

Chelmno

(in German, Kulmhof), extermination camp located in the Polish village of Chelmno, 47 miles west of Lodz. Chelmno was the first Nazi camp where gassing was used to exterminate Jews on a large-scale basis, and the first place outside the Soviet Union where Jews were slaughtered en masse as part of the "final solution." It was created to serve as the extermination center for the Jews in the Lodz ghetto as well as those from the entire Warthegau region. In all, some 320,000 people were murdered at Chelmno.

Chelmno encompassed two sites 2.5 miles apart. The first was located inside the village in an old palace. This site was where the prisoners were received and gassed, and where the camp staff was housed. The second site was located in a nearby forest, and consisted of mass graves and later, crematoria ovens.

The first group of prisoners arrived at Chelmno on December 7, 1941, and the first exterminations began the next day. The camp's early victims included Jews from throughout the area, as well as 5,000 Gypsies who had been imprisoned in the Lodz Ghetto. No railroad tracks reached Chelmno directly, so the deportees were brought by train to a nearby station, and then loaded onto trucks that delivered them straight to the reception area at Chelmno. The Nazis then gathered the victims in the palace's courtyard, and told them that they were being sent to a work camp, and thus had to get washed up. Groups of 50 were then sent to the building's ground floor, where they were made to give up their valuables and undress—men, women, and children together. Next, they were taken to the cellar, where they were reassured by signs that they were heading "To the Washroom," but in fact were forced down a ramp into a gas van. After the van was filled to the brim, the driver locked the doors and turned on the motor. After 10 minutes, the gas fumes had suffocated all those inside the van.

Throughout 1942 Jews from the Lodz Ghetto and from the 32 other towns and villages in the Warthegau were deported to their deaths at Chelmno. In addition, several Poles were also sent there, as were Soviet prisoners of war and 88 children from the Czech village of Lidice. The possessions that had

been brought by victims to Chelmno were given or sold to Germans living in the region. On January 19, 1942 an inmate, Jacob Grojanowski, succeeded in escaping and reached the Warsaw Ghetto, where he gave detailed information to the underground *Oneg Shabbat* Archives. By June 1942, through the channels of the Polish underground, his report reached London and was published (see also Grojanowski Report).

In March 1943 the Nazis stopped the deportations to Chelmno, as all of the Jews in the Warthegau, except for those left in the Lodz Ghetto, had already been annihilated. The camp was dismantled, and the camp staff was transferred to Yugoslavia to fight Yugoslav partisans. However, the Nazis reopened the camp in April 1944 in conjunction with their plan to liquidate the Lodz Ghetto. Members of the Chelmno staff were brought back from Yugoslavia to resume their work at the camp, to which crematoria had been added. Transports to Chelmno were renewed on June 23, 1944, and by mid-July, more than 7,000 Jews had been exterminated. At that point, the Nazis decided to step up the liquidation process, so they halted the transports to Chelmno and began deporting the remaining ghetto inhabitants to Auschwitz, where extermination by Zyklon B gas was quicker and more efficient.

In early September 1944, as part of *aktion 1005*, the Nazis began destroying all evidence of mass murder at Chelmno by digging up and cremating the bodies that had been buried in mass graves. On January 17, 1945, as Soviet troops drew near, the Nazis began evacuating Chelmno. While murdering the last 48 Jewish prisoners in the camp, the Jews put up a fight and three escaped. The rest were killed.