1b](image2.png)

2. How did you first hear about Auschwitz?

![Fig 2](image3.png)
3. Why did you visit?

*Chart based on word usage*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appreciation of the place</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important place to see</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of curiosity</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interested in it</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need to witness it</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to visit</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to see it</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Other includes**

- A friend wanted me to go
- Out of respect to the people who died
- To remember what happened
- To try to understand the tragedy
4. Have you prepared yourself in any way for this visit?

- Conversation
- Mental Preparation
- Documentary
- Reading

**Fig 4**

5. Would you visit Auschwitz a second time? Why?

- Yes
- No

**Fig 5a**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Other includes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6. How did you feel about your experience?

*It is important to consider the way in which people wrote their responses*

- I think it will take a while to process what we have seen today it was a shock to not be so shocked at key moments. I think this is because it's too horrifying to comprehend.
- Glad to have visited. Enriched by the mixed group
- Most informed.
- Exhausted drain shattered but humbled inspired.
- I am pleased to have been. I knew facts but it feels very different to see it.
- Can’t answer the question.
• I feel very moved sad and shocked about the cruelty and horrors that humans did to other humans. I felt a strong connection and empathy towards the millions of victims finally I felt horrified with humane kind.
• It was very informative, shock me in many ways. It was also eye-opening.
• Very difficult to assimilate and understand my feelings.
• Overwhelmed and emotional.
• Emotional.
• Touched.
• Like I still cannot even begin to mention must've been like. Disgusted at how inhumane the Nazi German soldiers were. Scared at the possibility of it happening again.
• It was a good experience that has opened my eyes more made me more passionate about making sure nobody forgets the Holocaust.
• Very emotional and angry that this has that this was allowed to happen.
• I want to pursue every living Nazi through the courts.
• There are no words for the reaction I have to visiting.
• Great and a bit sad.
• I feel very moved and I'm glad I came however I still can't fully believe it happened and I feel very lucky to believe the way I do.
• Not shocking but surprisingly so huge.
• It was very shocking and moving.
• It was interesting, feel very tired position it in my world view - will time to sink in and reflect on.
• Moved, shocked.
• Can’t write about it.
• It is hard to know what to feel other than deep sadness.
• Shocked at the scale.
• I feel very sad about the human violence. I had a deep feeling all over my chest as an identification with the victims and made me think a lot about human behavior nowadays.
7. Would you class Auschwitz as a museum, a horror site, a heritage site… other?

![Fig 6a](image)

![Fig 6b](image)

![Fig 7](image)
8. In which ways did your experience match your ideas of Auschwitz? and/or differ from them?

- I wasn't expecting to see such normal buildings/basics as such.
- The horrors took place in many forms but all within a parameter of barbwire and among victims.
- I don't think it's hit me just yet.
- Similar to expected but much larger site and imagine.
- As expected I have visited other concentration camp so the experience was familiar but was more peaceful than expected.
- It matched my ideas pretty well but the feeling of seeing the dimension of this cruelty was something I didn't picture of a well. It was only then that I felt strongly connected with millions. I was also amazed with the size of the camps and the number of people that suffered.
- It was as horrific as I expected.
- I maybe thought it would be more interactive but it was more of the museum than anything.
- It did match my ideas but more so.
- Opened my eyes to the true horror.
- I learned a lot.
- Expected fewer tourists.
- Expected it to be more industrially developed
- Expected it to be less peaceful.
- It matched my ideas and choked me even more than I expected when I saw the objects like the hair.
- I did not expect Birkenau to be that big.
- Good to be here and connect with the lives of those people.
- It had the same horrifying affect that reading about it had.
- I came here to live the experience, I can assure that I did. Difficult as it was I felt very happy to have come.
- It made me realize that there is still more to learn and find out. I also didn't expect them, the Nazi, to reuse so much of other people stuff. eg. bags hair..
- It was far bigger than I thought.
• It was very similar to what I expected physically but emotionally even when I was ‘prepared’ it was shocking and strong emotions appeared.

