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The 'Rabbits' of Ravensbrück: Medical Experimentation at the Nazi Concentration Camp for Women

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Medical Experimentation at the Nazi Concentration Camp for Women**

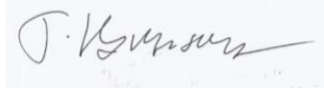
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in
the Department of History from The College of William and Mary and The University of St
Andrews

by

Jenna Kay Galberg

April 2020

Tomasz Kamusella, Dissertation Advisor

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'T. Kamusella', is positioned above a horizontal line.

The ‘Rabbits’ of Ravensbrück Medical Experimentation at the Nazi Concentration Camp for Women

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St Andrews

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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of B.A. International Honours in the School of History, University of St Andrews.

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Abbreviations:

RMG – Ravensbrück Mahn- und Gedenkstätte Exhibitions and Archive

USHMM – United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

LUWG – Lund University, Witnessing Genocide Archive

German Terms:

Blockälteste – block leader

Gemeinschaftsfremden – community aliens

Hauptlager – main camps

Kommandant – camp commander

Konzentrationslager – concentration camp(s)

Lebensraum – living space

Oberaufseherin – camp supervisor

Obergruppenführer – lieutenant general

Politische Abteilung – political department

Reichsführer-SS – commander of the SS

Revier – hospital

Schutzstaffel (SS) – Nazi protection squad

Volkgemeinschaft – national community

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Abstract

This dissertation reconstructs the experiences of a group of Polish women imprisoned in Ravensbrück, a Nazi concentration camp in northern Germany, during the Second World War. Arrested and incarcerated for their resistance activities, these seventy-four women were subjected to unconsented experimental operations ordered by Heinrich Himmler and performed by a group of Nazi doctors. By scrutinising prisoner testimony and contemporary documents which survived the war, in addition to engaging with secondary sources, it becomes evident that this group of Poles, known throughout the camp as the 'Rabbits', received widespread physical and emotional support from their fellow inmates. Their high survival rate, despite the brutal conditions and orders for execution, can be attributed in part to the relationships both amongst the 'Rabbits' themselves and with others in the camp, including their fellow inmates as well as some of their captors. Facing starvation, disease, and extermination, female prisoners defied national and class divisions and risked their lives to ensure the survival of the 'Rabbits'. Driven by the desire to hold their perpetrators accountable and expose Nazi atrocities to the global public, the women of Ravensbrück demonstrate the power of uncommon connections in the context of the Nazi concentration camp system.

Introduction: Ravensbrück *Konzentrationslager*

The Third Reich's pursuit of a 'racially' and ethnolinguistically homogenous national community (*Volksgemeinschaft*) and ample 'living space' (*Lebensraum*) propelled the vast network of concentration camps constructed initially across Germany and eventually throughout the European continent under National Socialist occupation. The process commenced in March 1933 with the establishment of the first concentration camp in Dachau. The early camps targeted individuals deemed hostile to the regime, notably political opponents and religious dissenters.¹ Despite a lack of overall coordination in the early 1930s, all camps relied upon repression, terror, and forced labour to break resistance to the Nazis, establishing harsh disciplinary methods based upon practices used in German prisons and the army.² The utilisation of pre-existing approaches, as well as an established propaganda campaign against the 'Leftist menace', helped to facilitate official and popular acceptance of such brutal suppression.³ The camps evolved throughout the 1930s and 1940s, eventually relying on extermination programmes and an 'annihilation through labour' policy to eliminate those "community aliens" (*Gemeinschaftsfremden*) who were deemed inferior, 'pollutants' of the social body": Jews, Roma ('Gypsies'), homosexuals, the mentally and physically disabled, 'work-shy', and 'a-socials'.⁴ In the course of the Nazi reign, twenty-seven *Hauptlager* and over 1,100 attached satellite camps across the continent held millions of prisoners, up to two million of whom died during imprisonment.⁵

¹ Sarah Helm, *Ravensbrück* (New York, 2014), pp. 10-11, 15.

² Nikolaus Wachsmann, *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps* (New York, 2015), pp. 33, 63.

³ Wachsmann, *KL*, p. 63.

⁴ Mary Fulbrook, *A History of Germany 1918 - 2008: The Divided Nation* (4th ed., Chichester, 2014), p. 63.

⁵ Wachsmann, *KL*, p. 5. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), 'Concentration Camp System: In Depth', <<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/>>.

Female detention under the Nazis officially began in November 1933 when the Prussian authorities established a female protective custody camp in the German town of Moringen.⁶ The camp held only twenty-three women by the end of 1934 and inmates were often released within months, which indicated the insignificance of female detention at the beginning of the Nazi reign.⁷ In response to a sharp increase in prisoner numbers, the *Schutzstaffel* (SS) established the first official concentration camp for women in Lichtenburg in 1937. Two years later, anticipating further growth of the prisoner population, SS officials decided to construct a new women's camp eighty-four kilometres north of Berlin on a large plot of lake-side land in Fürstenberg. Historians describe the establishment of Ravensbrück *Konzentrationslager* as a “milestone in the institutionalisation of women's persecution by the Third Reich”; Ravensbrück became the primary site of female captivity during the Nazi era.⁸ Approximately 120,000 women passed through the camp's gates during its six years of operation.⁹ Whilst the exact number of those who perished during imprisonment is unknown, camp historians estimate the figure to be at least 28,000.¹⁰

content/en/article/concentration-camp-system-in-depth> [accessed 10 January 2020]. Helm, *Ravensbrück*, p. xxii. If you include the temporary labour camps and transit camps also established by the SS, the total number of camps across German-occupied Europe was approximately 15,000.

