

# **Saving Auschwitz: Management, preservation, and salvation of the Holocaust symbol**

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## **Introduction**

Saying the word speaks for itself. It is estimated that between one million and 1.5 million people were murdered in Auschwitz and that up to 1.35 million of them were Jews.<sup>2</sup> Thousands of Poles, Sinti and Roma, and Soviet prisoners of war were also murdered. Families were brought by train from Germany and Nazi-occupied territories, were separated from one another on the ramps, and all those deemed unfit for labor—the infirmed, children, the elderly—were told they would take a shower. They were packed into a room, told to strip naked, and then herded into the gas chambers. Instead of water pouring out from the overhead nozzles, Zyklon B gas poured in.

Established by Germans in 1940, in the suburbs of the small town of Oswiecim annexed by the Third Reich, its name was changed to Auschwitz which also became the name of “Konzentrationslager” Auschwitz. It was a “hybrid,” having the dual function of exterminating and hard labor. Its death factory was established to kill primarily Jews and became part of the Final Solution with the construction of the gas chambers in 1942. Its death factory was constructed forcibly by the hands of the prisoners, mainly Poles. The site consisted of Auschwitz I (“Stammlager” or base camp); Auschwitz II—Birkenau (“Vernichtungslager” or extermination) and Auschwitz III—Monowitz, also known as Buna-Monowitz, a labor camp. Birkenau is the German translation of Brzezinski which means birch forest, and it referred to a small Polish village that was destroyed by the Germans to make way for the construction of a death factory which had the mission of total annihilation. Unable to cope with the influx of transports to Auschwitz I, most cattle cars diverted to Birkenau, where victims underwent cruel selection, separation of loved ones, and mass extermination.

The original tracks, gas chamber and crematorium ruins, the guard tower, ash pits, barracks—all of it, stands as an authentic testimony; a living will bequeathed to humanity. It has transcended into becoming the worldwide Holocaust symbol. This paper focuses on the management challenges to save Auschwitz from total destruction and the establishment of an

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endowment plan for its future, due to the initiative of the director Dr. Piotr Cywinski and cooperation by the international community.

## 1. Description of the Unimaginable

The location of Auschwitz-Birkenau is about an hour train ride from Krakow in Southern Poland. Built within the small industrial town of Oswiecim, the site is easily accessible from the train, approximately one kilometer and a half by foot to reach it. This author had the opportunity to visit the memorial site on two occasions: August 2004 and October 2011 as part of a research trip.<sup>3</sup> Upon arrival, especially if it is a first visit, one may be taken aback by the hamburger joint near the entrance, souvenir shop, and machines to buy drinks. The main entrance located in Auschwitz I consists of brick barracks, a visitors' center, and a parking lot for visitors. To get into the site, one must walk through the infamous Arbeit Macht Frei gate.



Figure 1. View from window where author slept in Auschwitz I. It looks out at the infamous brick barracks.

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<sup>3</sup> As part of the research trip, the author slept in Auschwitz I in a former building used by the SS in October 2011.



**Figure 2. From window where author slept. View of chimney from gas chamber and crematorium (left).**

Birkenau is located approximately three kilometers from Auschwitz I, and there is a shuttle bus which transports visitors to the second site. Those who do not realize they should visit Birkenau do not experience Auschwitz in its entirety. Operated and managed as one unit, they are also separate entities, providing the viewer with two perspectives combining to make up the whole and complete picture of the hell which happened there. Each one is dependent on the other to give the visitor the complete story. Graphic in nature with its imprints of ash pits, tracks, crematorium ruins, and remnants of barracks as well as those which still remain, the massive totality of destruction reels the senses. The enormous size of the site makes the Nazi death factory all the more an unimaginable reality.

Auschwitz-Birkenau is the largest site of 190 hectares split unevenly between each. The infamous Auschwitz I has 20 hectares and 170 hectares is the area of Birkenau.<sup>4</sup> Auschwitz I consists of brick barracks, many of which are opened and consist of sub-museums devoted to the commemoration of the multitude of victims. Barrack 27 is the Memorial Museum of the Martyrdom Struggle and Destruction of the Jews. There is also a Memorial Museum to the Roma and Sinti, Memorial Museum to Polish Prisoners; all located inside former barracks of prisoners. Barrack 10 is sealed off. It is where medical experiments mostly done on women were performed. The administration buildings are also located inside former prisoners' barracks and SS buildings, including the guesthouse where the author slept. Barrack 12 houses the educational department of Auschwitz. The barracks, used for modern-day purposes, merge death with life and where possible, everything is used. The main permanent exhibition is housed in one of the barracks and consists of an endless array of hair, crutches, Jewish prayer shawls, personal objects, baby clothes, mounds of shoes, prisoner uniforms, portraits of prisoners, bowls and spoons, suitcases, glasses, toothbrushes, shaving brushes—all which need to be preserved and meticulously conserved. One cannot help wonder how this is done by the professionals who handle the task. The average visitor does not ponder about this but gazes at the objects in awe and lingering shock. Auschwitz I also have an intact gas chamber and crematorium as well as prison cells revealing the conditions from earlier to later stages of prison accommodations.

