never change. But Auschwitz was something new on the earth. Its elaborate mechanisms for transporting, selecting, murdering and incinerating thousands of people a day constituted a kind of industrialization of death. It raised the terrifying possibility that with the advent of modern technology human nature really *had* changed. No wonder General Petrenko has been uneasy for 50 years. At Auschwitz that day, the 20th century saw itself in the mirror, and turned away in horror.

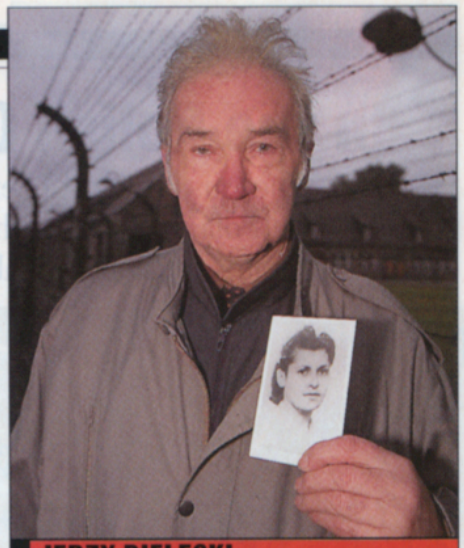
Liberation: When the Soviet soldiers reached the camp, they found the dead and dying waiting inside. The Nazis had evacuated most of the prisoners, forcing them to march west through the harsh Polish winter. The Red Army brought some food and medicine—and cameras to record the horrors.

Auschwitz was only one—the largest—of several Nazi extermination camps, and there's no reason to think it was the worst. It owes its prominence to its size and its special role as both a death camp for Jews and Gypsies (technically, the gas chambers were located in neighboring Birkenau) and the headquarters of a network of slave-labor camps housing Jews, Polish political prisoners, POWs, homosexuals and common criminals. Although newcomers were routinely told that the only way out of Auschwitz was through the chimney, that was never quite true. Along with more than a million who died there, tens of thousands lived there—worked, schemed endlessly and obsessively to stay alive—and even fell in love. Those who succeeded brought with them memories of how men and women lived in the shadow, the smell and dust of death. Their stories—some never before told—covering the period from the last great killing spree that began in the spring of 1944 to the "death marches" the following winter have been collected by NEWSWEEK correspondents on three continents for this, the 50th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz.

In the spring of 1944, as the war increasingly turned against the Germans, trains bearing the first of Hungary's Jews began arriving at Birkenau. Until then, Hungary's 800,000 Jews, although oppressed, had been spared the worst of the Nazi terrors, and it is likely that none of them had even heard the word Auschwitz. On one of these trains rode 17-year-old Rita Yamberger, her older sister Berta Morganstern and Berta's two children. Eighty people stood together in boxcars for four sweltering days and nights. There was a bucket to drink from and another that served as a toilet. At one stop, Yamberger got off to refill the water bucket and almost missed getting back on. As the train to Auschwitz began to pull away, she ran after it so she wouldn't be forgotten.

YAMBERGER'S TRAIN ARRIVED AT Auschwitz late at night and parked there until dawn, when the doors were flung open and the dazed passengers formed into lines for a "selection." Five by five, they marched past Mengele himself—"as beautiful as a statue," Yamberger remembers, in his glistening boots and crisp black SS uniform. Old people, sick people, young children and their mothers went to the left and potential workers to the right. Yamberger's sister saw that mothers with children were going off together, but, of course, she had no idea why. "So she put a scarf over my head so I would look older, and I took the hand of her son as if I was the mother," Yamberger remembers. "We all went left. We were happy because we were together. Then I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was Mengele. 'How old are you?' he said. In that second I was hypnotized. I had the boy by the hand. I told the truth. He shoved the boy away. He fell down, and I was thrown to the right. And that's how I didn't go to the crematorium."