• Was astounded by the scale. I thought I might be more disinterested but I feel exhausted instead. wasn’t sure of emotional respect.

• I was shocked by the lack of respect from some visitors. taking ‘selfies’ in front of significant areas.

• No comment

• I expected not to be able to fully comprehend Auschwitz when I got there, I was not able to.

• Broadened my thoughts

• I think that whatever idea we had about it previously doesn't match the real experience

• I couldn't imagine how large Auschwitz 2 was.
5.3 Focus Group

Focus group session with 2 Auschwitz visitors discussing their feelings during the experience and a few weeks later.
6. Discussion

Foley and Lennon\textsuperscript{11}, describe Dark tourism as “the presentation and consumption [by visitors] of real and commodified death and disaster sites” (2000:11). This case study does not focus on why tourists chose to attend Auschwitz, but rather on their journey throughout that consumption. Their experiences were somewhat related to their reasons for attending the site, their ages, and backgrounds.

Based on figure1, 50% of the group’s age is between 17 and 25, and their visit was funded. According to figure3, 22% of the group (CategoryA) visited Auschwitz because of this funding, meaning that they would not have gone otherwise. In CategoryB we have visitors who were motivated by a strong desire, including the 23% (fig1b) who’d first heard about Auschwitz through religious institutions. However, despite the fact that they came with different levels of motivation for the visit, both categories had similarly strong emotional responses. For example, in their written responses many members from both categories used words like “shocked” and “horrified” and agreed in the need to have the holocaust remembered. And most agreed that there was no need for a second visit, although 24% said they would return with friends or family (fig5b). Which leads to the clear understanding of the visitors that they might be needed to provide emotional support. Figure6b demonstrates that the main emotions are sadness, horror, and anger.

Although the emotional reactions were similar, there was a great variety in the ability to write about the experience (figs6). 39% wrote in great detail of their feelings, whilst 32% wrote a few sentences. 18% responded in a few adjectives such as shocked or horrified. Lastly, overpowered with emotion, 11% wrote that they were unable to respond to the question. Needless to say, the experience had a profound, emotional and thought-provoking effect. The comments demonstrated that many visitors might need to be provided with some emotional support following the tour.

\textsuperscript{11} First to define Dark tourism
Being Jewish or having another cultural link to Auschwitz also affects a visitor’s reaction. 23% of the Group was Jewish (Fig1b). Their reactions to the site was much more personal as it is part of their people’s history. In the video, “Auschwitz: Our Experience” (Torrente 2015), one of the interviewees also confirmed that because she was Jewish, she felt that the site affected her so much more than others. The same goes for Subject1 of the focus group; her experience was that much more emotional since her Jewish grandmother would have perished in the camps, had she not fled the country and that would have resulted in her having never been born!

According to Robinson, “Tourists move between the real and the imagined world with educated ease, and the power of the imagination cuts through the material to the extent that we can neither rely on the merely observable, nor the discrete.” (2012). In this case, the imaginative world that tourist can escape to includes all the ‘what ifs’. What if it had happened to me? What would I have done? Could it still happen? Another of the interviewees of “Auschwitz: Our Experience” (Torrente 2015) questioned why all the prisoners hadn’t rebelled. After all, their numbers were so great; if they all had, they could have been freed.

Although one can be literally paralyzed by fear, especially when faced with oppressive authority, imagining fear can be used as a tool to create reform and diligent awareness of - and opposition to - hate crimes and their ideologies. One of the most useful lessons from Auschwitz, as many in both categories declared, was that it taught them to be vigilant in the defense of human rights. As both focus group subjects declared, they could not help compare the antisemitism of the Nazis with the current rise of the extreme right in Europe and the islamophobic rhetoric of someone like Donald Trump. Fear has also made the attendees more appreciative of the small things in life. For example Subject1 makes sure to always tell her parents she loves them at the end of each conversation just in case it is the last thing they hear from her.
Clearly based on the responses of our group, dark tourism at Auschwitz is well designed in that the aims of the memorial are achieved. Robinson compares the heightened response and openness to education of tourists to the more passive reaction to a book or other media report of atrocities. When visiting sites, people are in a tourist state of mind. They are the audience, ready and eager to connect and identify with everything around them. Figure 4 shows that while 46% did not ready themselves in any way for the visit, bearing in mind that all knew about Auschwitz’s history, many went through various emotional forms of preparation placing them in a receptive mode.

