

Life in the Camps

There were hundreds of concentration camps scattered throughout the Reich and its occupied territories. Life in the camps was horrific and extremely bleak, lacking in any form of humanity.

As people entered the camps, their belongings were confiscated, their heads were shaved and they were issued striped prison uniforms. Dehumanization began as names were taken away and replaced by a number and a badge: a yellow star for Jews, a purple triangle for Jehovah's Witnesses, a red triangle for a political prisoner, and so on. In Auschwitz, laborers had their identification number tattooed on their arm.

Each camp was run by the Nazi SS and entrance gates often declared "Arbeit Macht Frei," meaning "work will set you free." Many camps provided slave labor for the war effort, with inmates working in mines, quarrying rock, making weaponry or other items needed by the Germans. Part of the Nazis' goal was to reduce their captives to animals, to deprive them of any sense of community and humanity. They accomplished this through beatings and torture, starvation and deprivation in every sense.

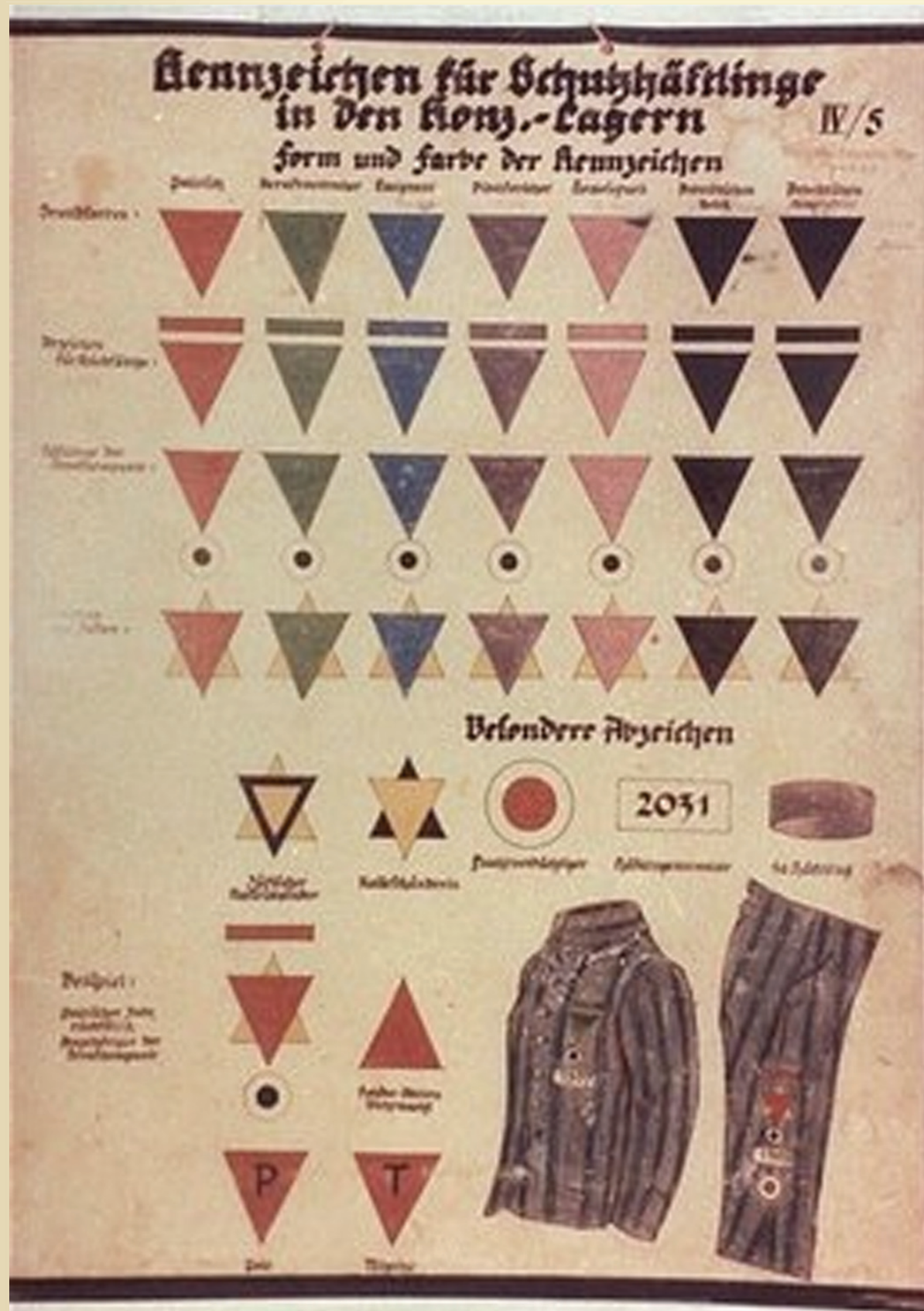


Chart showing markings for categories of prisoners. Dachau, Germany. 1942. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum



Major concentration camps in Germany and the occupied territories. A Teacher's Guide to the Holocaust, The Florida Center for Instructional Technology College of Education, University of South Florida



View of the entrance to the main camp of Auschwitz (Auschwitz I). The gate bears the motto "Arbeit Macht Frei" (Work makes one free). May 11 - 15, 1945. USHMM, courtesy of Instytut Pamieci Narodowej

"All three camps in [Kielce, Poland] were liquidated and transported to Auschwitz....The next morning the train rolled into Birkenau. We had heard of Auschwitz, but never heard the word "Birkenau." This was the biggest camp the Nazis operated.

In Birkenau we were immediately separated from the women and taken away. We had to undress. While naked, we were shaved and forced into the shower room...After the shower, we received striped clothing and wooden shoes...The next day we went through a selection, and the majority went to the gas chamber. We were naked when the S.S. doctor and officials checked in and looked us over.

We had to line up...and the tattooing began. It hurts when they stick you with the needle, and I was slapped in the face when I pulled my arm away."

Abe Price

Memoirs of a Survivor: My Life Under Nazi Occupation



Uniform of a political prisoner at Langenstein-Zwieberge, a sub-camp of Buchenwald, Germany, 1944-45. HMSWFL, Courtesy of Homer Heltter