Other families were more successful at staying together. Gloria Lyon, who was 14 when she was rounded up with her family in eastern Czechoslovakia, recalls how her



ANDY HERNANDEZ FOR NEWSWEEK

JERZY BIELECKI

The Lovers

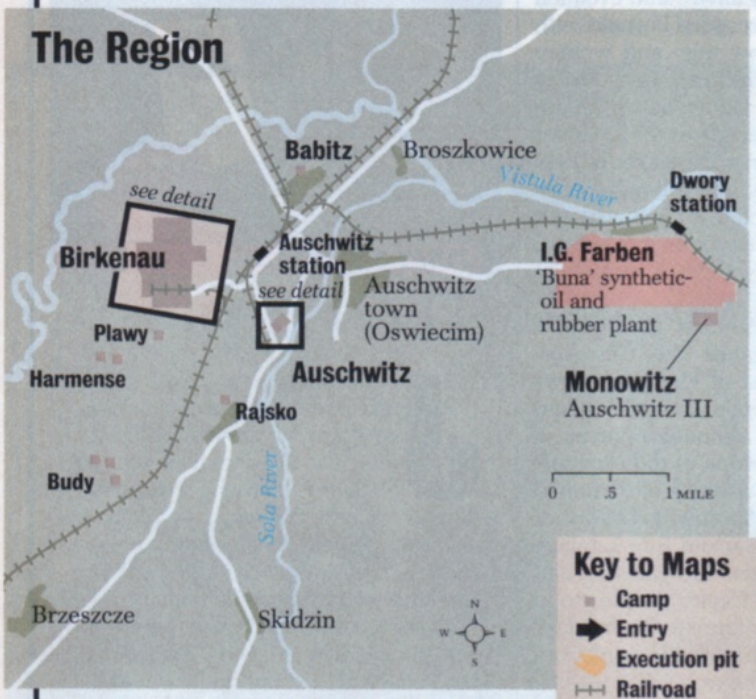
JERZY BIELECKI AMASSED THE pieces of the uniform over four weeks in the summer of 1944, receiving them from another political prisoner who worked in the storage area. Bielecki, a Polish Catholic, had reached a decision: to escape Auschwitz with Cyla Cybulska, a Polish Jew with whom he had fallen in love. "You are the only one in your family left," he told her. "Maybe I can save you." She laughed. But Bielecki told her he would come for her. In an SS uniform.

On July 21, he put it on, his hands shaking. He marched to the laundry room. He told the SS woman in charge that he had come for Cybulska, who was beginning to totter. Fright would be natural in a prisoner summoned for interrogation, but Bielecki was worried that she might collapse, sinking the whole plan. So he hurriedly told the SS woman, "I have to go. *Heil* Hitler!" To Cybulska, he barked, "Get moving!" She passed him on rubbery legs. They walked toward Budy, a farm where 350 prisoners worked. As they neared the checkpoint an SS guard strolled out. Bielecki pulled from his tunic a stolen pass and reported, "One guard and one prisoner returning to Budy." The guard unfolded the pass. He looked at Bielecki, then at Cybulska. There was a long pause. "*Danke,*" he said.

The escapees hid in grainfields for 10 days. Soon Bielecki hooked up with the Resistance; he hid Cybulska with friends. When the war ended, each thought the other was dead. But in 1983 Cybulska, a widow in Brooklyn, N.Y., learned that Bielecki was alive. She wrote to him and in June flew to Cracow. Bielecki, 62 and long married, met Cybulska, 63, with 39 roses—one for every year since Auschwitz.

