

Chronological history of the camp at Mauthausen

The camp at Mauthausen and "extermination through labour" 1938-1945

Original text in Italian by Lucio Monaco

1938-9

After the *Anschluss* (the "annexation" of Austria into the Third Reich), construction starts on the main camp, on high ground overlooking the city of Mauthausen, near Linz, near a granite quarry ceded by the council of Vienna to DEST, a construction company wholly owned by the SS.

German, Austria, Czech and Bohemian prisoners are set to work building the camp (1938-9), most of whom arrive from the concentration camp at Dachau. Within three years, the number of prisoners involved reaches 8,000. In this period, the prisoners are placed in the following German categories: common criminals, "asocials", political inmates, Jehovah's Witnesses (known as German as *Bibelforscher*) and the Roma ("gypsies"). The centrepiece of the work at the camp is the granite quarry, which also provides the materials needed for the construction of the perimeter walls, the control towers and the entrance doors.

1940

The sub-camp (*NebenLager*) at Gusen, 4 km from Mauthausen, is constructed, and holds 4,000 prisoners by the end of the year). It is the first of 56 sub-camps, scattered across the whole industrial zone close to Vienna and in the wider High Austria area. They principally serve to occupy the prisoners in war material production (in many cases using machinery located in tunnels, to avoid Allies bombing raids), and in the construction of industrial infrastructure (production plants, the tunnels themselves etc).

The first foreign prisoners (i.e. not from territories incorporated into the Reich) arrive in March 1940, a group of 448 Polish inmates. They are soon followed by nearly 8,000 Spanish republican soldiers who had sought refuge in France (which is invaded and defeated by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy in summer 1940) of whom 1,600 would survive the war. Later waves include 4,000 Czech prisoners, and 2,000 Dutch Jews. The most numerous national group would ultimately be Poles, including many priests. Still in 1940, the first juvenile prisoners arrive, aged from 13-18 years old – they are usually relatives of the Spanish republican soldiers. By now, the camp and its sub-facilities holds 8,200 prisoners in total.

As is clear from the above deportations, most of the early prisoners are "politicals", a group that would increase in size as the war went on, later including striking workers, partisans and other resistance fighters of all types, and Soviet prisoners-of-war. Due to the increasing numbers of prisoners, and the rising death-rate (caused in no small part by the extremely harsh discipline and exploitation the prisoners have to endure), the camp is now equipped with a crematorium oven, to which two more would be added later. Crematoria would also be added to the sub-camps at Gusen (1941), Ebensee (1944) and Melk (1944).

1941

Himmler reclassifies Mauthausen a "level III camp"; (i.e. maximum security) dedicated to the destruction of its inmates, via labour or other means. By the end of the year, the main camp and its associated facilities hold nearly 16,000 prisoners; 8,500 are held at Gusen alone. Towards the end of 1941, the camp has taken the form that is still visible today. There are three specific areas of note:

1. the main camp, laid out at the top of a hill, fenced in on its southern side by a huge 4-metre high granite wall, and equipped with control towers and entrances, barbed wire and electrified fencing. On the northern side, the fence is incomplete, and barbed wire is used to seal the gap. The prisoners' barracks are located in this area, along with the roll-call square, the showers and disinfection area, the kitchens, and from 1941, the Bunker: a mainly-underground complex of cells, laboratories for medical experimentation, execution sites, the crematoria, and the gas chambers (see below).
2. the quarry granite, 100m high and 1km long, which is reached via a long staircase made of badly-made and haphazard stone stairs. Here, between 1,000 and 3,000 prisoners work, including those assigned to the "punishment squads" (the *Strafkommando*) who are forced to carry weights of more than 50kg up the stairs on their shoulders. Many prisoners would be pushed off the staircase or the quarry walls to their deaths in the works below by the guards.
3. the camp "hospital" (*Krankenlager*), a rectangular area that includes ten barracks, with kitchens and other facilities, located under the main camp alongside the road that leads into Mauthausen. Surrounded by electrified wire fencing, it is known as the "Russian camp" (the Italian prisoners called it the "Red camp"), since it had originally been intended to hold Soviet prisoners-of-war. But from 1943, it is used for sick and ill inmates, and becomes a discrete facility in its own right. The Soviet prisoners-of-war are now closed

into barracks 16-19 of the main camp (the quarantine barracks) or barracks n.20, which is separated from the other barracks by barbed wire, from which 500 prisoners attempt a mass breakout in February 1945 (only three inmates survive the attempt).

