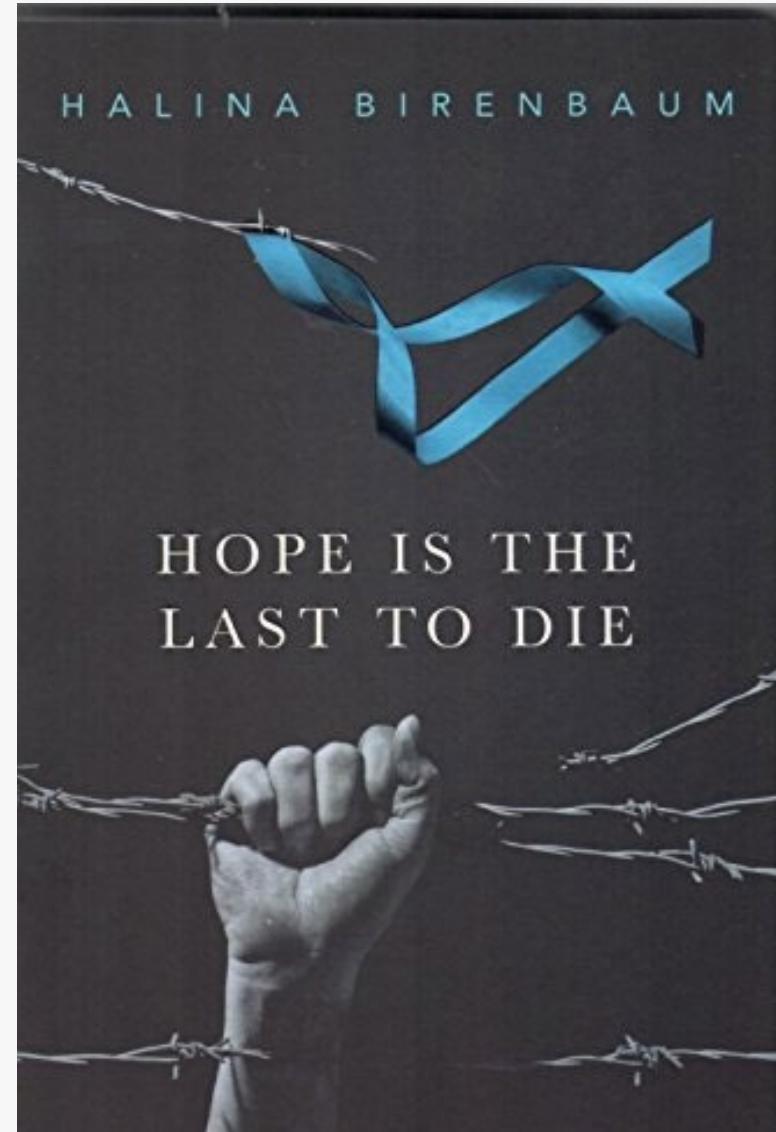


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# Mapping a woman's journey in Auschwitz-Birkenau

*... through Halina Birenbaum's 'Hope is the last to die'*



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<http://auschwitz.org/en/type-of-publication/memoirs-and-accounts/hope-is-the-last-to-die,16.html#2>

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# Halina Birenbaum

Halina Birenbaum was born in the Polish city of Warsaw in 1929. As the Germans invaded the city and ghettoized the Jewish population, Birenbaum spent several years of her childhood in the Warsaw ghetto. In 1943, the Nazis deported her to Majdanek. From there they sent Birenbaum to Auschwitz and then to Ravensbrück. Finally, she was sent to Neustadt-Glewe from where she was liberated on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1945.

In 1947 Birenbaum moved to Israel. In her memoir, *Hope is the Last to Die*, she shares her experience as a young girl in the Warsaw Ghetto and the camps. In her book Birenbaum also explains that the Eichmann Trial in Israel in 1962 motivated her to write about her experiences.

The publication of Birenbaum's memoir in 1967 marks more than two decades since her liberation.

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# Auschwitz Camp Complex

My project focusses on Birenbaum's experience in Auschwitz and specifically the locations she was in.

To get a better sense of the general space in which the Nazis kept her, I am first providing a large-scale map, showing the location of the camps Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II Birkenau:

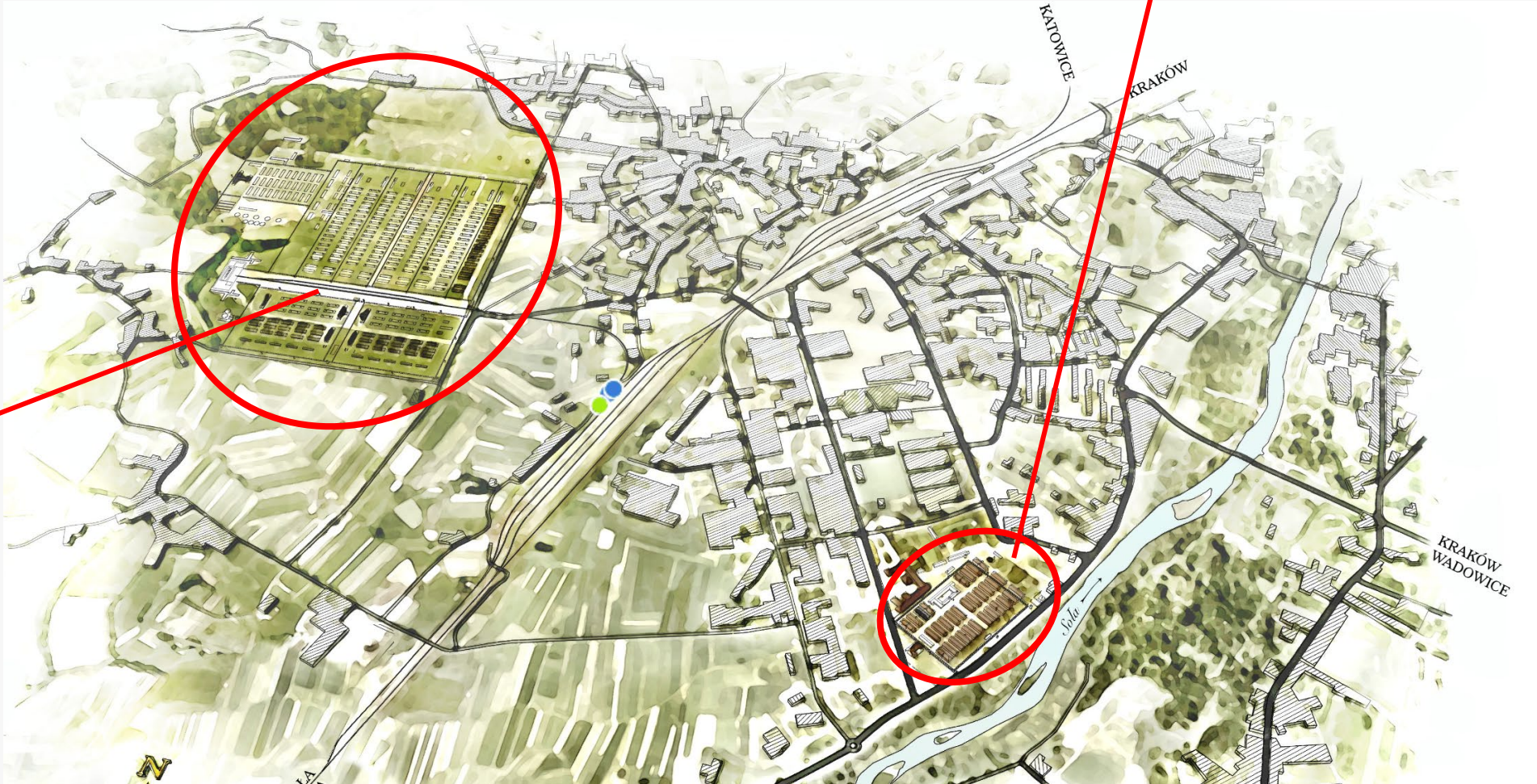
**Auschwitz I** can be seen at the bottom right of the map. It was established by the Nazis in 1940 as a concentration camp, initially for Polish prisoners.

On the top left of the map is **Auschwitz II Birkenau**, which the Nazis began to build in 1941. It was the largest part of the Auschwitz complex and was used primarily as a site for mass killing.

# Auschwitz Camp Complex

Auschwitz I

Auschwitz II  
Birkenau



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# Birenbaum in Auschwitz

Birenbaum arrived in Auschwitz in the summer of 1943. After her arrival, she was sent along with her sister-in-law Hela to Auschwitz II Birkenau. The two of them worked together, initially in the laundry, and remained close until Hela died from illness in the fall.

Birenbaum describes that the subsequent winter of 1943/1944 was particularly cold and contributed to a worsening typhoid epidemic. In January of 1944 she also became infected with typhoid but was able to recover. By the springtime it was rumoured in the camp that Nazi Germany was losing the war and in the summer of 1944 World War Two was expected to end soon.

At the time, Birenbaum was working in Kanada I where the belongings of arriving prisoners were stored. However, decreasing transports to Auschwitz led to the partial liquidation of Kanada I and Birenbaum was sent to work in the 'Kartoffelbunker' (potato warehouse).





The fall of 1944 is also the time when the Nazis began to destroy the crematoria in preparation for a departure from Auschwitz. By the winter of 1944 the Nazis began liquidating the camp as large groups of prisoners were sent away from Auschwitz to camps within Nazi Germany.

