Auschwitz 70th Anniversary Renews Debate over Concentration Camp's Future

*By*[*Katie Engelhart*](https://news.vice.com/contributor/katie-engelhart)

January 27, 2015 | 2:35 pm

Some 300 Auschwitz survivors today returned to the site of their wartime captivity to mark 70 years since the liberation of the Nazi concentration and extermination camp in Oswiecim, Poland. This year's International Holocaust Remembrance Day is endowed with a particular weight, since it likely marks the last major Holocaust commemoration that will be attended, en masse, by survivors themselves.

The backdrop to the memorial — also [attended](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/27/auschwitz-holocaust-survivors-liberation-70-anniversary-nazi-poland) by a pack of world leaders and dignitaries — was the so-called "Death Gate," the infamous and photogenic entrance to the Birkenau section of the facility where, during the camp's operation, trains unloaded passengers, some of whom were sent directly to death in the gas chambers, a short walk from the platform. Over a million people perished in the camp, before it was liberated by Soviet forces in 1945.

But that the Auschwitz concentration camp — [visited](http://auschwitz.org/en/museum/news/1-5-million-people-visited-the-auschwitz-memorial-in-2014,1118.html) in 2014 by an unprecedented 1.5 million people — remains standing at all is an unlikely feat, of history, politics, and accounting.

Though the number of pilgrims to Auschwitz has [increased](http://auschwitz.org/en/museum/news/revision-of-the-way-we-see-the-world-and-ourselves-auschwitz-memorial-report-2014-,1132.html) steadily in recent years, the last few decades of the memorial's history have been marked by fiscal shortfalls, 11th-hour pleas for cash, and fear that biological decay will irreversibly and irreparably wear away at this most potent homage to Nazi barbarity.

The occasion of the 70th anniversary has drawn renewed focus to the troubled questions of how, when, and, indeed, whether Auschwitz should be preserved for future generations. Over the last several decades, a steady stream of reports have detailed the inevitable effects of time on the camp's physical structure: decomposing wooden barracks, crumbling chimneys, and insects infesting an exhibit of dust-covered human hair. The Auschwitz Memorial has scraped together enough funding to begin guarding against this decline. But at the same time, some critics — wary of turning Auschwitz into an inauthentic, Disney-like tourist destination — have argued in favor of controlled decomposition and of letting time take its natural course.

Back in 2009, Poland [issued](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/can-auschwitz-be-saved-4650863/?all&no-ist) an appeal to its European neighbors, Israel, and the US to donate money to a fund for restoration work at the Auschwitz site — separate from the museum's normal operating budget, of around $10 million a year. Since 1947, the Polish state had [provided](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7800397.stm) the bulk of the memorial's funding, and by 2009, foreign financial assistance was covering less than 3 percent of the museum's annual budget.

And so pockets were tight. Poland's approach to staving off decline at Auschwitz had thus far been, officials admitted, "reactive." Conservationists hoped that if they could gather at least $150 million, they would have enough to [set up](http://news.nationalpost.com/2013/05/05/fo0506-je-auschwitz/) a perpetual restoration fund, with annual restoration projects supported by interest payments.

"Auschwitz Museum is in a financial crisis, that's for sure," memorial spokesperson Pawel Sawicki told the BBC in 2009. "And if we can't secure the buildings and conserve the site properly, we will be forced to close it to the public in a few years."

A year earlier, Piotr Cywinski, then director of the memorial, had [charged](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1041890/Poles-ask-world-funds-stop-Auschwitz-falling-ruin.html) that the international community should "share the burden" of keeping the memorial running. Cywinski told reporters that he needed £50 million ($76m) for urgent repairs, and said that only about £2 million were earned each annum on book sales, entrance fees, tour tickets and parking.

By then, Birkenau — the largest camp in the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex and the place where most of the concentration inmates were murdered — had fallen into a state of rotting disrepair. Exposed for more than six decades to the elements, just a small proportion of what was once hundreds of structures remained intact. After all, Birkenau's wooden structures, thrown up in the early 1940s as a purpose-built death-camp, were not built to last. By contrast, many of the barracks in the Auschwitz I camp, were made of brick.

An influx of visitors was also thought have hastened the erosion. By the end of 2009, around two-thirds of Birkenau's brick barracks had been declared unsafe, and were closed to the public. Many [had](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/can-auschwitz-be-saved-4650863/?all&no-ist) sinking foundations, cracking walls, and wooden barracks that were damaged by water leaking in from punctured roofs.