1942

The extension of the sub-camps connected to Mauthausen proceeds at great pace. On 30 April 1942, the head of the SS-WVHA (the main SS economic bureau for economic administration), SS-Obergruppenführer Oswald Pohl, issues an order to the camps to exploit the prisoners as slave-labour to the maximum (known as the "Pohl Circular"), to meet the ever-growing labour needs of the German war machine. The sub-camps grow out of the need to locate war production beyond the reach of Allied bombers (in tunnel complexes excavated in mountain ranges), and to decentralise and distribute the huge numbers of prisoners needed to carry out the necessary work (since they could not all be located in one camp, which would also have been too far from the various construction sites). The prisoners are now set to work in three main areas:

- 1) infrastructure construction (roads, electricity power stations, components production)
- 2) the transfer of war production facilities underground (which involved excavating tunnels and installing the necessary machinery).
- 3) arms production

Therefore in 1942, the main camp at Mauthausen assumes new functions in line with these developments. It now houses the:

- 1) central administration for the collection, selection and distribution of the slave-labourers, according to the requests for workers made by the various companies involved in war materiel production.
- 2) financial supervision of the proceeds the SS raised by "renting" out their slave-labourers to these companies.
- 3) central control of surveillance of the camps.

As a result, each new transport of prisoners that arrives in the zone under the jurisdiction of Mauthausen first goes to the main camp, where the prisoners are registered, selected and introduced to the extremely harsh discipline and work regimes at the camp, by means of the "quarantine" facility. Aside from serving to select and distribute the prisoners, Mauthausen also serves as a collection and elimination centre for those unable to work (including those rendered incapable of work by the treatment meted out to them in the prisons and the forced labour itself), and as an extermination facility for specific categories of "enemies of the Reich", above all Soviet prisoners-of-war (who are murdered with gas), Dutch Jews and a regular number of Czech intellectuals.

Jews deported to Mauthausen are generally arrested on political charges. Their fate is therefore incomparably worse than that of other prisoners: of the 90 Jews who arrive in 1940, 80 are already dead by the end of the year. The 2,600 Jews who arrive from Holland, Austria, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Romania between 1941 and 1942 are nearly all dead within one year of their arrival. The few remaining survivors are transferred to Auschwitz. Several thousand Hungarian and Polish Jews (who arrived from Auschwitz) reach Mauthausen in summer 1944. It is worth remembering that between 1938 and 1945, the total number of Jews sent to Mauthausen stands at nearly 39,000.

A vital role in the annihilation process is provided by the gas chambers, which utilises Zyklon-B. This is first used in May 1942, when 208 Soviet prisoners-of-war are murdered. In the course of four years, nearly 5,000 people are killed this way, including "dangerous" political prisoners, the sick and those unable to work (who are sent to the gas chamber from the *Revier* – the camp's so-called medical facilities). Between 1941 and 1942, sick and ill inmates at Gusen are killed via a mobile gas van on a regular run from Gusen to Mauthausen, in which up to 30 prisoners at a time are asphyxiated via carbon monoxide piped into the sealed back compartment of a modified truck. Finally, between August 1941 and December 1944, the gas chambers at Hartheim castle (located 20 km from Linz) is used to murder other sick and ill inmates, plus prisoners sent there from Mauthausen, Gusen and Dachau (known as the "14f13" programme). In total, 8,000 people are murdered this way, including some 5,000 transported from Mauthausen and Dachau. At the end of 1942, the Mauthausen complex holds 14,000 prisoners.

1943

The system of Mauthausen sub-camps and underground production sites across this part of Austria is now completed (the underground facilities produce synthetic fuel, jet fighters and conventional weapons). Each of these facilities was generally given a codename: Ebensee is codenamed "Cement", the St.Georgen facility near Gusen is "the Crystal Rock", Melk is "Quartz" etc. Thousands of prisoners are also set to work in external facilities, usually owned by the SS (the "*Goringwerke*"). The shifts are ruinous (12 hours at a time), even if the prisoners in some of these external sites have slightly better working conditions than those in the tunnels. But in many camps, work leads directly to death or physical incapacity in less than three months. The sick and ill are sent to the *Revier*, to the "Russian camp" at Mauthausen, or are simply killed via the gas chambers or other means.