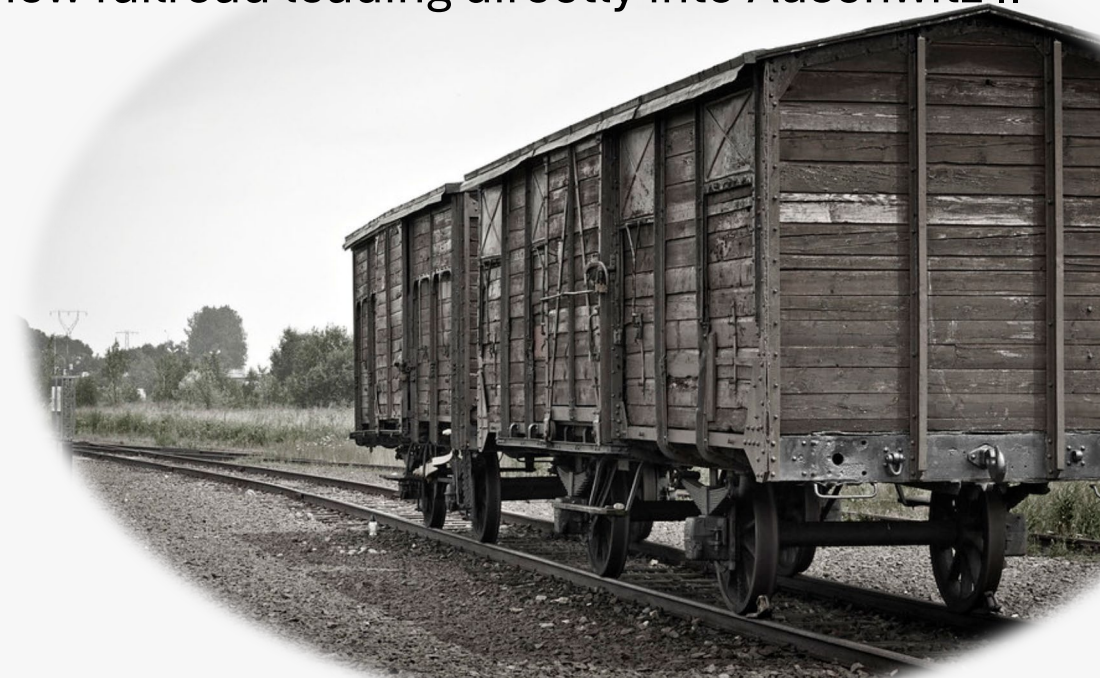
On January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1945 Birenbaum was shot by an SS guard, leaving her with a severe injury in her arm. While she was recovering slowly, she was forced by the Nazis to embark on the so-called Death March, leaving Auschwitz behind and walking hundreds of kilometers to Ravensbrück concentration camp in Germany.


Birenbaum's survival in Auschwitz surely included a great amount of luck, but it is also a story of the resilience and bravery of a young girl.

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# Arrival at the Alte Judenrampe and registration in Auschwitz I

Coming from Majdanek, Halina Birenbaum arrived at the Alte Judenrampe in Auschwitz in the summer of 1943. The ramp was located on the grounds of the Auschwitz freight station and was in operation from the spring of 1942 until May 1944. More than half a million prisoners arrived here; the majority of them were Jews. After May 1944 the Nazis began to use a new railroad leading directly into Auschwitz II Birkenau.





It is important to note that Birenbaum was registered as a worker. Even though she was Jewish this meant that she did not have to undergo a selection when she arrived.

Moreover, correspondence between Majdanek and Auschwitz suggests that a request had been made for a group of selected women to be sent as workers from Majdanek to Auschwitz. Birenbaum appears to have been one of those women and was thus never meant to be killed.



# Arrival at the Alte Judenrampe

Auschwitz II  
Birkenau

Alte Judenrampe

Auschwitz I



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# Arrival at the Alte Judenrampe – Map Orientation

This map illustrates Halina Birenbaum's arrival at the Alte Judenrampe. At the bottom right of the map is Auschwitz I and at the top left is Auschwitz II Birkenau. The green dot that is circled in red is the location of the Alte Judenrampe where Halina Birenbaum arrived from Majdanek. Since Birenbaum was transported to Auschwitz in the summer of 1943 and also based on the descriptions in her memoir, I expect that this is indeed where she arrived.

*'It was the height of summer. The train dragged along. The journey lasted two days and nights. **Hunger, thirst.** We were forbidden, on **pain of death**, to change positions'* (page 108)

*'The train stopped. They herded us out of the wagons and those who had died or been shot during the journey were **thrown from the windows like sacks.**'* (page 109)

*'Shoved brutally and beaten, we moved in a column **away from the railroad station...**'* (page 109)



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# Arrival at Birkenau

After her , the Nazis sent Birenbaum to stay in Auschwitz II Birkenau. As the largest of the camps in Auschwitz, Auschwitz II Birkenau was the killing site of more than a million people. Around 90 % of victims of the Auschwitz complex were killed here.

The construction of this death camp began in 1941 and continued even throughout its operation period from March 1942 to January 1945. In March 1942 the men's camp opened in Birkenau followed by the women's camp in August of the same year. In the following year further camps began operating, including the men's quarantine camp and a family camp for Jews from Theresienstadt.

When Birenbaum arrived in Birkenau the summer of 1943, various parts of the camp were still under construction. For instance, neither the large main gate made of red bricks nor the unloading ramp inside the camp were completed yet.

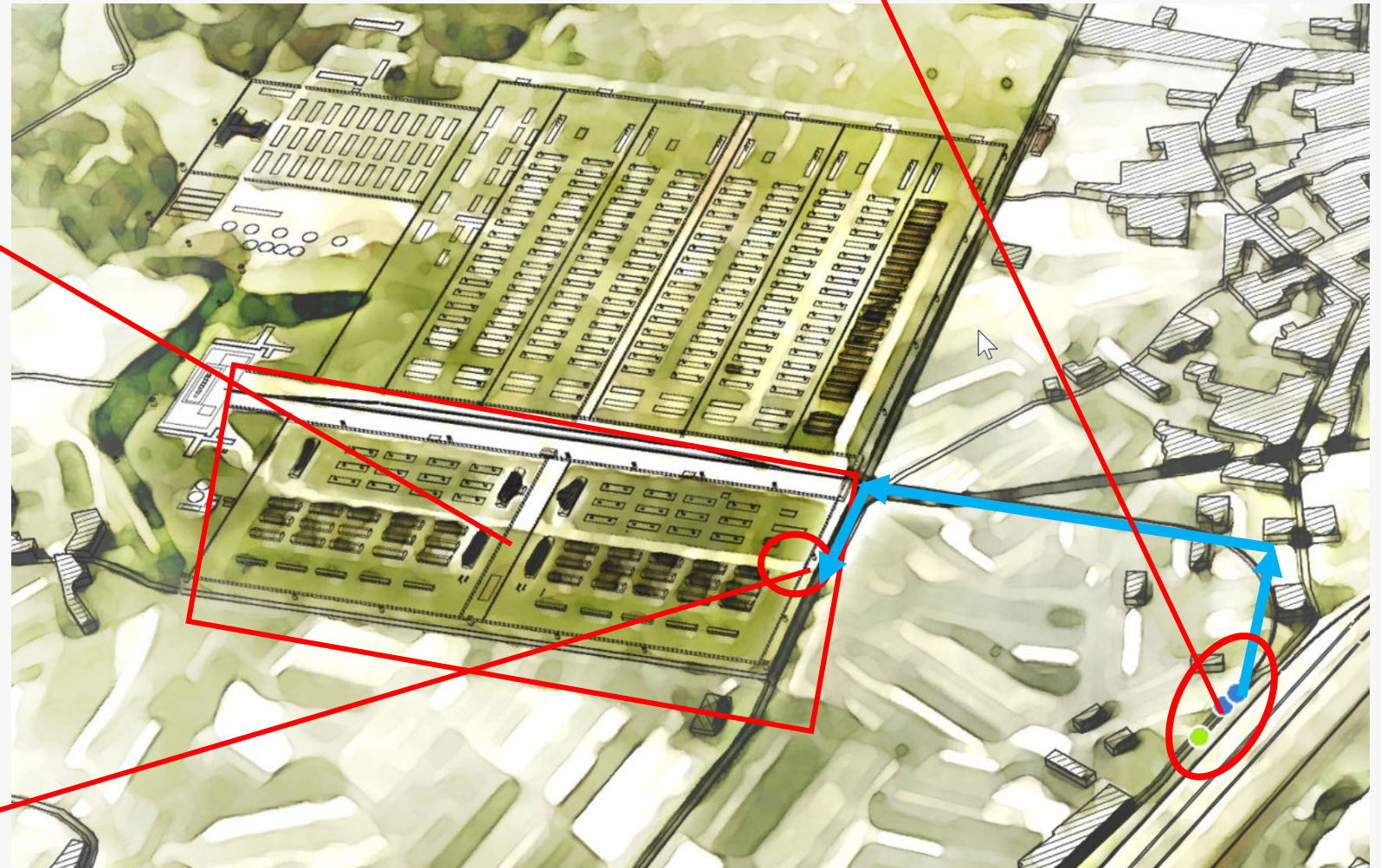


# Arrival at Birkenau

Alte Judenrampe

Women's area in  
Auschwitz II Birkenau

Entrance to Women's  
area in 1943



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# Arrival at Birkenau – Map Orientation

This map illustrates Halina Birenbaum's arrival at Auschwitz II Birkenau. The women's area in Birkenau is within the red box and the red circle shows the entrance to the camp from where Birenbaum came in. Since the main gate of the camp had not yet been built, this is where I expect Birenbaum to have entered instead. The blue arrows show the way that I expect her to have walked from the Alte Judenrampe to the entrance of Auschwitz II Birkenau and into the camp, specifically the women's area. The 'thick stinking mud' that Birenbaum describes reminds me that she is indeed in Birkenau, since it was built on a swamp.