Moreover, the importance of being in the physical space where these atrocities happened is irrefutable to dark tourism sites and can be attributed to the effects of what is called “psychogeography”\textsuperscript{12}. In his book, Christopher Tilley offers a new approach to landscape perception. He declares that people link spaces to the human activity that took place in them. They link them with things that they believe have eternal value, such as the earth, the sky, the constellation, the divinities, birth, and death. (Tilley and Kapferer 1994:13). As many mentioned in their comments, they had no conception of the sheer size of the operation. In the focus group, the subjects voiced how it felt wrong for the sun to be shining on such a place. To further the point, numerous documentaries have been made about Holocaust victims returning to Auschwitz, feeling that they needed to go in spite of the difficulty of it. In Albert Fish’s documentary Kitty Felix Hart, a holocaust survivor said: “I don’t know if I’m psychologically ready to see Auschwitz, I don’t know what it’ll do to me” (2012).

In addition to the effect of the physical presence in the landscape, tourists are also affected by the way in which the Auschwitz Memorial excels both in its site management and training of tour guides. Clelia Mattana, a well-known travel blogger, wrote that all visitors should take a guided tour: “I must say that at Auschwitz they choose their educators very well. Their sensitivity is really extraordinary.” (2015) As declared in the observations, the tour guide plays a key role as a _

\textsuperscript{12} The practice of exploring the urban environment while being led by curiosity and a paused sense of time and place. - Urban dictionary.
mediator to the venue. Both focus group subjects agreed that the tour guide was professional and genuine. The format of the tour, with its dramatic pauses and chambers of horrors, could have backfired if it wasn’t for the sense that the guide was compassionate and authentic. For example, the pauses of silence at certain locations felt like a way of honoring the victims rather than merely a dramatic tool to heighten the emotional tension.

It is irrefutable that seeing things for yourself and being in the space where it happened has a much bigger impact when visiting Auschwitz. However, there are many contributing factors that render the experience complete. For instance, careful placement of resources and additions can enhance dark tourism. In her book “The Tourist”, Lippard links between Marx’s semiotic theory and cultural experiences. “There are two parts in the experience, the model, which is the representation of the site and the second is influence, the transformations and changes brought upon due to the model” (1999:23). At Auschwitz, visual stressors act as models. The piles of hair, shoes, utensils, etc on display at the site help the observer to identify the victims as real people and provoke a reaction of horror and disgust at their mistreatment. Similarly, the addition of one Jewish culture themed floor and another of the Nazi culture offered context and added value and meaning to the tour of the historical site. Disgust with the Nazis was amongst many responses to the site; one person even went as far as demanding that all Nazis still living should be put on trial. (question6.16).
7. Conclusion

Although it is impossible to have precision when evaluating tourists’ reactions to Auschwitz, an overall impression can be gained. Certain subjects that had personal ties to Auschwitz had a more profoundly emotional reaction to it, the entire group shared sentiments that must be common to any right-minded mature visitor – reactions of horror, sadness and outrage. The venue itself, they way it was modeled, and the expertise and humanity of the tour guides excelled in keeping with the aims of the memorial and enhancing the experience of the tourists.

The Auschwitz memorial could, therefore, be considered as a successful Dark Tourism site since their aims and objectives are met. Visitors are educated about the Holocaust, they will always remember it since it had such a deep effect on them and they will seek to make sure that it never happens again. Thus, misgivings some might have about the less honorable motives for touring Auschwitz provide a weak argument when balance against the many positive results of the experience.

