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completely barred from public schools.11 Bauer writes that by 1 January 1939, only Jewish-run organizations could hire Jews, and that if a business was taken over by Germans, then no Jewish person could work for that company again. The ultimate goal of this process was to force all Jews out of the country. The results were panic and a massive migration of Jews, people who had once been good citizens of either Germany or Austria.12

THE NAZI CONCENTRATION CAMPS

When the Allies were liberating the concentration camps at the end of the war, the most notorious image of the remains of Nazi Germany were photographs of the hollow-faced survivors of the Holocaust.

From as early as 1921, Hitler warned the world that concentration camps would be a major part of his new society.13 Almost immediately after coming to power, the SA established small detention centers throughout Germany. Gilbert notes that on 9 March 1933, a scant two months after Hitler took national power, “the SS sent thousands of critics of the regime, including many Jews, to a so-called ‘concentration camp,’ at Dachau, near Munich.”14 Dachau was the first major concentration center, expanding to accommodate 5,000 prisoners by the end of March.15 Other state-sponsored camps quickly sprang up throughout Germany. By the early fall of 1934, fully 80,000 people had been incarcerated.16

The biggest impetus for the Nazi concentration camp system occurred in May 1934 when the SS took over operation from the SA, and they consolidated most of the camps into larger concentrations. Theodor Eicke, the former head of the Dachau camp, was appointed by Himmler to the position of Inspector of Concentration Camps.17 His job was to reorganize the system. A highly competent administrator, Eicke closed all the SA camps, standardized the operations of the camp system, and created the SS Death’s Head guards. The administration of the camps remained under the control of Eicke, and the Gestapo was in charge of the incarceration and release of prisoners. By the early summer of 1935 five major camps existed in Germany: Esterwegen, Lichtenburg, Moringen, Dachau, and Sachsenburg.18

Buchenwald was created in the summer of 1937 near Weimar in
Thurgia when Sachsenberg and Lichtenburg were closed. Buchenwald

had the distinction of being the first major concentration camp to fall into the hands of the Western Allies while it still had a full population of prisoners. The U.S. Army had earlier discovered an abandoned Nazi camp at Natzweiler, France, near the end of 1944; the Soviets had come upon Auschwitz, Poland, in January 1945. On April 5, the U.S. Army, however, found fresh evidence of atrocities on a large scale when they overran recently abandoned camps at Ohrduf and Nordhausen-Dora. But these discoveries had not fully prepared Allied troops and their commanders for the sight of the sprawling camp at Buchenwald near Weimar in central Germany, which they reached on April 11, 1945. It held 21,000 starving and ragged prisoners and was complete with crematoriums, execution rooms, and a hospital used for medical experiments on prisoners.19

As Hitler propelled Germany toward war, the concentration camps grew even more full, as they became sources of forced labor as well as prisons for Jews and other political unwanteds for the Nazis. Camps closer to SS factories and industrial centers, such as Sachsenhausen north of Berlin, began to spring up when prisoners also became sources of forced labor. More pressure was put on the camp system as Germany expanded its territory.

After the invasion of Poland and the USSR (with three million and one million Jews, respectively), the population of the camps exploded. Additional camps, including Auschwitz, were quickly and efficiently constructed in the newly occupied territory. Poland, which had a legacy of anti-Semitism even before the war, became a nightmare of historical proportions as extermination and concentration camps littered the landscape. Auschwitz, located near Cracow, was established in June 1940 with Rudolf Hoess as the founding commandant. He and five other SS men arrived in Auschwitz on 29 April. Thirty more Germans, all convicted criminals from Sachsenhausen, arrived on 30 May to serve as Kapos, the title given to prisoners in charge of other prisoners. Jews from the town of Auschwitz eventually were forced to fix up the site, which had been an Austro-Hungarian artillery base during World War I.20 Auschwitz became a large complex of three different camps and thirty-six subcamps. One of the camps held political prisoners; an-
other one, Birkenau, which could house up to 100,000 prisoners, held the Final Solution gas chambers and used Zyklon-B gas as the method of mass extermination; and the last one maintained crematoria capable of simultaneously cremating 2,000 bodies. There was no limit to the inhuman treatment at Auschwitz—even the medical staff, people trained and sworn to alleviate human suffering, administered their own version of cruelty against the Jews and other prisoners.