*'There were long rows of gloomy brick barracks and everywhere **thick stinking mud**' (page 110)*

*'Shaven heads appeared in the windows, **colorless faces** that might have belonged to men or women – we could not tell' (page 110)*

*'Usually everything was made of wood but this camp seemed solid, expansive, precisely organized and built **as though it was meant to last forever**, for centuries! Could any power change things here, crumble it, or liberate us? (page 110)*



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## Bathhouse and arrival procedures

Upon her arrival in Auschwitz II Birkenau, Birenbaum was moved to sector Bla of the women's camp.

In this sector she was forced to undergo arrival procedures in the bathhouse. It is important to note that the majority of Jewish prisoners arriving in Auschwitz II Birkenau never experienced these extensive procedures as, instead, the Nazis sent them directly to the gas chambers where they were killed.

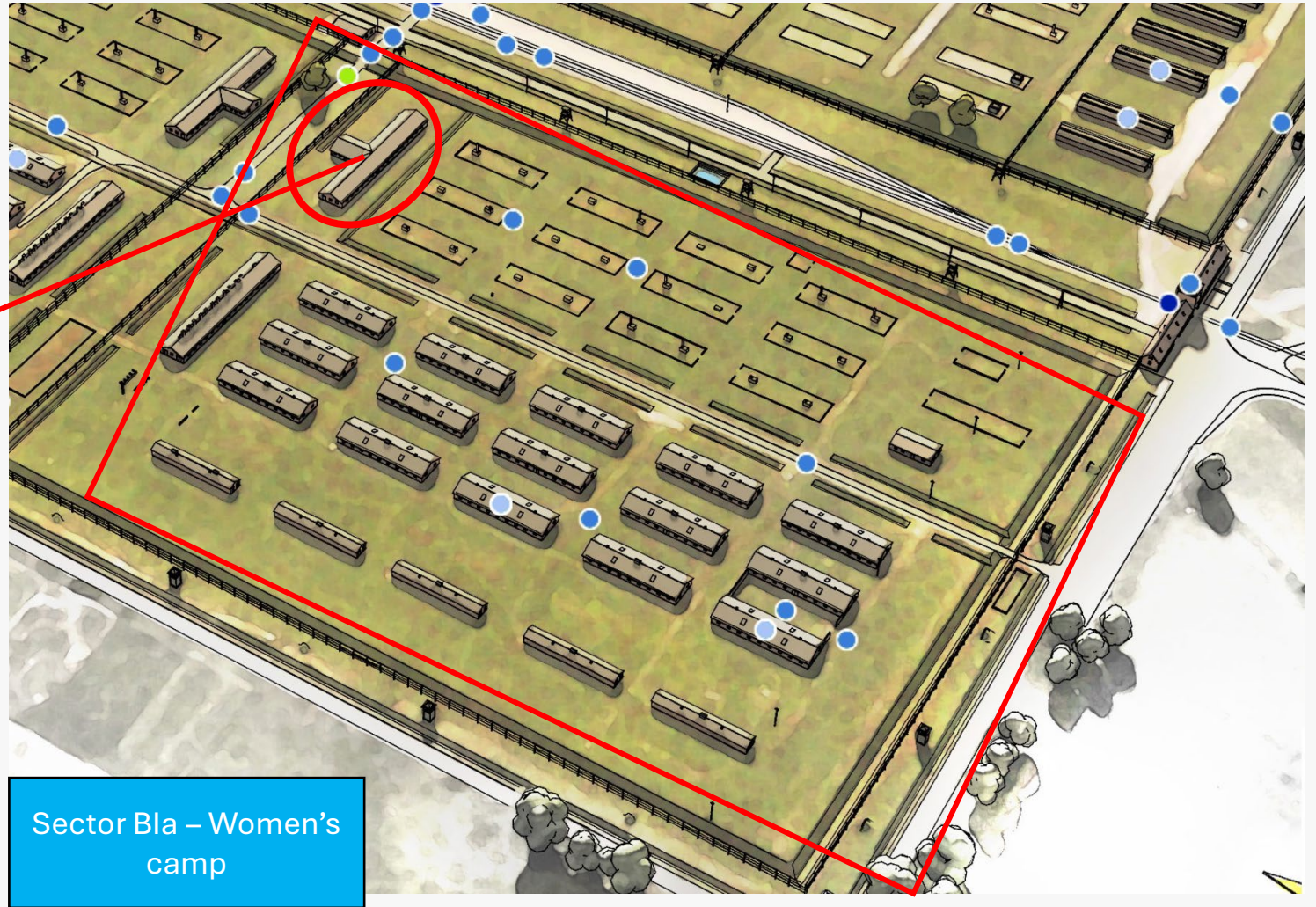
However, as we recall, Birenbaum had been sent from Majdanek to Auschwitz to work. Consequently, she was properly registered and forced to undergo these procedures (registration, shaving, showering, tattooing, dressing) upon her arrival in Auschwitz II Birkenau.





# Bathhouse and arrival procedures

Bathhouse



Sector B1a - Women's camp

# Bathhouse and arrival procedures – Map Orientation

This map shows Birenbaum's first location within Birkenau. Upon entering the camp, she was moved to the sector Bla in the women's camp, which can be seen on the map in the red square. It is important to note that Birenbaum at this point in the memoir does not explicitly say that she is in the Bla sector of the women's camp, but towards the end of her memoirs she writes about being moved from Blb to Bla and she says that she went back to the sector in which she was quarantined. Consequently, I know that after her arrival she was initially in sector Bla. In this sector she describes the sort of arrival procedures that she had to undergo in the bathhouse, which I have circled in red, in various areas in and around the buildings.

*'Gorged, insolent Capos in dark-blue striped dresses and beautifully sewed aprons herded us, with swearing and beating to a large hut near a bathhouse where we waited long hours as they counted and recounted us, **registered us and shaved our heads**' (page 110)*

*'Finally, **they tattooed numbers and marks on our wrists** – the emblem of Auschwitz, proofs of identity..' (page 110)*

*'During these hours of agony, as **they transformed us into inhabitants of the camp**, I wandered around almost deliriously around the barracks **looking for water. A drink, a drink, a drink!**' page 111)*

*'From the shower we had to **run naked** into a large, very cold and draughty hall' (page 111)*

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# Quarantine in Bla

After arriving in Auschwitz II Birkenau, Birenbaum was taken to sector Bla of the women's camp. This is where she had to go into 'quarantine' for the first two weeks of her stay in Birkenau. More specifically, Birenbaum was taken to block 15 within sector Bla.

Around the time of Birenbaum's arrival in the summer of 1943, the construction of a designated quarantine camp was completed (in August) and became operational. However, this quarantine camp was for men only and was located in sector BIIa. When Birenbaum arrived, there was no designated quarantine camp for women. However, block 15 was the block that the newly arrived women, including Halina Birenbaum, were sent to for their quarantine at the time.