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<sup>4</sup> Auschwitz and Birkenau are 49 acres and 420 acres respectively.



Figure 3. Ovens and gas chamber in Auschwitz I. Photo taken by author.



Figure 4. Glasses and shoes which need to be properly preserved. Auschwitz I, taken by author.

*"The more you work here the more you don't question why but for whom—for the memories, the prisoners, and for people to get the chance to see what happened here."* -Jolanta Banas Maciaszyczyk, Head of Conservation.

The largest focus for management of the Birkenau complex involves maintenance of its huge grounds. There are carpenters, electricians, and painters who work laboriously repairing wooden and brick barracks, depending on their needs; workers fixing the drainage system to preserve the crematorium ruins and keep them from disintegrating, and laborers who meticulously clean and maintain the grounds. Those responsible for security, patrol in a vehicle and on foot the large area, to prevent vandalism and provide a feeling of safety in this wide and eerie space. The authentic ruins are part of the Birkenau memorial site. At the rear of the site is a memorial and monument, where ceremonies take place. The original tracks sprawl through the length of the site. It was on these tracks that the cattle trains of

death transported the hundreds of thousands perished. Wooden barracks and brick barracks line the horizon of this death place. Ruins of barracks are visibly seen. The crematorium and gas chamber ruins are left out in the open, with no mercy from nature's elements, a way to leave them as untouched and unhampered authentic memorials for hundreds of thousands who were annihilated. The ruins stand as testimonies of the heinous acts.

## **2. Plea for Auschwitz and the Auschwitz Birkenau Foundation**

Despite its “popularity” on the world stage and despite the fact that the site is on the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites, Memorial Site and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau has experienced its own set of challenges. In 2010, Birkenau came under threat because of flooding and the Auschwitz I gate was stolen. Time has taken its toll. Although it is funded by Poland's Ministry of Culture, it is an unrelenting financial challenge to maintain and preserve its 155 structures and 300 ruins, kilometers of roads, barbed wire and fencing, hundreds of thousands of documents and personal belongings of the victims—all evidence of the crimes. Grappling with it all, conservation work was carried out sporadically, with the most urgent repairs implemented. Since the end of World War II, the entire financial burden fell on Poland, preserving the countless testimonies and documents. In 2003, the Lauder Foundation contributed to the establishment of a conservation laboratory, the only one of its kind on a Holocaust memorial site. But with the serious threat of preservation and understanding its financial plight and the race against time, the Auschwitz director made a plea to the international community:<sup>5</sup>

This place is important for all of us. This is where we can most fully understand the tragedy of a Europe plunged into war and mutual hatred. Here too, the younger generations can best understand how much we must preserve site in order for the future to be different. Auschwitz remains the most comprehensible explanation of the post-war struggle for human rights. I believe that today every mature democracy depends on educating its young people in such a way so that they understand the profound state efforts to build a different world. It might not always be a success, and it might not be completely ideal, but it will be different. That is why I think that at the moment, when the last eyewitnesses to those tragic times are passing away, the preservation of Auschwitz is becoming a truly shared responsibility.

The challenge for conservation was based on analysis of all the objects and it was decided that the barracks were in danger of collapse or destruction. According to the conservation director: “Forty buildings altogether, visitors can enter into fourteen depending on the condition of the building. Another challenge was the crematorium ruins. We finished an important project with crematorium III in Birkenau. We wanted to achieve the goal to secure the ruins and there was movement on the ground from erosion. We had to save the

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<sup>5</sup> Dr. Piotr Cywinski. *The Preservation of Auschwitz-Birkenau Handbook*, p. 32

underground from pressure and do drainage because of the rain” (J. B. Maciaszczyk, personal communication, February 11, 2011). In an interview conducted with Auschwitz’s conservation director, conserving Auschwitz-Birkenau is very intricate and intensive. All the areas are urgent and priorities need to be decided by the professional team.

With the grappling and passing of time along with the ongoing deterioration of the material testimony to Auschwitz, the Auschwitz museum was obliged to undertake complex, long-term conservation tasks. The Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation, established in 2009 assumes that the annual sum of four to five million Euros will make it possible to plan and systematically carry out essential conservation work at the Memorial and Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau. It has dedicated itself to raising a Perpetual Capital Fund of 120 million Euros. According to Jacek Kastelaniec responsible for fundraising for the site, "it is a universal cause and this is our main idea that needs to be understood by everybody. It should not be only a question of people with Jewish roots. It is not enough. It is humanity and it could happen to everybody. For me it is important to keep the symbol of this whole tragic history and to keep it going” (J. Kastelaniec, personal communication, February 9, 2011).