The infamous Dr. Joseph Mengele, also known as the “Angel of Death,” was the chief medical officer at Auschwitz. Mengele, ambitious for notoriety in medicine, performed medical experiments on living Jews, “injecting them with phenol, petrol, chloroform or air, or [ordered] SS medical officers to do so.” Mengele was also interested in genetic experiments with twins, reportedly hoping to increase the German race. Gilbert reports that among some of Mengele’s experiments were two twins who died as a result of an experimental operation, a Jewish women who was killed on his command so he could perform a comparative autopsy with her dead twin sister, and a triplet sibling on whom he performed a “postmortem” while the child was still alive.

Gilbert notes that following his arrival at Auschwitz, Mengele took responsibility for the selection of which new arrivals or patients in the infirmary were sent to their immediate death in the gas chamber. Mengele managed to avoid capture after the war, fleeing first to Argentina and then to Paraguay in 1960, when Israeli agents were closing in. Mengele’s remains, removed from a grave in Brazil, were positively identified in 1985.

Auschwitz did eventually develop a rather extensive resistance movement. Reports of the genocide practiced in Birkenau did not reach the rest of the world until 1944, when three Jewish prisoners managed to reach Slovakia. A major escape was attempted, but all 250 escapees were eventually shot and another 200 were killed as accomplices. As the Soviet Army was closing in on the camp, SS soldiers started dismantling the camp, and on 18 January orders were given to evacuate the remaining prisoners into Germany. As described in Night, this evacuation was mostly done on foot, and many prisoners were too weak to survive. The death march from Auschwitz proved to be a nightmarish trip, as the SS shot tens of thousands of Jews along the way. Although a few Jews managed to escape and find hiding places until they were rescued by the
advancing Soviet Army, for most people the march became an agonizing dance with death.

Despite the harsh treatment by the SS, there were some Germans who did help some Jews escape death. Oskar Schindler is reported to have saved over 1,500 Jews by having them work in his factory. Steven Spielberg made a movie, Schindler’s List, about his efforts to save Jews, and it won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1994.

THE FINAL SOLUTION

Like a rage that ran through Nazi Germany and occupied Europe, the Final Solution attempted to annihilate the Jewish people. This Nazi process followed several stages. In their concerted effort to make whole areas of Germany “Jew-free,” the Nazis at first tried to expel the Jews from their homes and villages. Emigration was the next step in the process. Forced to sell their property for whatever they could get, more than half of the 1933 German Jewish population, 500,000 people, had emigrated by 1938. Emigration was further complicated by the fact that other countries wanted proof that those wishing to emigrate could support themselves. And more often than not, there were strict limitations on the foreign exchange of money. What was exchanged was done so at exorbitant rates. By the time even the wealthiest Jew had emigrated, not much of their estate was left.

Despite the unfair hardships being placed on them, the rest of the world’s acceptance of German Jews was less than enthusiastic. During the 1930s the whole world was in an economic slump, and no one seemed very willing to increase the number of people in their labor markets. Those that were accepted usually were farmers and miners; the German Jewish professional class was not particularly welcomed at all. Anti-Semitism played a large part in the limits of Jewish immigration as well; this attitude has never been an exclusively German phenomenon. The Jewish people really had no place to go.

In 1938 the condition of the German Jews reached a crisis point. As the Nazis moved toward war with their European neighbors, their policies toward the Jews grew more radical. Concerned about the problem, President Roosevelt organized an international conference, but the conference ended up “largely stating what they