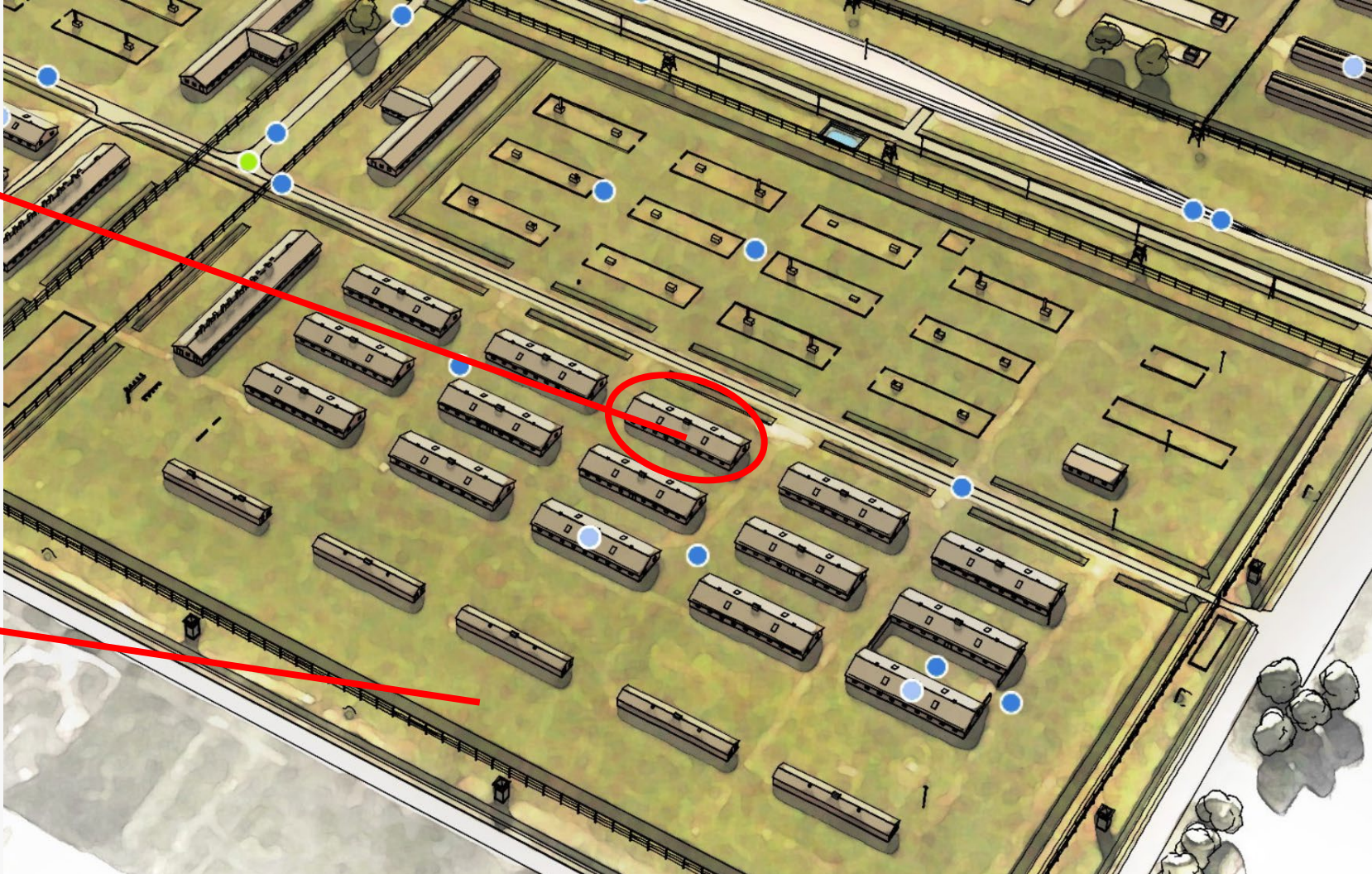




# Quarantine in Bla

Block 15 –  
Birenbaum in  
'quarantine'

Meadow



# Quarantine in Bla – Map Orientation

This map shows the location of Birenbaum's quarantine time in Bla. She was taken to block 15, which I have circled in red at the center of the map. Birenbaum writes that during her stay in Bla she was herded out daily to the meadow, a large empty area surrounded by barbed wire. She mentions that when she was in the meadow, capos were watching the female prisoners to make sure that they do not use the washrooms, which is the last row of thin buildings before the fence. I have therefore marked the meadow roughly as the area behind the barracks and washrooms, just before the fences that are around Bla. Birenbaum also wrote that she was able to see the crematorium from there. However, it is unlikely that she had a clear view of the entire building (crematorium II) from the meadow in Bla.

*“They also **painted a huge cross on our backs** with red paint. Then they took us to Block 15 in groups of five, **into quarantine**” (page 112)*

*‘During the two-week quarantine, we only worked inside the camp area, but since there was not enough work for everyone, the great majority were **herded out daily to the meadow**, a large, empty area surrounded by barbed wire’ (page 112)*

*‘In Majdanek, I had heard from women that Jews were being gassed and cremated in Auschwitz. I did not believe them... But now, a few dozen yards from our camp, behind barbed wire, **I could see a huge building with tiny barred windows and an enormous chimney. It was the crematorium. I saw the chimney smoking almost daily**’ (page 114)*



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## View from the meadow to crematorium II and gas chamber

When Birenbaum is in quarantine in sector Bla in the summer of 1943 she mentions seeing a gas chamber and crematorium in the distance (or at least the smoke coming from it).

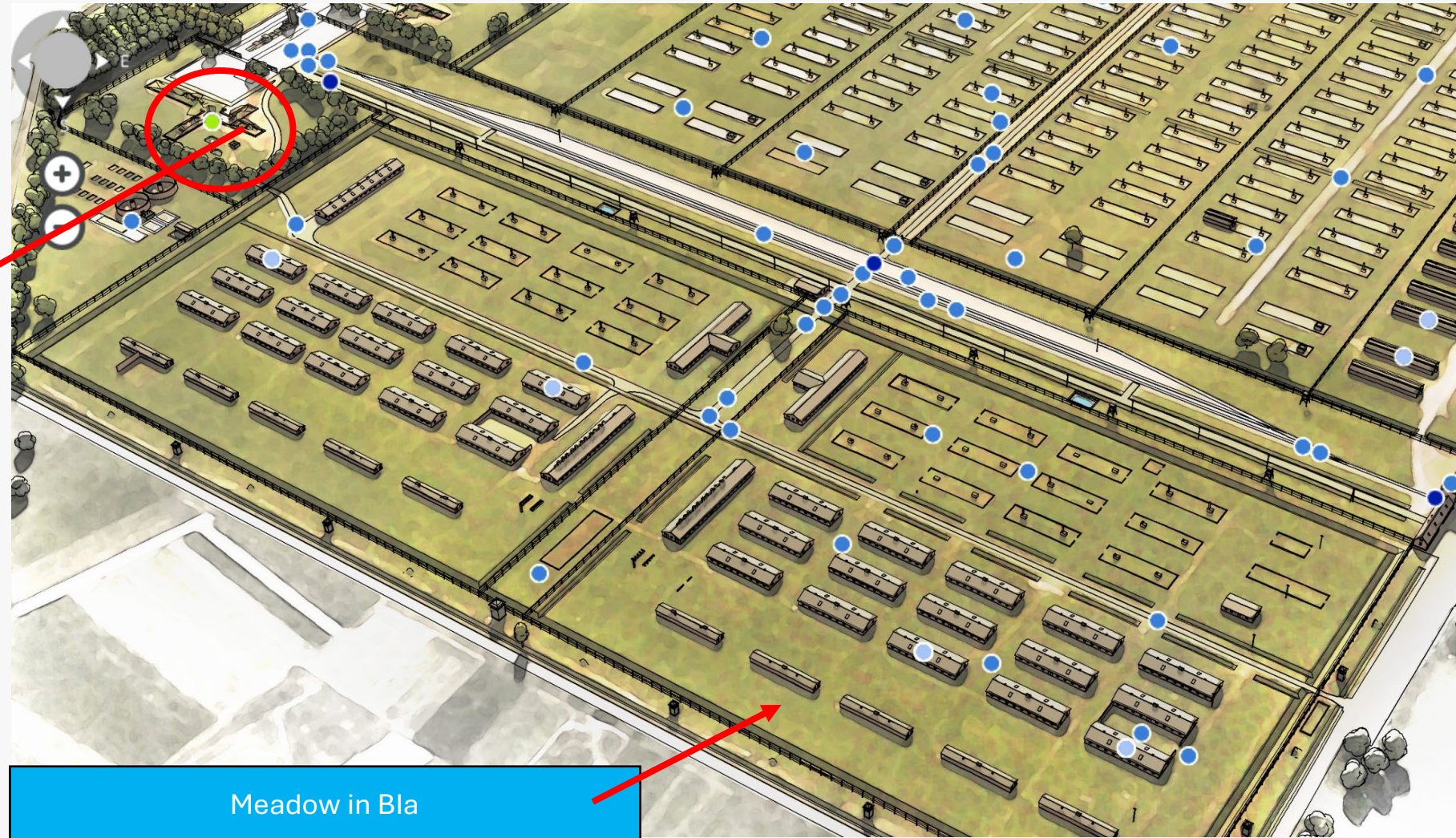
In the summer of 1942 the Nazis began the construction of four large gas chamber and crematoria in Auschwitz II Birkenau. The construction was completed, and the crematoria and gas chambers became operational between spring and early summer of 1943. Thus, when Birenbaum arrives in the height of summer in 1943 all crematoria and gas chambers in Auschwitz II Birkenau were already in operation.

The crematorium that Birenbaum is referring to is crematorium II and the adjacent gas chamber. It had become operational on March 31st. Both the gas chamber and the undressing room at crematorium II were located underground. It is estimated that crematorium II had the capacity to burn over 1000 corpses in a single day.





# View from meadow to crematorium II and gas chamber



Crematorium II  
and gas  
chamber

Meadow in Bla

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# View from meadow to crematorium II and gas chamber – Map Orientation

On this map I have again marked the meadow area located in Bla, where Birenbaum was on a daily basis. The crematorium, which was crematorium number II, is on the left side circled in red. It appears that there is significant distance between the meadow and crematorium II, as well as fences and likely some trees. Under those circumstances it is unlikely that Birenbaum would have been able to see the entire crematorium building. However, there is a good chance that she saw the smoke coming from it and heard about the crematorium from other prisoners. Birenbaum certainly knew that crematorium II was located there, regardless of whether or not she was able to see it from the meadow in Bla.