Visiting Auschwitz may have a different effect on each individual, but almost always results in deep emotional and psychological turmoil.

Perhaps there is a divide in Dark tourism site between places that like Auschwitz or Ground Zero13 provoke deeper questioning of human nature, history, cruelty etc, and the more memorial type of monument that are built in honor of someone that has past, such as Amy Winehouse or Elvis Presley. Both sites may have a common objective of remembering, however the distinction between them is great. Some might even argue that the nature of the later might not be as honorable and honest. Should the public encourage all these types of memorials? Is there an emotional need for them? Does visiting these less psychologically stimulating sites, make the more intense experiences easier?

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13 The World Trade Centre memorial site
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10. Appendix

1. Auschwitz and Birkenau

During World War II, Adolf Hitler, who was Germany’s chancellor from 1933 to 1945, established a policy known as “The Final Solution” to deal with the “Jewish problem”. This policy involved isolating the Jews of Germany and other European countries annexed by Germany in dehumanising and violent conditions. The situation escalated when the nazi built series of concentration and extermination camps in which they imprisoned millions of Jews, artists, educators, Gypsies, communists, homosexuals, the mentally and physically handicapped and others deemed unfit for survival in Nazi Germany.

Auschwitz, the largest of these camps, was built and operated by the Third Reich in Polish areas in 1940. Initially, the site was a prison for corrupt polish politicians. However, once Hitler’s “Final Solution” became Germany’s official policy, Auschwitz was turned into a death camp since its location was at the center of German-annexed countries and close to the train line, thus facilitating transportation.

Not all the prisoners were immediately killed. Some suffered a different fate as they were subjected to inhumane medical experiments. Others, who were deemed healthy enough to work were enslaved for the labor of munitions, synthetic rubber, and other products considered essential to Germany’s efforts in World War II. Furthermore, some worked as builders and assisted the creation of Auschwitz 2, also known as Birkenau.

Birkenau, the biggest of the Auschwitz facilities, was of 40 square kilometers and could hold approximately 90,000 prisoners. The majority of Auschwitz’s victim died at Birkenau. It was built in order to facilitate every process of the extermination.
The train transporting victims stopped beyond the gates of Birkenau. As soon as people got off, a doctor divided them into two groups. Those that are fit for labor and those that are not. The latter included countless pregnant women, children, elderly, and handicapped who were led into what the believed were communal showers. After stripping from all clothing and belongings, they unknowingly entered the gas chambers, were disguised as the bathhouses. All the bodies were then burned in the crematory ovens which the nazi conveniently built adjacently to the gas chambers.

Crematory ovens

In 1944 the defeat of Nazi Germany by the Allied forces seemed certain. In order to hide the horrors that they had committed in Auschwitz, the Germans began destroying evidence. Buildings were torn down, blown up or set on fire, and records were destroyed. In January 1945, Auschwitz was to be abandoned. Nazi guards marched approximately 60,000 detainees, accompanied by Nazi guards, departed the camp on foot in order to make it onto trains that headed towards concentration camps in Germany. Many died in what has come to be known as the Auschwitz death marches. Later that month, when the Soviet army entered Auschwitz, they found approximately 7,600 sick or emaciated prisoners who had been left behind. The liberators also discovered mounds of corpses, hundreds of thousands of pieces of clothing and pairs of shoes and seven tons of human hair that had been shaved from detainees before their liquidation. According to some estimates, between 1.1 million to 1.5 million people, the vast majority of them Jews, died at Auschwitz during its years of operation. An estimated 70,000 to 80,000 Poles perished at the camp, along with 19,000 to 20,000 Gypsies and smaller numbers of Soviet prisoners of war and other individuals.

For further detail:
http://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/auschwitz
http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/auschbirk.html
http://auschwitz.org/en/history/