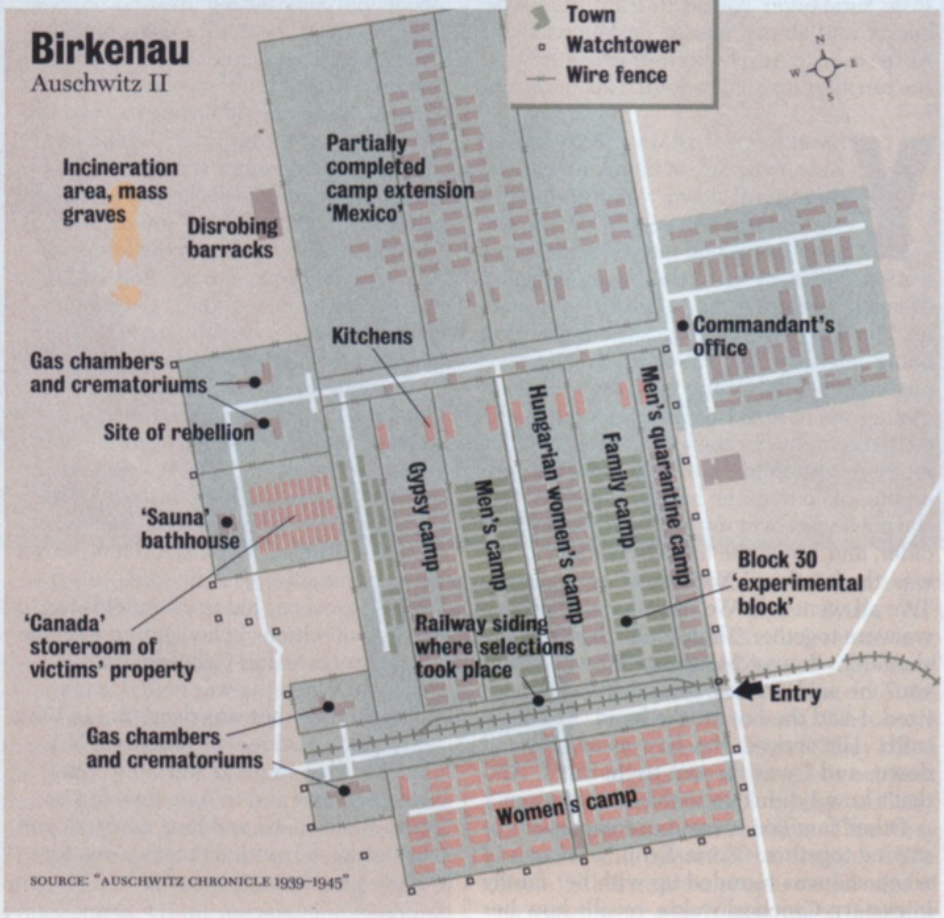
In the Polish Countryside, Five Miles of Death

The Auschwitz concentration camp was actually dozens of camps clustered in southern Poland. Most of the gassings were done in Birkenau. Once the camps were built, many of the slave laborers worked in the I.G. Farben plant near Monowitz.



Block 10: Research station, medical "experiments"
Block 11: Jail and punishment, the "death block"
Block 20: Infectious-disease infirmary. Housed "treatment room" where people were killed with phenol injections.
Block 21: Prisoners' infirmary
Block 24: Prisoners' office

Key to Maps
- Camp
- Entry
- Execution pit
- Railroad
- Town
- Watchtower
- Wire fence



SOURCE: "AUSCHWITZ CHRONICLE 1939–1945"

Prisoner Identification

Triangular badges were used to classify and label registered prisoners after their arrival. Those chosen to go straight to the gas chambers were not given badges.

- Jewish "race violators"

Political detainees:
- Jewish
- P — Polish
- German
- F — French

Common criminals:
- Jewish
- Other

Asocial prisoners:
- Jewish
- A — Labor-re-education prisoner
- S — Security detainee
- Homosexuals
- Gypsies
- Jehovah's Witnesses
- Other

SOURCE: "AUSCHWITZ CHRONICLE 1939–1945" BY DANUTA CZECH, U.S. HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

12-year-old sister, Annuska, was sent off with the old people and children, but managed to sneak back into the other line and rejoin the family. "My mother was very angry that she did this," Lyon said, "because we conjectured that the old people will take care of the children, and our group would have to do the hard work." Never was disobedience in a child better rewarded; both sisters survived the war and are still alive.

Sometimes the inmates who met the trains and escorted the victims to the gas chambers would—at the risk of their own lives—whisper to young mothers to give their babies to older relatives. Not many obeyed, of course. Helen Farkas, arriving at Auschwitz as part of an extended family from Transylvania, recalls that "my sister Ethel said, 'He's crazy. What do they mean I should give my child to an older person?' " But in the confusion the baby began to cry, and her mother-in-law took charge of him and disappeared off to the left; guards beat Ethel back when she tried to join them. The sisters, selected for work, were stripped and shaved to the skin. "We started to look for each other, shouted each other's name," Helen says. "We couldn't recognize each other, naked, without hair. When we found each other, we started laughing, we laughed so hysterically it turned into crying."