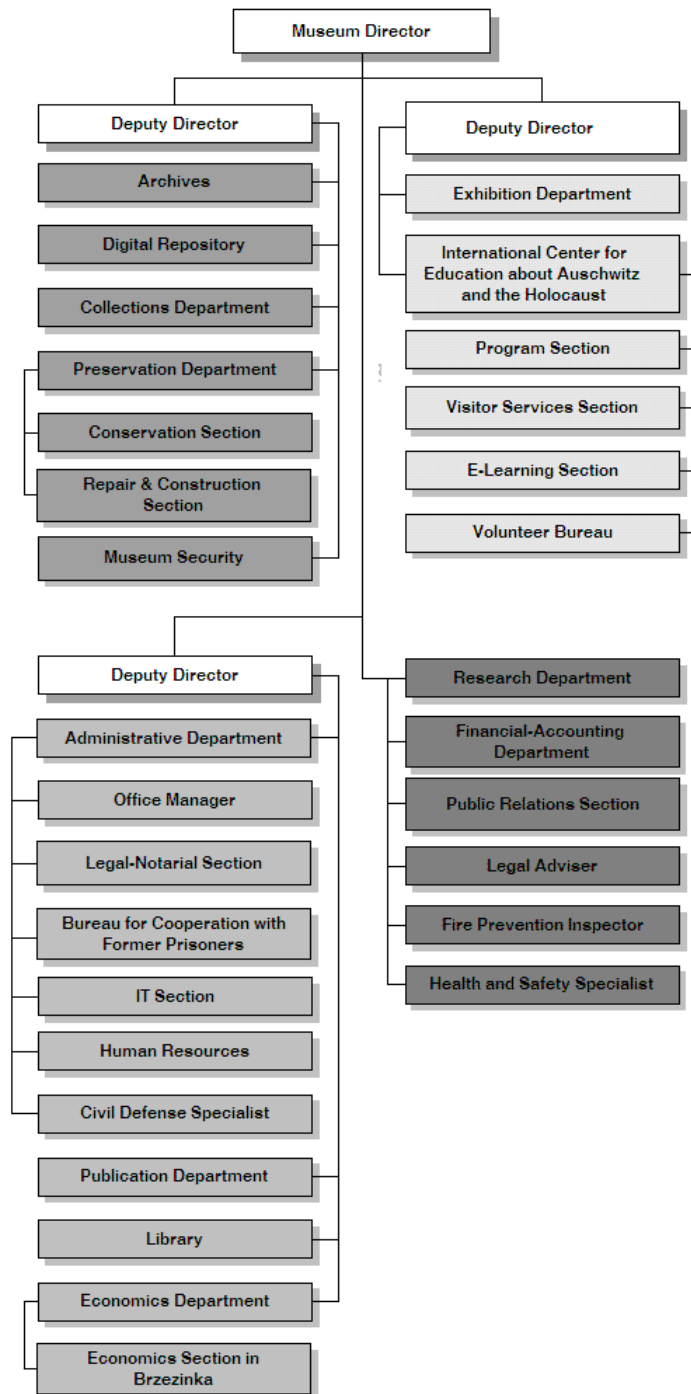


**Figure 5. Crematorium ruins Birkenau. Taken by author.**



**Figure 6. Tracks in Birkenau and tower entrance. Taken by author.**

Included is a diagram of the management structure, courtesy of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial Museum. It consists of approximately 250 employees and volunteers.





Emphasis for the Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation is to gather as many countries as possible because symbolically, it is important for them to see that each other is involved and the fact that it should be preserved. It was decided to approach the international community. The Foundation consists of four separate bodies: The Foundation's Council, International Committee, Management Board which includes the Director of Auschwitz and who is also President of the Board and the Financial Committee. All are crucial to the success and regulation of the structural and functional integrity of the process behind the creation and management of the Perpetual Capital. The Foundation has established a professional relationship with the renowned companies that provide its services on legal matters, accounting, bookkeeping and external audit. All of these emphasize the Foundation's primary objective of securing the Perpetual Capital and guaranteeing transparency with regard to the disposal of funds. The Foundation's Council is the decision-making supervisory and opinion forming body, including appointing and recalling members of the Foundation's Management Board, supervising its decisions and defining the main aims of the Foundations activities. The International Committee ensures the functioning of the Foundation and is completely transparent to the public and its benefactors. Members come from countries and institutions which contributed to the creation of the Endowment Fund. The Financial Committee consists of experts in the field of safe fund investing, advises the Management Board on fund investing strategy, and coordinates and oversees financial work of the Foundation. The Management Board manages the Foundation's activities and represents it externally. It consists of one to six members appointed by the Foundation's Council for three-year terms in office.<sup>6</sup> For Jacek Kastelaniec, the most important thing "is the contacts; to reach somebody who can be helpful. Others are providing information on who should be approached to give some sort with materials, including translation from Hebrew."

