This Day in History… January 27, 1945

Liberation of Auschwitz

On January 27, 1945, Soviet troops liberated the Auschwitz concentration camp, marking the beginning of the end of the Holocaust.

The Nazis targeted Jewish Europeans and other ethnic groups, such as the Romani, Polish, and Slavic, during World War II. Adolf Hitler considered these groups to be genetically inferior to his "Aryan" master race. Removing the Jewish people was one of the steps in Hitler's plan for world domination.

Allies liberate Holocaust survivors, early 1945

To facilitate this mass murder the Nazis built concentration camps. At first, these highly organized camps were used to terrorize and intimidate, but in 1941 when Hitler decided to murder all of the Jewish people, the camps became killing factories. About 2.5 million people were murdered at the concentration camp in Auschwitz, Poland, alone.

From the "1945: Victory at Last" World War II sheet

Witold Pilecki was the only person known to voluntarily be imprisoned by the Nazis at Auschwitz Concentration Camp. Pilecki was a Polish cavalry officer who saw heavy fighting at the outset of World War II. When the Soviet Union invaded Poland from the east, the Polish resistance collapsed. Pilecki then helped found the "Secret Polish Army," an underground resistance unit. As news of the Auschwitz camp surfaced, he volunteered to investigate and allowed himself to be captured.

For two and a half years Pilecki organized resistance, fed information about the camp to the outside world, and wrote about the details of the camp. Pilecki helped create resistance cells and smuggled information out of the camp. But by 1943, he realized no help was coming. Pilecki decided to escape to give his report in person, and one night he and two other prisoners succeeded. Pilecki's reports, however, were dismissed as unbelievable exaggerations, and neither the British nor the Russians would help.
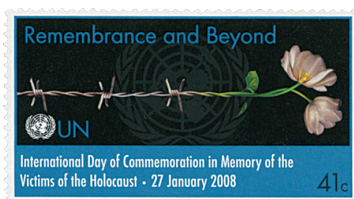
Then in mid-1944, about half of the 130,000 prisoners were moved to other camps. That November, the Soviet Red Army began approaching Auschwitz through Poland. Aware of their impending arrival, the camp's Nazi organizers quickly began to dismantle the crematoriums and convert them into air raid shelters. They destroyed most written records and other evidence of what had occurred there, including many of the buildings. Another 58,000 Auschwitz detainees were relocated on January 17.

Then, on January 27, 1945, the Soviets arrived and liberated the remaining 7,500 prisoners. Though the Nazis had destroyed much of the camp, the liberators were still shocked at what they found there, including the belongings of over a million people. By the end of the war approximately 6 million Jewish people, about two-thirds of all the Jewish people in Europe, had been killed by the Nazis. The total number of civilians killed by the Nazis is estimated to be at least 11 million.

UN stamps honoring International Holocaust Remembrance Day

Fifty years later, the United Nations named January 27 as "International Holocaust Remembrance Day," to honor the victims of the Holocaust. Secretary-General Kofi Annan called the Holocaust "a unique evil that cannot simply be consigned to the past and forgotten."

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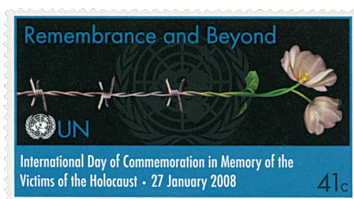
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