*‘In Majdanek, I had heard from women that Jews were being gassed and cremated in Auschwitz. I did not believe them... But now, a few dozen yards from our camp, behind barbed wire, **I could see a huge building with tiny barred windows and an enormous chimney. It was the crematorium. I saw the chimney smoking almost daily**’ (page 114)*

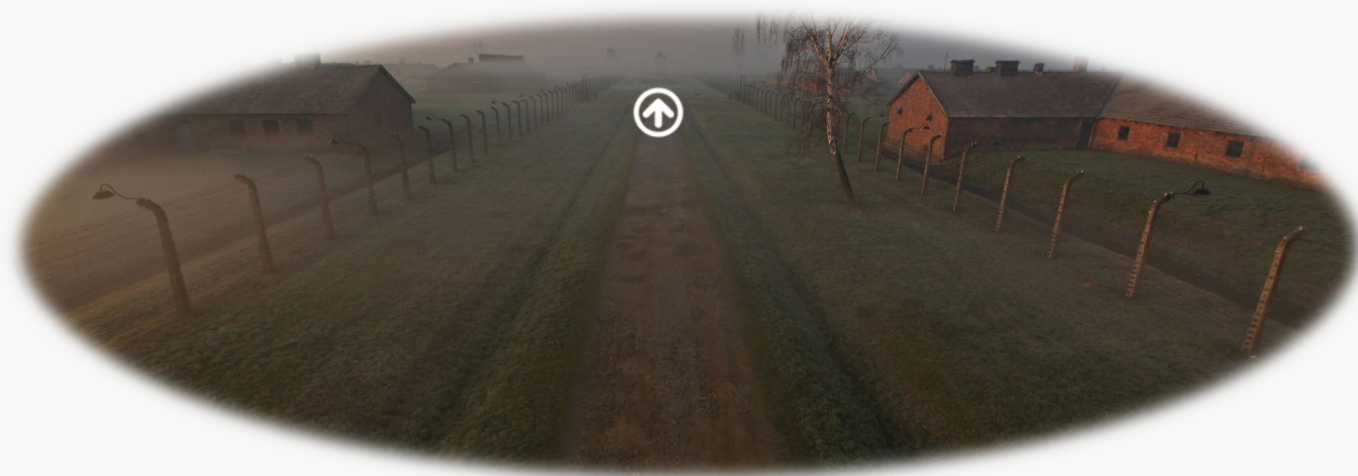


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## Transfer to Blb

After her two weeks of Quarantine in Bla, Birenbaum was transferred along with her sister-in-law Hela to the other sector in the women's camp, which was Blb. In this sector she stayed in Block 27, which was a brick barrack.

Bla and Blb were both women's sectors located next to each other and within the same general area in Auschwitz II Birkenau. However, despite their close proximity to each other, a transfer between the sectors had a significant impact on the prisoners. Moreover, the path from Bla to Blb led Birenbaum between the kitchen and sauna building, as well as through a corridor of approximately 10 meters located between the two sectors.





# Transfer to Blb

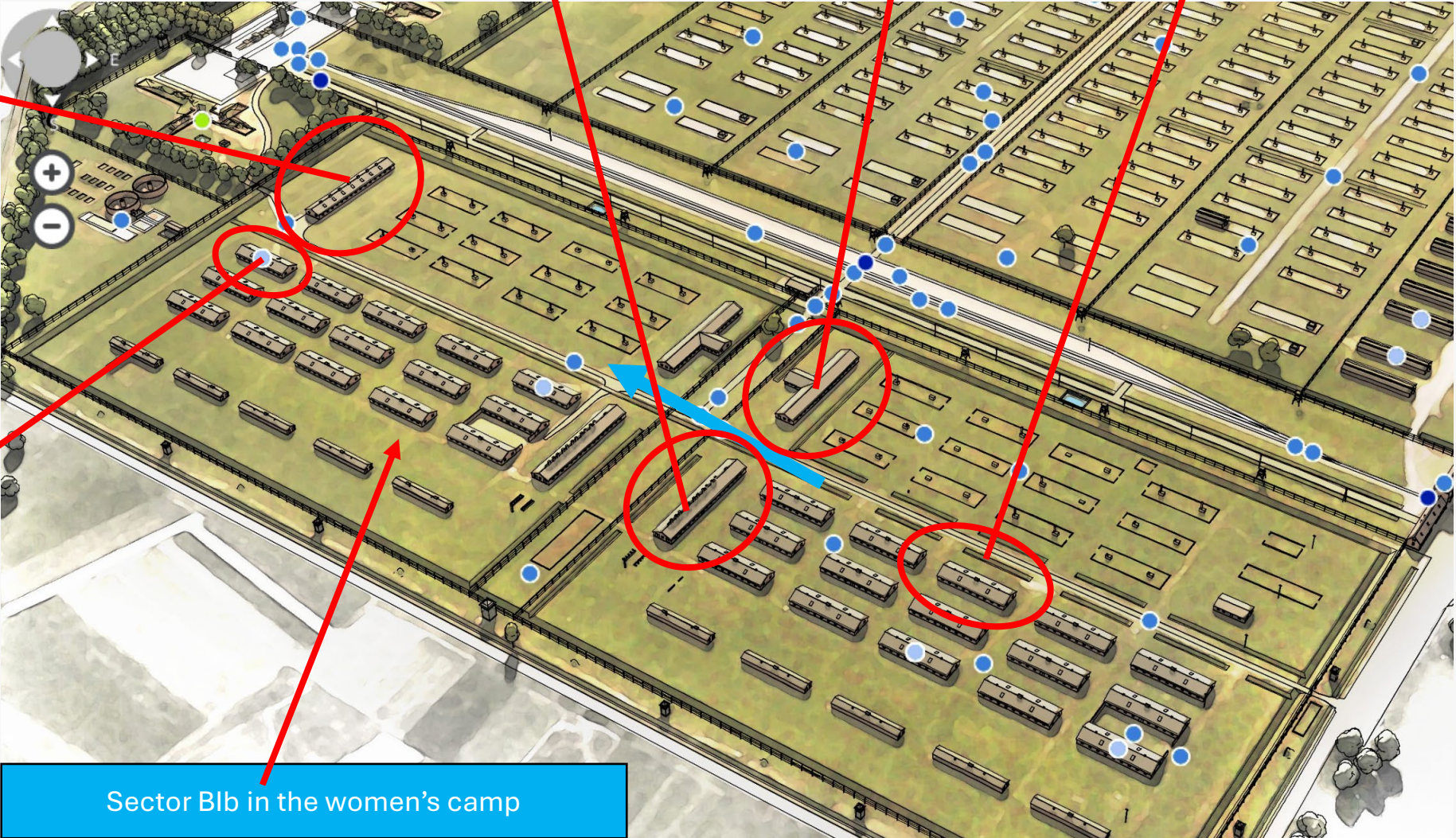
Laundry in the Bekleidungskammer

Kitchen

Sauna

Birenbaum's previous location in Bla

Block 27 – Birenbaum in Blb



Sector Blb in the women's camp

# Transfer to Blb – Map orientation

In sector Blb Birenbaum stayed in block 27, which is circled in red on the left of the map. In Blb she first works in the laundry, which was located in the Bekleidungskammer building across from her block (also circled in red). On the map I have also indicated Birenbaum's previous location in Bla to show that, even though the two sectors were next to each other, she still moved to an entirely different area, further away from Bla and much closer to Crematoria II and its gas chambers. The blue arrow indicates the path that led Birenbaum from Bla, through the Sauna and Kitchen buildings, to Blb.

*'After quarantine, Hela and I found ourselves in camp B. **Our new block overseer, a 20-year old Jewish woman from Slovakia, had come to Auschwitz in one of the first transports and had succeeded by this time in learning all the secrets of hell and in becoming a monster**' (page 114)*

*'In camp B, Hela and I **first worked in the laundry**. In other words we had a **comparatively easy job by camp standards**, since at least we worked indoors, not exposed to rain or the heat of the sun' (page 114)*

*'Despite everything, I still looked quite well. **I was starving**, but did not show it, my cheeks were rosy, as before. **But to my despair, Hela grew thinner and frailer day by day**' (page 119)*



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## Underwear workshop

After working in the laundry in Blb, Birenbaum and her sister-in-law were sent to work in an underwear factory, within the same building. Although this type of work was relatively easy by camp standards, the August heat during the day and night made for unbearable conditions for the prisoners.

Unlike her previous work in the laundry, Birenbaum remained at the underwear workshop for several months from the summer of 1943 to early spring of 1944. In the beginning of winter in 1943 Birenbaum's sister-in-law is moved to the sick ward where she dies shortly after.

During her time in Blb Birenbaum frequently met her friend Celina who stayed in a different block. She writes that she went to see Celina almost every evening after roll call. It should be noted that while Auschwitz I had a designated assembly square for roll call, Auschwitz II Birkenau did not. Instead, roll calls in the women's camp in Birkenau would take place outside the prisoners' barracks. This is how Birenbaum was able to meet her friend Celina after roll calls.



