

Ravensbrück Concentration Camp for Women



Photograph. Women at Ravensbrück in 1939. (from Bundesarchiv, Bild)

Situated alongside an tranquil lake, the Ravensbrück concentration camp, 50 miles north of Berlin, was constructed in 1939, exclusively to house women. By the end of the war, 130,000 women from 20 European countries had been led through its entrance, often oblivious of the danger inside.

Most of the camp's inhabitants were not Jewish, they were considered inferior because they were prostitutes, lesbians, political resisters, work-shy, or anti-social. Roma (Gypsies) and Jehovah's Witnesses – the latter had only to renounce their faith to be set free – were also confined there. All were considered useless by the Nazis, worthy of most brutal treatment.

More than 30,000 women, some estimate as many as 90,000 died there from starvation, disease, gassings, hanging, torture, or execution by shooting.

"They had what I would call dead eyes," – Sylvia Salvesen, a Norwegian survivor of Ravensbrück, recalling her first impression of the bald, skeletal prisoners she saw when she arrived at the camp in 1943.

Sarah Helm, a British journalist described how once a new prisoner's initial shock at camp life subsided, she would struggle to maintain a modicum of humanity: "Being able to share a mattress with someone or to share your soup – those things meant everything."



The camp's day began before dawn with appell, (roll call), which required prisoners to stand in thin dresses for hours, even in snow. Female guards dressed in black capes lashed inmates with whips. Many women froze to death where they stood; those who collapsed from exhaustion were taken to their death. The prisoners fit for labour would then move on to gruelling, often impossible, tasks in work gangs. The camp's philosophy was deliberately counterintuitive. It allowed those capable of work to live, then it worked them to death.

Sarah Helm discovered that a significant minority of Ravenbrück's camp guards were lesbians, drawn to the job for the opportunity it afforded them to meet other women during a time when lesbianism, like all homosexuality, was reviled. Lesbianism was also common among the prisoners. Many took on men's names and wore men's clothing when they could get away with it.

Certain of these lesbians were openly gay upon entering the camp. "During the previous Weimar period, lesbianism and other forms of liberal lifestyles had been allowed and flourished," – Helm. "When the Nazis came in, they cracked down on them." Others, she said, were desperate for close friendships due to

their daily hardships. In many cases, those alliances became sexual, facilitated, in part, by the tight sleeping quarters.

The women also sought refuge in different camp families. These included the Russian Red Army POWs, led by the dauntless Yevgenia Lazarevna Klemm, who ordered her group to march across the camp with heads held high and to reject the guards' offers of preferential treatment if they became their camp spies. "Do not break the circle," Klemm implored of her girls, that they sabotage the military equipment they were forced to make at a plant near the camp, because they knew it could be used against Russian troops.

She had the strength of character to keep them together - Sarah Helm, who was deeply moved when she uncovered Klemm's story. A history teacher before the war, Klemm survived the camp only to commit suicide in post war Russia. The Stalinist regime harassed her repeatedly and ultimately forbade her from teaching.



Sarah Helm also discovered details regarding prisoner Elsa Krug, a prostitute from Düsseldorf. Even their fellow inmates wrote off the prostitutes as lost souls whom they never took the time to get to know. Yet Krug held power as a *kapo* (a prisoner who supervised other inmates). She ran the work gang in the camp's kitchen supplies cellar, which afforded her the opportunity to smuggle out much needed food for others. She disobeyed orders by refusing to beat her fellow inmates and was gassed to death as a result.



The stories of the camp prostitutes were only uncovered in the mid-'90s, - Helm. "No one wrote about the tragic cases of these young women, who were taken off the streets of Germany and killed, or left to die in the camps." She pointed out that none of the prostitutes were called to give evidence at the Hamburg War Crimes trials or at any later trials.

Other heroines emerge in Sarah Helm's narrative, including the brave Polish 'rabbits' - women who were mutilated in medical experiments at the camp's 'hospital.' In some operations, deep wounds were made to the women's legs, which were then deliberately infected with bacteria. Medications were then tested for their efficacy in healing the swollen, pus-filled limbs.



One rabbit, Kryisia Czyz, used urine as invisible ink in the margins of the censored letters she sent to inform her family, and the Polish underground, of the unspeakable suffering in the camp. Miraculously, a clandestine radio station operating from Britain broadcast Czyz's reports. The International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva also received the information—as it did other news regarding the camps, but the organization refused to intervene. Sarah Helm discovered evidence of this in the files of a small museum of the Polish underground, located in Northwest London.

Asked how she was able to write about such atrocities, Sarah Helm said, "It wasn't so much the atrocity that was the problem, it was the sadness." She cites the babies born in the camp and then deliberately starved to death. "That was the most painful of all. The extraordinary joy these women had when their babies were born and then how they watched them die. That was almost non-write-able. In fact, I haven't written everything I read about."



Adversitate. Custodi. Per Verum