From 1943, Italian prisoners start to arrive at Mauthausen (mainly partisans and anti-fascists). They are viewed by their German captors as traitors to the Reich, and by other prisoners as Fascist enemies (completely ignoring the reality of the political situation in Italy after Mussolini's fall on 25 July). This creates particularly difficult conditions for the Italian prisoners, which are only improved after many months. The first Italian transport (October 1943, with between 300-1000 people) arrives from the internment camp at Cairo Montenotte (which holds Italians from Gorizia, Trieste and Capodistria), deported to the Reich by Mussolini's new rump puppet Republic of Salò. Up to February 1945, there are around twenty transports, which latest historical research suggests comprises nearly 8,000 people. By the end of 1943, Mauthausen and its sub-camps now holds 25,000 prisoners (8,000 alone at Gusen).

1944

As transports to the camps from all across Europe become more frequent (mainly of "political" prisoners), convoys of Italian workers arrested after the wave of industrial strikes in March 1944 start to arrive at Mauthausen. On 11 March, a transport containing 597 deportees from Tuscany, Piedmont and Lombardy arrives at the camp. On 16 March, it is the turn of 563 prisoners sent from Piedmont, Lombardy and Liguria. Another 600 Italian prisoners arrive at the start of April, from Lombardy. During 1944, there are a total of fifteen transports from Italy. Women Italian prisoners (who mainly had been arrested during the industrial strikes) do not remain in Mauthausen, but are moved to Auschwitz or Ravensbruck.

Towards the end of 1944, the Nazis begin to evacuate the camps in the East, and Auschwitz, sending the survivors on murderous death marches to Mauthausen. The weakest prisoners are simply killed on arrival, the rest are sent onto the sub-camps. The total population of Mauthausen and its sub-facilities now stands at 72,000 (including 1,000 women).

1945

The massive overcrowding in Mauthausen (by March 1945 its various facilities hold 84,000 prisoners) and the lack of food causes conditions for the inmates to deteriorate even further. The influx of prisoners from Auschwitz (9,000 people, mainly Jews), Gross-Rosen, Sachsenhausen, Nordhausen and Ravensbrück increases, and to these inmates we must also add Jews sent to work on defence fortifications along the Austro-Hungarian border. In the western-most section of the "surveilled area" of Mauthausen, a campsite is erected, in which typhus, malnutrition and illness cause hundreds of deaths (most of the victims are then buried in mass graves, as the crematoria are no longer able to cope with the number of dead).

In April, a series of negotiations with the International Red Cross lead to the release of several hundred prisoners (mainly French). But between 20 and 28 April, several hundred other prisoners (definitely 650, but maybe more) are herded into the gas chamber in the main camp, transferred there from the *Krankenlager* or the *Revier* (in the "Russian camp"). A large number of Italian prisoners are included in the dead. On 5 May 1945, two Allied military trucks reach the camp, and the International Resistance Committee (including Italian prisoner Giuliano Pajetta), secretly formed by prisoners in March, takes control of the camp, liberating it with weapons taken from the Nazis. In the main camp, there are now around 20,000 prisoners, nearly all on the edge of death. More than 10% of these will die in the month after liberation.

Research indicates that, together with its sub-camps, Mauthausen holds around 230,000 prisoners in the seven years of its existence, with the dead believed to be 120,000. The most modern research suggests the following annual breakdown of these figures:

Year	1938	1939	1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945
Prisoners ¹	1,010	2,995	8,200	15,900	15,900	25,607	72,392	64,800
Deaths ²	36	445	3,486	8,114	14,293	8,481	14,776	36,214

⁽¹⁾ this is not the total number of prisoners, but refers to the highest registration number issued to a prisoner that year. Female prisoners are not included in these figures, since they were only present in any systematic manner in 1944 (when there were 959) and 1945 (1,734).

⁽²⁾ the figure for 1945 under-estimates the true figure by around 16,000 people, including those who arrived at Mauthausen already dead on transports from the East, and thus who died post-liberation. The overall death-rate for the Mauthausen complex has been calculated to be 52.5% of the total number of prisoners deported there.

(source: H. Maršalek, *Die Geschichte des Konzentrationslager Mauthausen*, Vienna 1980).

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