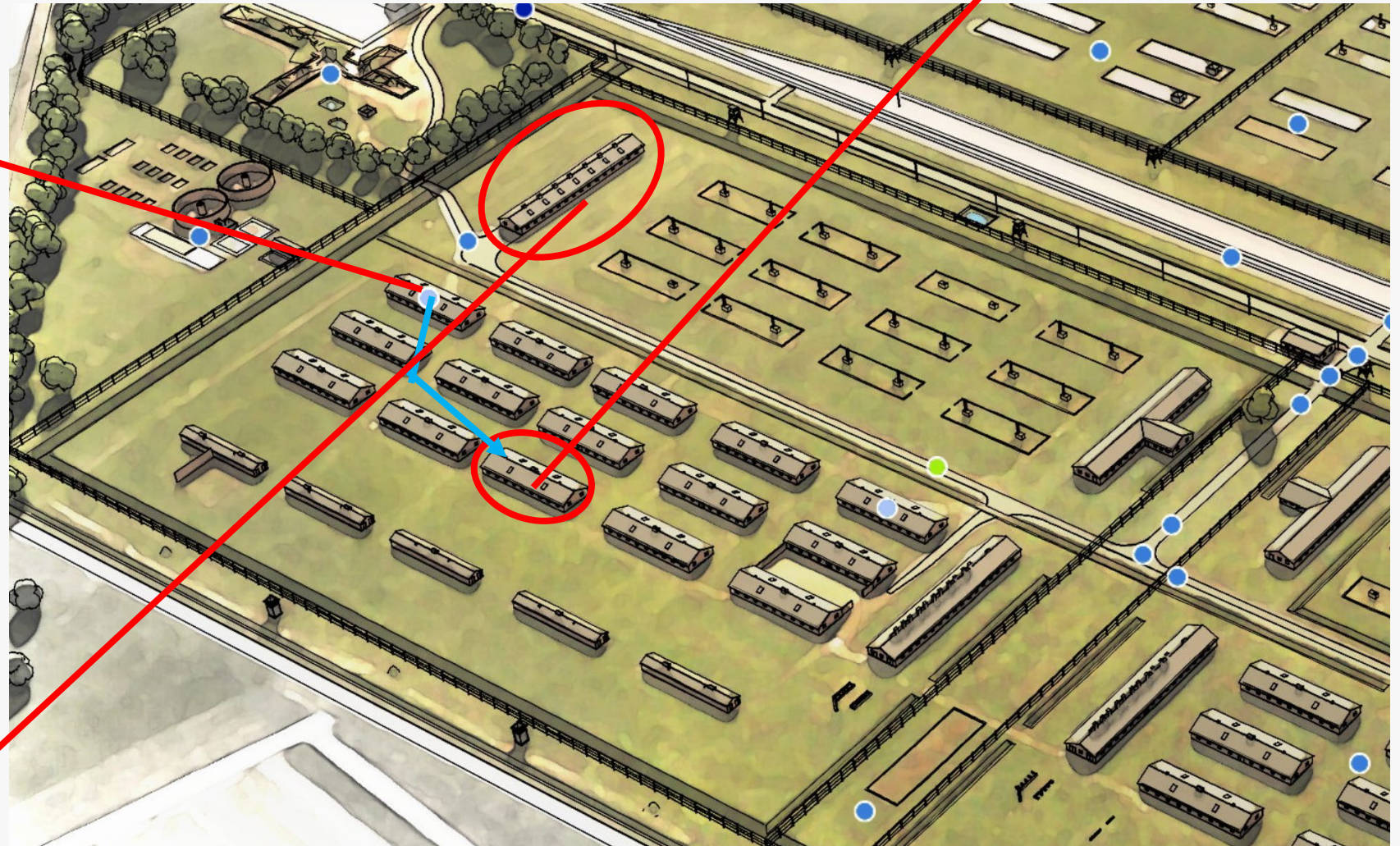


# Underwear workshop

Block 13 –  
Birenbaum's friends

Block 27 –  
Birenbaum in Blb

Underwear workshop in  
the Bekleidungskammer



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# Underwear workshop – Map orientation

Birenbaum's new work at the underwear workshop was also located in the Bekleidungskammer, which I have circled in red, across from block 27 where Birenbaum was staying. While staying in Blb, Birenbaum mentions that she accidentally met her friend Celina in block 13. I have circled block 13 in red and used the blue arrow to show the way from Birenbaum's block (27) to her friend's block (13).

*'Fortunately we did reasonably well at our next work, which was in an **underwear factory**. We had easy work sitting down' (page 119)*

*'As we slept eight or ten to a bunk in the **hot August nights, drenched in sweat and sticking to one another, quarrels and fights broke out**' (page 121)*

*'While in **Block 13 I accidentally met Celina**, a former school friend of my elder brother' (page 140)*

*'I went to see Celina and Mrs. Prajsowa almost every evening after roll call' (page 142)*

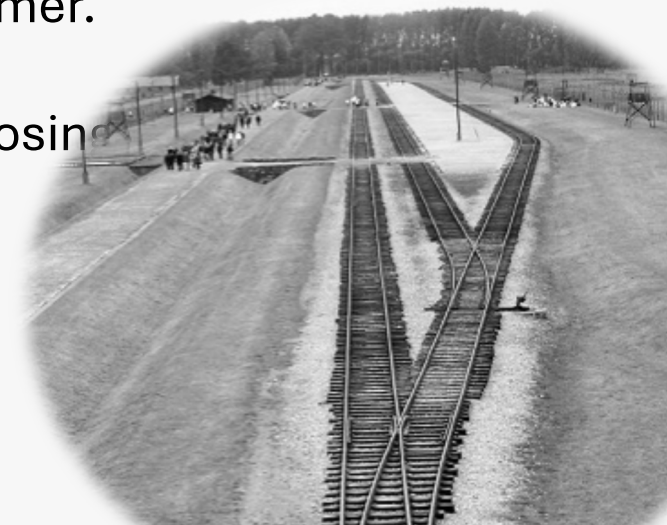
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# Weaving workshop

After the underwear workshop where Birenbaum remained for several months, she was transferred to the Weberei, which was a weaving workshop. Unlike her previous workplaces, this was located outside of Auschwitz II Birkenau. Twice daily she had to walk from her barrack in B1b to the Weberei outside of the camp.

Birenbaum describes that, at the weaving workshop, she had to work quickly to match the expectations of the SS overseers. Prisoners who were not able to keep up would be punished terribly. While working at the weaving workshop Birenbaum made friends with Polusia, her worktable neighbor. They grew close as they continued to work together from early spring 1944 into the summer.

By the summer of 1944 it became clear that the Nazis were on the verge of losing the war. As a result, the dynamics in the camp changed rapidly.



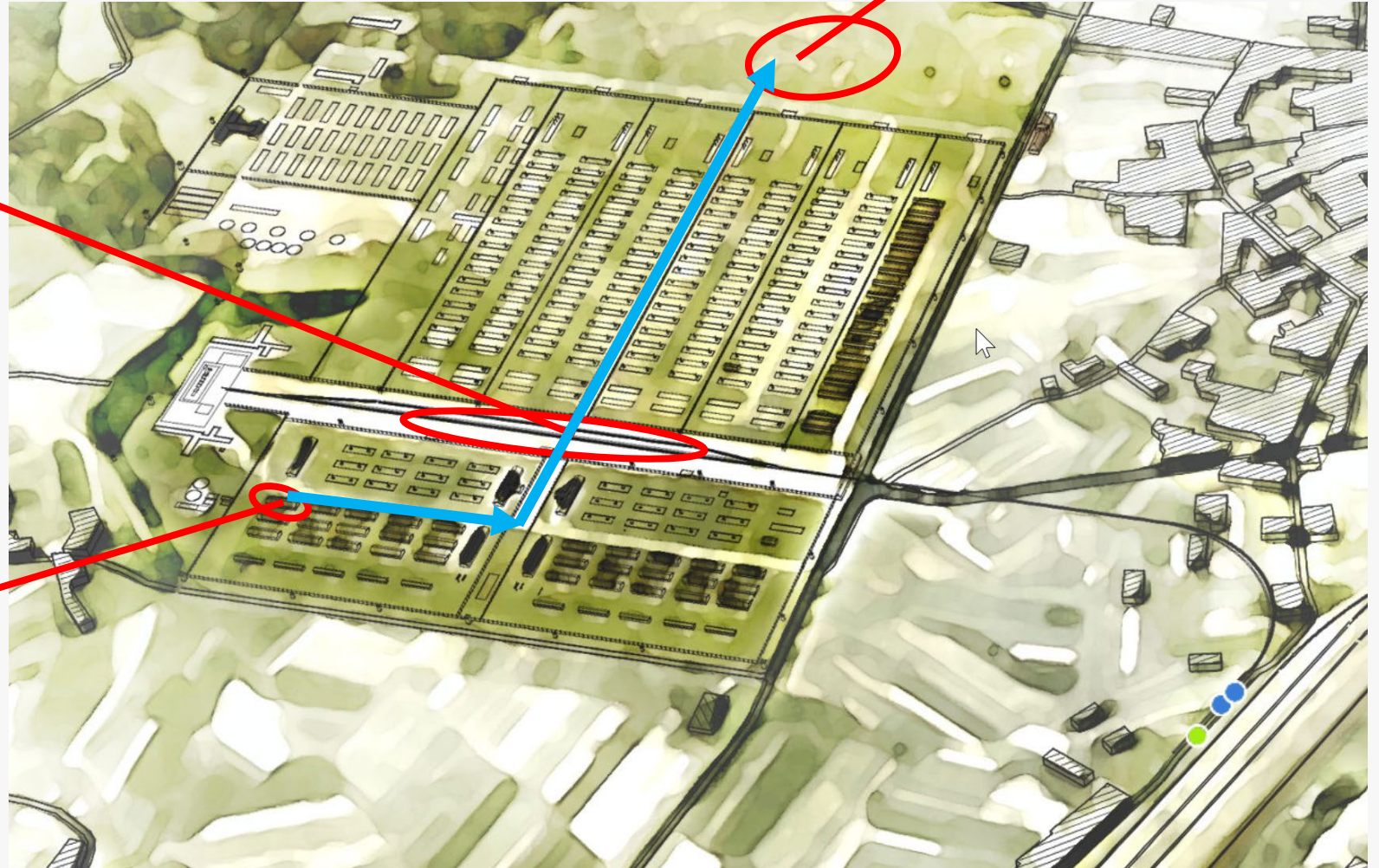


# Weaving workshop

Unloading ramp

Block 27 –  
Birenbaum in Blb

Weaving  
workshop



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# Weaving workshop – Map orientation

Birenbaum's work at the Weaving workshop was not in close proximity to her block and she describes that, on her way there, she passed both a crematorium and an unloading ramp. On the map I have circled block 27 where Birenbaum was staying. I have also indicated the unloading ramp that is now inside Birkenau and had still been under construction when Birenbaum arrived. As of May 1944, it was in operation. The weaving workshop was located just outside of Auschwitz II Birkenau, close to sector BIII ('Mexico'). I have indicated Birenbaum's path to the weaving workshop from her block in BIb with the blue arrows.

