

# Institute of National Remembrance

<https://ipn.gov.pl/en/digital-resources/articles/7421,Dachau-and-death-were-synonymous.html>

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## Dachau and death were synonymous

Col. William Quinn from the 7th US Army after partaking in the liberation of the Dachau concentration camp in May of 1945, wrote this in his report: „There, our troops found sights, sounds and stenches beyond belief, cruelties so enormous as to be incomprehensible to the normal mind. Dachau and death were synonymous.”



By the order of Heinrich Himmler from March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1933 the first concentration camp was established in the Bavaria region in Germany.

Founding of the camp, and later of other camps as well, was based on the February 28<sup>th</sup>, 1933 emergency decree concerning “protection of the nation and the country”. The Dachau camp was built on a swampy area, characteristic for its unhealthy, moist climate, especially unpleasant during autumn and winter, when the prisoners were forced to stand outside for hours, at the camp’s barrack square. It was a death camp, where prisoners were being killed with exhausting work, hunger, physical abuse and pseudo-medical tests. After walking through the camp’s gate under the sign “Arbeit macht frei” (“Work sets you free”, trans. annotation), prisoners became nameless numbers, stripped of any rights and left with seemingly one “way out” – through the chimney of the crematorium.

Around 250 thousand prisoners went through the KL Dachau; on the liberation day there were barely 33 thousand of them, almost half of whom were Poles (it was the largest ethnic group). In December of 1940, priests from Sachsenhausen, Mauthausen-Gusen and Oranienburg were also brought to the camp. There were 2720 Catholic priests in total (Polish clergymen the most – 1780) held in Dachau, 868 of them perished. The precise number of prisoners and mortal victims is difficult to measure, since the camp’s index was lacking entries for people who were brought to the camp by the Gestapo for execution. The prisoners were being slaughtered almost until the very day of the liberation. In March of 1945, 70 women from the French Resistance were hanged, on March 5<sup>th</sup> 4 English and 3 American pilots, shot down during airstrikes, were killed as well.

The camp's overcrowding hit its peak in 1944, when thousands of people were transferred from the already evacuated concentration camps, e.g. Auschwitz or Buchenwald. Prisoners who didn't die on the way, were in the state of total exhaustion. Most of them slept outside. Many didn't receive food nor water. Barracks, built for 45 people, were occupied by 150-200 prisoners; one bloc would often be a home to a thousand inmates. Small, one-person beds were occupied by two people at once, the healthy side by side with the ill. Overcrowding brought higher mortality rate, people usually died of typhoid, putrid fever and starvation. The ill were often too weak to even leave their bunks. They lay naked, without underwear nor any bed sheets. People were dying in hundreds. Countless bodies were stacked in front of the crematorium. Some prisoners, barely showing any signs of life, lay in mud in front of the blocs, dirty and unshaved.

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