SO THE TRANSPORTS ARRIVED, with their cargos of innocent flesh, from anywhere the SS could lay their hands on a Jew: France, Holland, Slovakia, Greece and, of course, Hungary, until the government halted the deportations in mid-July, after 438,000 Jews had been shipped to Auschwitz in little more than two months. The victims, unsuspecting, walked to the gas chambers under the blank and baleful gaze of the SS, and then were turned into smoke that blackened the skies, and a stench so awful and pervasive that Lyon lost her sense of smell for nearly five decades after. Those selected for work were shorn, tattooed with a number on their left forearm, issued uniforms, bowls and spoons and turned out into the barracks. Hundreds slept in triple-tiered rows of bunks. The newcomers faced the scorn of the Polish and Czech Jews who had come earlier. "They told us, 'While you were going to theaters, we were already here'," recalls Judy Perlaki, who was brought to Auschwitz from a town in Hungary in May. The religious ones would pray. The old-timers taunted them: "'Go ahead, pray. But do you know where your mother is? Right up in that chimney'."

The new inmates entered a life of roll calls, beatings and work, punctuated by surprise selections for the gas chambers, which the Nazis kept busy even if no trains arrived. The roll calls were held twice a day, always in the open, and prisoners stood at attention until the count was complete, which might take several hours. This was hard enough even for prisoners who weren't suffering from the camp's rampant diarrhea. Standing became even harder, naturally, as Poland's harsh winters set in. *Kapos*, the prison trusties—many of them criminals—whom inmates feared almost as much as the SS, roamed the ranks. They would hit anyone who stepped out of place, or stamped his frozen feet, or whom they felt like hitting. By a whim of the commandant, an orchestra of inmates was commissioned to serenade the prisoners as they marched off to the factories, mines and construction sites. "This was the unreal thing: this beautiful music," says Rachel Piuti, who came to Auschwitz in 1944 from a labor camp in central Poland. "We marched out, the music accompanied us. We marched back, the music welcomed us. This is why it seemed already like life after death." The orchestra also played for the deportees on their way to gas chambers, and one inmate remembers the elderly Hungarian men tipping their hats appreciatively as they marched by.

An inmate's rations were ersatz coffee in the morning, a pint or so of watery soup for lunch and a half pound or so of bread for dinner. A person doing heavy labor outdoors obviously could survive this diet for no more than a few weeks or months. So those who lived, by definition, had some means of obtaining extra food—a skill the SS valued, a job where they could steal, or a protector somewhere in the camp. A large number of the survivors worked in the unit where the belongings of new arrivals were meticulously sorted, tagged, logged, stored and immediately stolen. The warehouses were known as "Canada," after that fabled land where everyone had warm socks and cigarettes. In August, Siggi Wilzig, a German Jew who had been in Auschwitz since 1942, landed one of the most sought-after positions in the camp, organizing the Canada warehouse. One whole room was for storing toilet paper—"a huge room, 12 or 15 feet high full of toilet paper. It just stayed there and no one knew why." He had labeled each roll and stacked them in order as the Germans wanted, and then filled the insides of the tubes with rings, watches and other small valuables he could barter for food.

Another job which provided enough to eat was *sonderkommando*—the Jewish prisoners who met the trains, escorted the condemned to the gas chambers and then hauled their bodies to the crematoriums. "When they got off the train, they had to strip in the dressing room," says Henryk Mandelbaum, who worked as a sonderkommando

MARC BRYAN BROWN

IRENE HIZME AND RENE SLOTKIN

The Twins

RENE SLOTKIN AND HIS TWIN sister, Irene Hizme, remember the concentration camp as a bleak patchwork of smells and pain. The acrid wooden bunks. The medical experiments they bore without crying. The memories are nearly primal, because the Czech twins were not quite 6 when they arrived in Auschwitz-Birkenau in late 1943.

From the beginning, the Germans made "special" use of the twins, housing them in Czech family camps set up for propaganda purposes. In July 1944 the family camp in Birkenau was liquidated. "I didn't understand what was going on, except they were taking our mother away," says Irene, now 57. "She was screaming and we were screaming," she says. The twins were separated. Josef Mengele, whom the children called "our doctor," stepped up his experiments. René was the "control," while Irene underwent injections and surgery. "I knew even as a child that I didn't dare make a sound . . . Whatever was done to me made me sick." Once Mengele gave her a piece of candy after cutting her open. That flash of normal life "made me feel horrible."