*'But at the last moment, before breaking down entirely, I was fortunate again; the block orderly apparently took pity on me, and **transferred me to the Weberei**' (page 149)*

*'The Weberei labor detail worked in a barrack that was a long way outside the camp. Twice daily, on our way there, we passed a ramp and **people being herded out of wagons**' (page 151)*

*'The road to the Weberei ran close to the crematorium and to a small wood where **corpses were burned en masse, in heaps, in ditches**, when the crematorium could not keep up with the great number of transports' (page 151)*

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# Kanada

In the summer of 1944 Birenbaum was transferred from the weaving workshop to Kanada I, a warehouse in which the belongings of arriving prisoners were stored. While Kanada II was located in Auschwitz II Birkenau, Kanada I was located outside of Birkenau, closer to Auschwitz I. Since Birenbaum worked in Kanada I she had to walk from her camp in Birkenau to work just outside the camp at Auschwitz I.

The conditions at Kanada I were much better than what Birenbaum had previously experienced. She could eat a variety of food and dress in elegant clothing. However, in the fall of 1944 Birenbaum's work in Kanada came to an end as less and less transports were arriving in the Auschwitz camp complex.



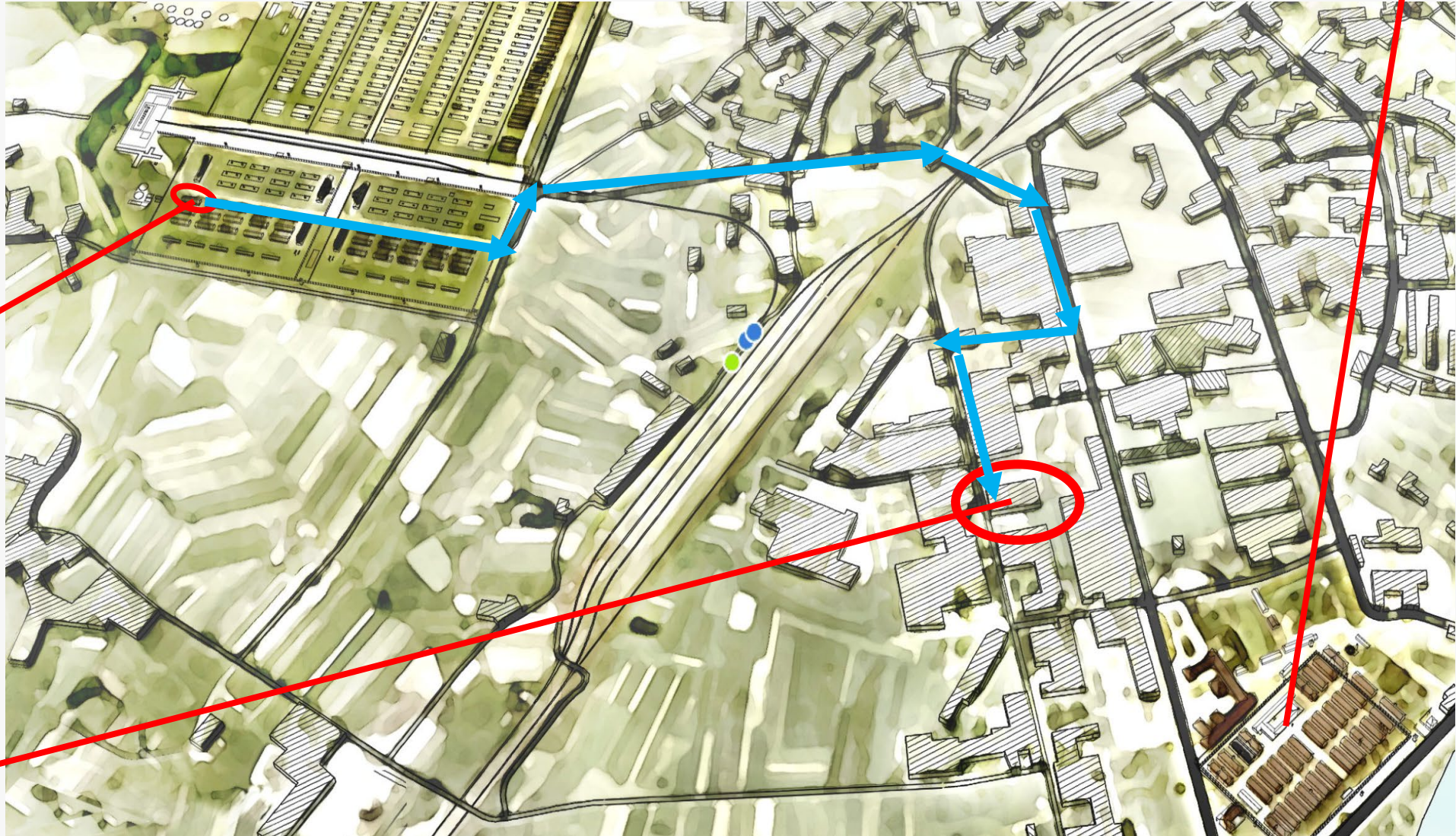


# Kanada

Auschwitz I

Block 27 –  
Birenbaum in Blb

Kanada I



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# Kanada – Map orientation

On the map I have circled block 27 in red, where Birenbaum was staying in B1b and I have also indicated the location of Auschwitz I at the bottom right of the map. The area of Kanada I is circled in red and located just outside Auschwitz I. I have indicated Birenbaum's path to Kanada I from her block in B1b with the blue arrows.

'We dreaded that block (26) like burned children dread fire, and I was particularly afraid, on account of my sick bladder and the whooping cough that had been troubling me lately. But chance had it otherwise; instead of being sent to block 26, **I was unexpectedly sent to Kanada**' (page 155)

'After a warm bath, dressed in fresh and clean clothes that were free of lice, **I felt reborn**' (page 156)

'**We walked several miles each morning and evening** from our camp at Birkenau to Auschwitz, where the Kanada was located' (page 156)

'**Finally the Kanada came to an end...** It was partly liquidated and our labor detail was disbanded. In the fall of 1944, the transports began decreasing, became less and less frequent and then, finally, stopped entirely' (page 162)



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## Return to Bla and Kartoffelkommando

After Kanada comes to an end in the fall of 1944 Birenbaum and other female prisoners were put into a small block in Bla. She thus returned to sector Bla where she was initially in quarantine.

Towards the end of fall, Birenbaum was then transferred to her next and last labor detail, the Kartoffelkommando (potato commando). Birenbaum thus worked at the small potato warehouse that had been constructed in the fall of 1944. Likely this was shortly before Birenbaum began working there. It served as a means of storage for potatoes until January 1945 when the entire Auschwitz camp complex was liquidated.

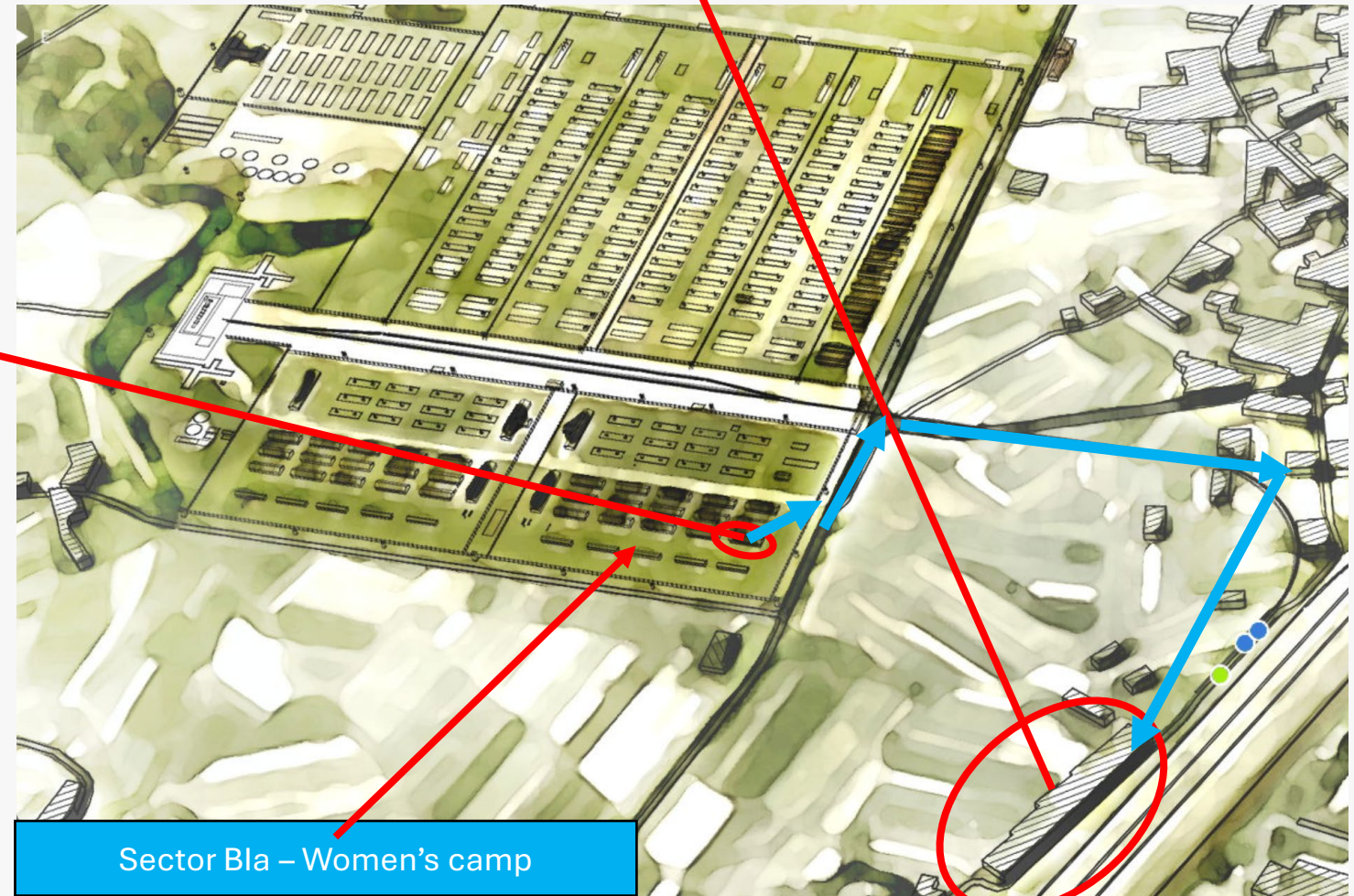
The potato warehouse was located within the vicinity of Auschwitz II Birkenau and within close proximity of the Alte Judenrampe where Birenbaum arrived in the summer of 1944.