The annual interest of 4 to 5 million Euros will make it possible to plan and systematically carry out essential conservation work. In the first stage, the Museum envisions the conservation and explanation of thirty of the most endangered vestiges of wooden barracks in Birkenau. The condition of the barracks is varied. The cost of conserving and preserving the remains of one barrack is approximately 78,000 Euros according to the Auschwitz Museum. One small tower is 18,000 Euros. Conservation of moveable objects is estimated at 250,000 Euros. One of the most important conservation tasks in recent years has been the work begun in 2004, and which is still underway, aimed at securing and conserving the ruins of the gas chambers and crematoria, which were the heart of the Nazi extermination system and according to Jacek Kastelaniec "carrying on with this work preserves the most distinct symbol of Auschwitz and the Holocaust." The buildings are in their original form and have not been altered, save for some urgent repairs.

Maintaining remembrance requires financial output. Upholding the authenticity of Auschwitz is an undertaking that exceeds the budgetary resources of the museum. Therefore in addition to funding from the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, obtaining

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<sup>6</sup> Source: Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation

outside funding is important to its survival. The budget includes funds from the European Union and the Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation.

## 2.1 World Reaction

The task of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation to secure the long-term conservation program is an arduous one. It will make it possible to safeguard the remains of the camp for future generations. World reaction has been positive with donations from a wide diversity of nations.

<b>Country and Nation</b>	<b>Donation</b>
Federal Republic of Germany	30 million Euros
The German States (Lands)	30 million Euros
United States of America	15 million dollars
Republic of Poland	10 million Euros
Republic of Austria	6 million Euros
Republic of France	5 million Euros
United Kingdom of Britain and Northern Ireland	2.1 million pounds
State of Israel	1 million dollars

**Table 1. World reaction. Source: Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation.**

Donations and declarations below one million dollars include the Kingdom of Belgium, The Netherlands, Canada, City of Paris, Kingdom of Norway, Swiss Confederation, Sweden, Czech Republic, New Zealand, Republic of Turkey, Estonia, Malta, and others. There are also countries that declared their participation but to date have not yet decided on the amount. The figures above make up the sum of approximately 97 million Euros out of a total of 120 million Euros of the Endowment Fund which is required. It should be noted that Romania is not listed from 2011 but sent positive signals towards its contribution. It is noted by the author that since the establishment of the Foundation, the name Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum was changed to Memorial Museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau, insinuating the international cooperation involved in the preservation of the site.

and the future of Auschwitz. Operating on the idea that the perpetual fund from the Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation will not be spent but rather invested, so that the annual income from the investment will secure the site, the most urgent repairs could immediately be done.



**Figure 7. Toilets in wooden barrack in Auschwitz II or Birkenau, taken by author.**

### **3. Conclusion**

The existence of the memorial site makes it possible to encounter Auschwitz directly and to see with one's own eyes this most gruesome and heart-wrenching cemetery of the perished. The original camp buildings and objects tell the story and speak in a way that cannot be conveyed through the printed word or pictures. It is a place for people to visit and commemorate the perished. It is the only site that has an endowment plan for the future which makes it more secure than the other sites in Poland and outside. However, with all that, it still has not reached its goal of 120 million Euros. International cooperation for the site's preservation has permitted the Auschwitz staff to progress with maintenance, conservation, and preservation of its most urgent needs. It is a requirement for its existence. As an international mass cemetery, responsibility should not only fall on the Polish government but it should be maintained by the international community. The shocking mass grave pits engraved into the damp ground in Birkenau are reminders of the mass murder that took place in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Its massive totality of destruction is felt everywhere. In addition to the difficult challenges for the existence of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the management has to cope with an influx of visitors which exceeds 1,000,000 a year. In 2010, the site was visited by approximately 1,300,000 people from all over the world, with an increase in 2011. The enormous size of the site makes it all the more a shocking reality. The implementation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation through the initial initiative of

the Auschwitz director is proof on the ground that with action taken, progress can be made; that with international cooperation and a framework, memorial sites can be preserved. Auschwitz-Birkenau is a place of death with no life yet life. Activity is constant and we are reminded of its important place on humanity's world stage; where the world can gather so as not to forget the horrendous consequences when racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, bigotry, and intolerance are permitted to be revealed and tolerated. Management's evil side exposed itself to the extreme in Auschwitz.



**Figure 8. Photo of child taken by author. Museum to Roma and Sinti, Auschwitz I.**



**Figure 9. Tracks in Birkenau which sprawl and illustrate the massive death factory. Photo by author.**

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