As the Russians drew closer, all the prisoners in René's barracks were herded onto a truck. "I knew I was on my way to die," says René. "Then here comes Dr. Mengele in his green convertible." Mengele stopped the transport. Only he could kill his twins. Days later, René was marched out of Auschwitz with most of the prisoners. But Irene, too weak to walk, collapsed among the dead by her barracks. A Polish woman scooped her up and took her home. An American couple adopted Irene and they searched for two years until they found René in Prague.

in the fall of 1944. "Whole families went in, supposedly to take showers. When the chamber was more than half filled, they realized something was wrong. There was commotion. The SS beat them brutally with sticks." The sonderkommandos' was hard physical work, made worse by the burden of never knowing when a relative might turn up in the gas chamber. Mandelbaum tells of one legendary sonderkommando who voluntarily walked into the gas chamber with his own family; and another, who encountered his mother and assured her until the last minute that she was only being taken to the showers. For that sin, the sonderkommando's own colleagues were said to have killed him themselves.

SOME PEOPLE SCREAMED IN THE gas chambers, at least one group sang the Czech national anthem and some prayed. Sonderkommando Yehoshua Rosenblum escorted a venerable rabbi to the gas chamber and warned the naked old man that he was going to die. "I told him he should say a prayer: 'Put something on [meaning a hat; Jews pray with their heads covered] so you can say a prayer before you die.' I had a chance now to talk to someone about what was going on here. 'Children, parents who never did anything in their lives—why should such a thing happen?' He said: 'Quiet. It is forbidden to complain; this is the will of God. You cannot answer these questions.'

"He told me: 'Tell the world what these evil persons are doing to the Jews'." But Rosenblum answered: "Rabbi, today it's you, tomorrow me." All the sonderkommando expected to wind up in the crematoriums themselves eventually; it was part of the job. The Nazis assured their silence by periodically killing them and starting fresh with a new batch.

One Jew who escaped the gas chambers that summer was Roman Friester, who was 15 and an orphan when he arrived in Birkenau from a small labor camp elsewhere in Poland. He talked his way into a job by volunteering as a specialist in running a lathe, a machine he had never laid eyes on. Survival had a cost. Lying in his bunk one night, he was raped by another prisoner, an older man who had access to food. "He put his hand with a piece of bread into my mouth. I badly wanted this bread. I wanted to swallow the bread quickly before he finished, so he would have to give me another piece of bread. I got a second, and a third.

"He went off and in a moment I realized that I didn't have my prisoner's cap. Any prisoner at the morning roll call without his cap was shot. He wanted to liquidate me and so he stole my cap.

"That night, I stole a cap from some other prisoner. So the next morning, some other prisoner was killed instead of me. I never looked to see who it was."

One more prisoner killed—who was to notice? Lives were saved and lost all the time that summer. Max Garcia, a Jew from Amsterdam, was saved by his appendix. After four days of severe stomach pains, he was sent to the camp hospital, which often would have been a ticket to the crematorium. But the SS surgeon had never seen a case of acute appendicitis and decided to open up Garcia for the experience. Sal De Liema was saved by a kapo, who had smashed his eyeglasses out of spite. Shortly after, he went through a

Newly shorn women lined up in camp, weary men waited to die

58 MONTHS OF HORROR

From the beginning, it was a loathsome place of death, torture and depravity. By the middle of 1944, the stench of burning human flesh filled the air. At Auschwitz, murder had become a technological feat.

APRIL 1940
Heinrich Himmler gives the order to establish Auschwitz. Two months later the first inmates—728 Polish political prisoners—arrive and Rudolf Höss takes command. With an influx of Soviet POWs, the camp begins to grow.

Himmler (middle) visits camp

OCTOBER 1941
With orders to make Auschwitz ready to exterminate Jews, construction begins on Birkenau: crematoriums, watchtowers and electrified barbed wire—where some commit suicide.

JULY 1942
The first transports from Holland join Jews from all over Europe, who begin to arrive by the thousands. Those who live long enough to be "processed" could end up in one of roughly 40 subcamps, where hard labor and brutality are their daily bread.

After a suicide

MAY 1943
Josef Mengele takes over as camp doctor at the Gypsy Family