# Return to Bla and Kartoffelkommando

Kartoffelkommando –  
likely in this area

Block 25



Sector Bla – Women's camp



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# Return to Bla and Kartoffelkommando – Map orientation

Birenbaum does not mention the specific block she is staying in when she returns to Bla in the fall of 1944. However, she does write that she was in a locked, walled block and I know that block 25 in Bla had a wall around it. It makes me think that Birenbaum was staying in block 25, which I have circled in red in the center of the map. Birenbaum writes that her next and last labor detail was the Kartoffelkommando. This was a new construction, close to the Alte Judenrampe. I have indicated the rough location of the Kartoffelkommando in the red circle on the map on the bottom left. I have indicated Birenbaum's path from block 25 in Bla to the potato warehouse with the blue arrows.

**'They crowded us into a locked, walled block** in camp A just as they had done at the start of my sojourn in Auschwitz during quarantine 18 months earlier' (page 164)

'Finally, the scales of our destiny tipped towards life. For reasons unknown to us, the camp authorities decided to keep us alive and returned us to various huts and jobs' (page 166)

**'My next and last labor detail was the Kartoffelkommando'** (page 166)

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# Sick bay and departure from Birkenau

While Birenbaum was still working in the potato warehouse she noticed that, by the winter of 1944, the Nazis began the evacuation and liquidation of the camp.

However, on the first day of the New Year Birenbaum is shot by a sentry on a watchtower, resulting in a serious injury of her arm. She drags herself to the sickbay, where she is admitted in block 28. After admission she was most likely sent to block 23, which was for internal diseases.

Birenbaum remained in the medical block for just over two weeks.





Although she was slowly recovering, she was still very weak and, in mid January 1945, the Nazis forced her to embark on the infamous death march away from the Auschwitz camp complex and ultimately to her next destination: Ravensbrück concentration camp in Nazi Germany.

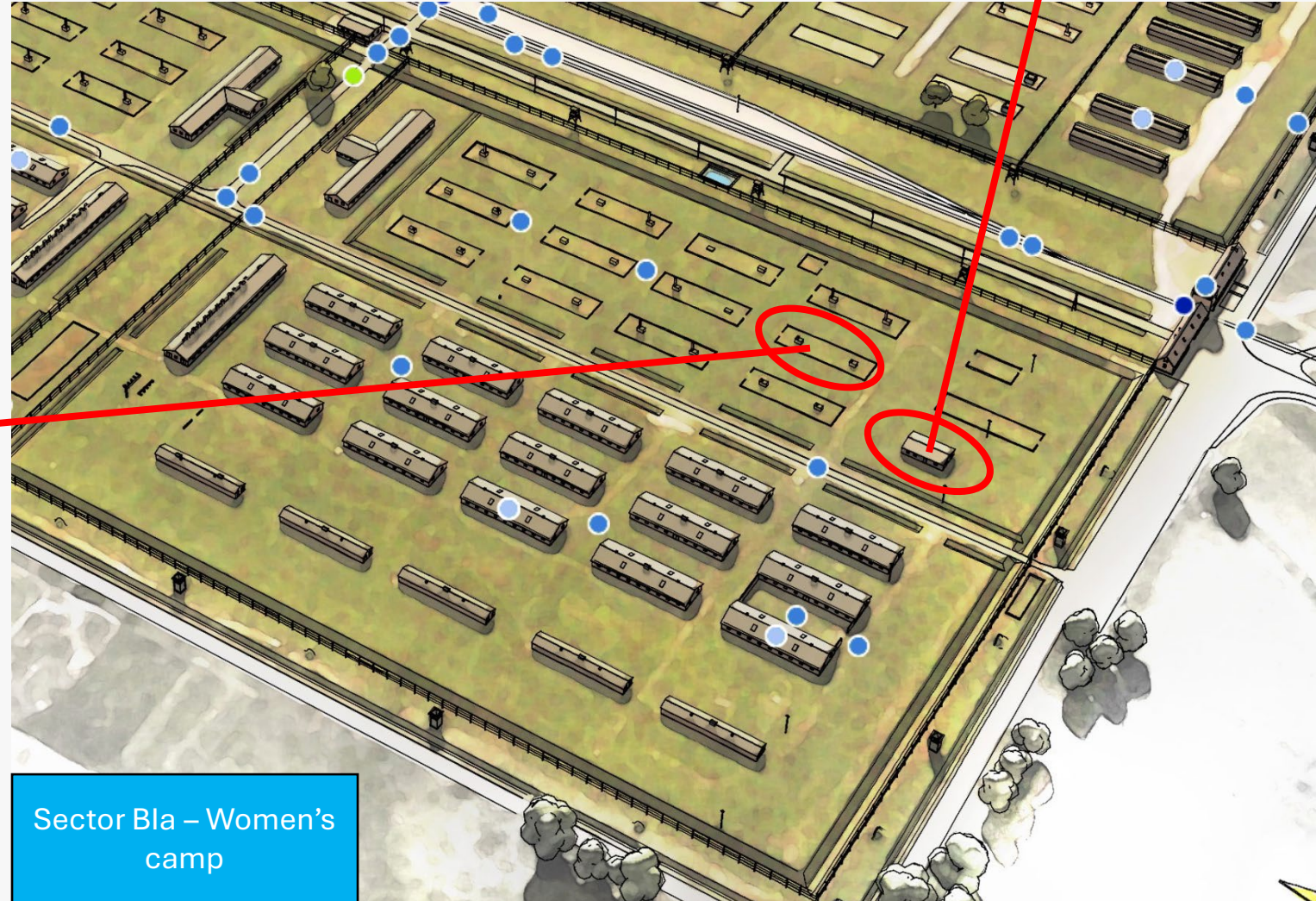
From January 17<sup>th</sup> to January 21<sup>st</sup> 1945 the Nazis forced selected prisoners from the Auschwitz camp complex to march many kilometers towards the west. Some marches were longer than 200 kilometers and thousands of prisoners died from exhaustion or were shot by the SS along the way. Because of the corpses that were left behind on the trails, these marches later became known as the 'Death Marches'.



# Sick bay and departure from Birkenau

Block 28 – sick bay admission

Block 23 (internal diseases) – potentially where Birenbaum was



Sector Bla – Women's camp

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# Sick Bay and departure from Birkenau – Map orientation

Within Bla there were several blocks that were designated medical blocks, but their respective purposes changed over years. After her injury, Birenbaum would have gone to block 28 of the sick bay to be admitted. Afterwards, she would have likely been in block 23 which was for internal diseases. However, she could have also been in a different block. I have indicated both, block 28 and block 23, with red circles on the map. Birenbaum remained there until she was forced to embark on the death march.

‘He aimed and **before anyone could notice and warn me, a bullet struck**. The sentry was probably aiming at my heart, but missed and struck my arm. At first I did not understand what had happened’ (page 176)

‘I dragged myself to the sick bay. The sickbay at this time was in our sector, not far from the place where this new misfortune happened to me. **But the way to the sickbay seemed endless**’ (page 177)

‘**It was late at night when they took us away from Auschwitz**. Red and yellow tongues of flame, and blue clouds of smoke stood out against the white background of snow; the Hitlerites were burning the evidence of their crimes, ’ (page 201)



# Acknowledgment of Sources

Birenbau, Halina, and David J. Welsh. *Hope is the Last to Die*. Oswiecim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2017.  
<http://auschwitz.org/en/type-of-publication/memoirs-and-accounts/hope-is-the-last-to-die,16.html#2>

Images and maps taken from the official website of the 'Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum' in Auschwitz, Poland.  
<http://auschwitz.org/en/>

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