In January 2009, a squeamish Germany — under increasing pressure to come to Poland's aid — said that "keep[ing] the memory of the Holocaust alive" [was](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7800397.stm) a "core duty" for the nation.

This was not Auschwitz's first funding scare. Though the concentration camp was made a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1979, the memorial did not begin to receive substantial outside donations until the 1990s. This was, in part, a product of the Cold War.

Until 1989, the Communist Government of Poland [kept](http://www.nytimes.com/1994/01/05/world/the-decay-of-a-20th-century-relic-what-is-a-fitting-future-for-auschwitz.html) tight control of Auschwitz management decisions. In 1992, Germany announced a $20 million grant — and a televised fundraiser drew another $1 million from the German public. Some of the money was spent on a state-of-the-art acclimatization system for memorial exhibits and structural reinforcements to a number of decaying barracks and chimneys.

Foreign leaders [eventually](http://www.jta.org/2014/09/29/news-opinion/world/vatican-helps-fund-preservation-of-auschwitz) [came](http://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/europe/07/03/poland.clinton.auschwitz/) [through](http://news.nationalpost.com/2013/05/05/fo0506-je-auschwitz/) with cash — but the process has been slow-going. On January 14, the Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation, which maintains the memorial, [announced](http://auschwitz.org/en/museum/news/six-first-donors-of-18-pillars-of-remembrance-campaign-support-the-auschwitz-birkenau-foundation,1123.html) that it had raised $140 million of its desired $156 million campaign goal. The money [came from](http://auschwitz.org/en/museum/news/revision-of-the-way-we-see-the-world-and-ourselves-auschwitz-memorial-report-2014-,1132.html) a number of governments — $60 million from Germany, $15 million from the US, $10 million from Poland, as well as $1 million each from Italy, Russia, and Israel. [Private bodies](http://forward.com/articles/212994/auschwitz-foundation-nears-m-anniversary-goal/) like Volkswagen, which [famously](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/279070.stm) used slave labor under Nazi rule, and the Steven Spielberg Righteous Persons Foundation also donated.

Germany's contribution, the largest of participating states, was announced in 2009, and [came](http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB126100402980394555) after months of heated talks between Auschwitz Foundation officials and German government representatives. German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle called the pay-out, "an expression of our historic responsibility."

Also in 2009, then British Prime Minister Gordon Brown paid a personal visit to Auschwitz and he [toured](http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/gordon-browns-anguish-at-auschwitz-390850) the camp, visibly weeping, after promising that Britain would contribute to the Auschwitz restoration fund.

Indeed, world leaders have taken every opportunity to showcase their generosity when grants are offered. In 2013, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu traveled to Auschwitz to open a newly-upgraded exhibit. "I am standing here today with great pride and great pain," he [told](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/netanyahu-helps-dedicate-upgraded-holocaust-exhibit-at-auschwitz/2013/06/13/3763c124-d42b-11e2-8cbe-1bcbee06f8f8_story.html) reporters. "The leaders of the Allies knew full well what was happening in the death camps. They could have acted, but they didn't. We, the Jews, know exactly what the lesson is."

Today, restoration work is picking up pace. It is designed not to reverse decay, but to [halt](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7800397.stm) its progress. A grant from the European Commission has allowed for two wooden quarantine barracks in Birkenau to be conserved, in addition to a number of artifacts, including the personal files of Soviet POWs, according to the [2014 Auschwitz Memorial Report](http://auschwitz.org/en/museum/news/revision-of-the-way-we-see-the-world-and-ourselves-auschwitz-memorial-report-2014-,1132.html). New steel beams have been added, to help prop up the ruins of gas chambers II and III, and work has begun on the former camp bathhouse.

These last-ditch efforts have been [building](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-22886415) over the last ten years. In 2005, for instance, conservationists [began](http://forward.com/articles/2437/after-the-dust-of-september--has-settled/) vacuuming, washing, and oiling thousands of pairs of children's shoes, collected by the memorial. But this work is delicate. Just [handling](http://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/05/arts/handling-artifacts-not-built-last-holocaust-american-indian-museums-use-new.html) the shoes can lead them to crumble and each [takes](http://news.nationalpost.com/2013/05/05/fo0506-je-auschwitz/) two hours to clean and inspect. Documents are often cleaned by hand, page by page.

