

Bergen-Belsen

Concentration camp located in northern Germany. Bergen-Belsen was established in April 1943 as a detention camp for prisoners who were to be exchanged with Germans imprisoned in Allied countries.

The first prisoners to arrive at Bergen-Belsen were not candidates for prisoner swaps, but rather 500 Jewish prisoners from the Buchenwald and Natweiler-Struthof camps who were brought in to build the campsite. Over the next year and a half, five sub-camps were set up at Bergen-Belsen. The first was a "prisoners' camp," which housed those 500 prisoners who had come to construct the camp. This sub-camp was shut down in February 1944, and the few surviving prisoners were sent to Sachsenhausen.

The second sub-camp was called the "special camp." This camp barracked two transports of Jews from POLAND (some 2,400 Jews mostly from Warsaw, Lvov, and Cracow) that arrived in mid-June 1943. These Jews were bearers of special documents, passports or entry papers, which had been issued by various countries, mostly South American. Despite the documents, which their holders had considered a ticket to life, these Jews were deported to their deaths at AUSCHWITZ in late 1943 and early 1944.

The third sub-camp in Bergen-Belsen was called the "neutral camp." This section contained some 350 Jews who were citizens of neutral countries, such as Spain, Turkey, Argentina, and Portugal, and who lived at Bergen-Belsen from July 1944 to early March 1945. The conditions in the "neutral camp" were better than in any other Bergen-Belsen sub-camp.

The fourth sub-camp was the "star camp," which housed those Jewish prisoners who were designated as exchange candidates. The prisoners living in this sub-camp, the largest of the five, did not have to wear prison uniforms, but were made to wear the Jewish badge—a star of David—hence, the camp's name (see also badge, Jewish). Most of these prisoners were from the Netherlands, with smaller groups from Tunisia, Tripoli, Benghazi, France, Yugoslavia and Albania. In July 1944 there were 4,100 Jews in the "star camp." Only a small number of the Jews brought to Bergen-Belsen as prisoner exchange candidates were actually set free in such swaps.

The last of the sub-camps was the "Hungarian camp," which was established in July 1944 to house the 1,684 Jews from HUNGARY who had been allowed to leave Hungary on the "Kasztner train," and would eventually reach safety in Switzerland.

From March 1944 Bergen-Belsen slowly became a "regular" concentration camp, with new prisoners arriving who were considered to be too sick to work at other camps. The first such prisoners arrived in late March from Dora-Mittelbau. They were barracked in a new section of the camp where the living conditions were awful; most died shortly after arrival. Similar groups of prisoners, mainly from Hungary, kept arriving throughout 1944.

In August 1944 a new section was added to serve as a women's camp for 4,000 Jewish female prisoners from Hungary and Poland. In early fall thousands of prisoners arrived from Plaszow and Auschwitz. They were put in the "star" sub-camp with almost no living facilities. Among this group were Anne Franck and her sister Margot, who both died of typhus in March 1945.

The conditions at Bergen-Belsen, which were already abominable, got even worse when tens of thousands of prisoners arrived in early 1945, after horrific death marches from camps in the east that had been evacuated by the Germans. In March 1945 alone some 18,000 prisoners died in the camp.

Bergen-Belsen was liberated by the British army on April 15, 1945. The soldiers were totally shocked at what they found, including 60,000 prisoners in the camp, many on the brink of death, and thousands of unburied bodies lying about. After its Liberation, Bergen-Belsen became a Displaced Persons' camp, which was in existence until 1951. (see also displaced persons, Jewish.)