In other areas, officials have [opted](http://www.nytimes.com/1994/01/05/world/the-decay-of-a-20th-century-relic-what-is-a-fitting-future-for-auschwitz.html), controversially, to rebuild. In the mid-1990s, a number of Birkenau's wooden barracks were constructed anew, with new brick foundations and new wood. But the renovations drew the ire of critics, who argued against measures that would compromise the site's authenticity.

Indeed, as restoration work continues, a minority of opponents raise their voices to urge caution. Many [object](http://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/05/arts/handling-artifacts-not-built-last-holocaust-american-indian-museums-use-new.html) to efforts to actively restore the camp: rebuilding structures so that they resemble the edifices they once were. Others argue in favor of a controlled decay, which would allow the museum to slowly disintegrate over time and, they [say](http://www.nytimes.com/1994/01/05/world/the-decay-of-a-20th-century-relic-what-is-a-fitting-future-for-auschwitz.html), with dignity. Cultural historian Robert Jan van Pelt has [argued](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/can-auschwitz-be-saved-4650863/?all&no-ist) that Auschwitz preservation projects risk turning the site into a "kind of theme park, cleaned up for tourists."

The battles are played out over small objects — should ageing leather shoes be cleaned to their most pristine condition, or [stay](http://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/05/arts/handling-artifacts-not-built-last-holocaust-american-indian-museums-use-new.html) covered by the mud of their final steps? Should structures that were damaged by retreating Nazi henchman be left in their damaged state, or built up to show what the camp would have looked like in operation?

In a recent fundraising pamphlet, Auschwitz conservation specialist Mirek Maciaszczyk, [wrote](http://news.nationalpost.com/2013/05/05/fo0506-je-auschwitz/) of the need, "to distinguish between damage resulting from the object's ageing… and from damages inflict in the camp which are part of the history of this place and need to be preserved."

Much debate concerns [Auschwitz's display of human hair](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1993/11/15/evidence-of-evil). The memorial contains some two tons of it: shorn off the heads of dead prisoners. Today, it forms one of the most striking exhibits at the site: a great pile of it, thrown together, forming tuffs and mounds. But the masses of hair are now covered in a thick layer of dust — so that the locks appear uniform and grey, instead of blond, brown, black, and copper-toned. Indeed, it looks more like wool or wire than human fiber.

Today, the hair is so wiry and brittle that to move it would cause much of it to fall apart. Some argue that hair must be preserved, since it helps to demonstrate the enormity of the Nazi's victim base. The hair itself has also [served](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1993/11/15/evidence-of-evil) as critical evidence of Nazi crimes. Chemical analysis of Auschwitz hair — which showed traces of poison gas — was used as evidence in the post-war trials of Nazi war criminals.

But others find the exhibit insensitive and impersonal — or [offensive](http://www.psmag.com/books-and-culture/the-awkward-case-for-preserving-holocaust-relics-6813), for religious purposes. Others still argue that the decades-old build up of dust has its own symbolic logic, since it has turned the pile of hair into a uniform and amorphous mass, and thus serves as an aesthetic reminder of the Nazis' own ability to strip their victims of identity, and cast them as faceless victims.

In 1945, Auschwitz-Birkenau [was](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/can-auschwitz-be-saved-4650863/?all&no-ist) [liberated](http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB1029272807968457555) by Russian troops — but not before Nazi forces wreaked havoc on the sprawling facility. Retreating soldiers used dynamite to blow up the camp's crematoria and gas chambers, and torched a few dozen barracks in last-minute efforts to bury evidence of their atrocities. In the days and weeks following, locals pillaged the site of its few remaining valuables.

Two years later, the government of Poland [declared](http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB1029272807968457555) that Auschwitz would be preserved as a museum, and began a series of later-regretted renovations to the facility. A parking lot was built on the camp's original entrance site and some brick barracks were updated with modern tiles. Over the years, exhibits were added and then [revised](http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/pavilion_auschwitz/intro.asp) as scholarship improved and the Cold War thawed.

Around 100,000 Jews left Auschwitz alive. While thousands of those people died soon after, many on Nazi-led "death marches" to the west, tens of thousands [lived](https://www.google.co.uk/search?tbm=bks&hl=en&q=auschwitz+museum+hair+dust#q=auschwitz+restoration&hl=en&tbm=bks&start=10) to see liberation.