⁶ Wachsmann, *KL*, p. 47.

⁷ Ino Arndt, 'Das Frauenkonzentrationslager Ravensbrück', *Dachauer Hefte* (1987), p. 95.

⁸ Irith Dublon-Knebel, *A Holocaust Crossroads: Jewish Women and Children in Ravensbrück* (Chicago, 2010), p. 2. Jane Caplan, 'Gender and the concentration camps', in Jane Caplan and Nikolaus Wachsmann (eds.), *Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany: The New Histories* (Milton Park, 2010), p. 83. Although women's camps were later established within various main camps, notably Auschwitz and Majdanek, Ravensbrück remained the only individual site explicitly established for female incarceration.

⁹ Mahn- und Gedenkstätte Ravensbrück (RMG), Exhibition, 'The Ravensbrück Women's Concentration Camp - History and Memory'.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

As the only all-female incarceration site, Ravensbrück differed from the other concentration camps particularly in terms of its administration. Notably, whilst SS officials patrolled the area outside camp walls and occupied senior positions in the ‘Commandant Staff’, the guards inside Ravensbrück were women, who, unlike their male counterparts, did not have previous experience with political violence.¹¹ This hierarchy of Nazi paramilitary members and female guards controlled the camp; however, an overlapping prisoner hierarchy contributed heavily to administration. Much of the day-to-day running of Ravensbrück was left to the prisoners, who worked in the kitchens, administrative offices, *Revier*, and as *Blockälteste*. The prisoner functionary system not only relieved female guards of unpleasant tasks, but also incited tensions amongst prisoners. By granting privileges to certain women and giving some inmates power over others, the SS deliberately increased conflict and minimised solidarity.¹²

Conditions at Ravensbrück deteriorated considerably throughout its existence. At the outset, prisoners wore identical striped uniforms, bedding was changed regularly, food was sufficient, and punishments remained minimal, particularly in comparison to the men’s camps of the period.¹³ Upon her arrival in 1940, German prisoner Margarete Buber-Neumann was greeted with “neat plots of grass with beds in which flowers were blooming”.¹⁴ The original camp

¹¹ Wachsmann, *KL*, p. 134.

¹² RMG, ‘The Ravensbrück Women’s Concentration Camp’. The women employed at Ravensbrück were not considered regular SS members and were referred to as *SS-Gefolge* (SS retinue). Jack G. Morrison, *Ravensbrück: Everyday Life in a Woman’s Concentration Camp* (Princeton, 2000), pp. 105-106. The camp police system, created in 1942 as the camp population expanded, had a similar aim. By appointing certain inmates to spy on their fellow prisoners, officials fostered distrust and conflict between women.

¹³ Wachsmann, *KL*, pp. 227-228. The first execution in Ravensbrück did not occur until February 1941 and only in the following year did killing become the norm.

¹⁴ Margarete Buber-Neumann, *Under Two Dictators: Prisoner of Stalin and Hitler*, trans. Edward Fitzgerald (London, 2008), p. 162.

structure consisted of twelve barracks each housing 100 prisoners.¹⁵ In the first months, the inmate population consisted of political dissenters, particularly communists and social democrats, religious dissenters such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, and prostitutes, almost all of whom were of German nationality.¹⁶ After the outbreak of war in September 1939, the Nazis transported an increasing number of foreign nationals to Ravensbrück. Poles eventually became the largest national group in the camp, numbering over 30,000 in total.¹⁷

Upon arrival at Ravensbrück, women underwent a medical inspection and were placed into quarantine blocks for a period of time before receiving housing and work assignments.¹⁸ The daily routine began with a pre-dawn roll call in which inmates lined up outside their blocks for counting before leaving on their respective work details.¹⁹ In the early years, many inmates worked in construction, as prisoners were responsible for the continued expansion of the camp. Maria Plater-Skassa's account provides a glimpse into the manual labour some women were forced to endure: "*zum Beispiel sollten wir Steine mit einem Wagen transportieren, große Steinblöcke, Felsblöcke oder Kies auf den Wagen packen und dann ziehen*".²⁰ It was not until

¹⁵ Former inmates and historians refer to the housing units as 'blocks' or 'barracks'. These terms are used interchangeably throughout this dissertation.

¹⁶ Arndt, 'Das Frauenkonzentrationslager Ravensbrück', p. 102.

¹⁷ Lund University, Witnessing Genocide (LUWG), 'Record of witness testimony No. 228', 29 January 1946. Zofia Maczka lists the total number of Polish women as 30,435. Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, pp. 86, 92. Dublon-Knebel, *Holocaust Crossroads*, p. 2. Judith Buber Agassi, *Jewish Women Prisoners of Ravensbrück* (Lubbock, 2014), p. 27. The term 'Polish' in this text refers to non-Jewish Poles, most of whom were Catholic, including the 'Rabbits'. Jews comprised approximately fifteen percent of the inmate population in Ravensbrück.

¹⁸ Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, p. 35.

¹⁹ Krystyna, Czyż-Wilgat, 'Krystyna Czyż-Wilgat: Camp No. 7708', in Wanda Symonowicz (ed.), *Beyond Human Endurance: The Ravensbrück Women Tell Their Stories*, trans. Doris Ronowicz (Warsaw, 1987), p. 71.

²⁰ Loretta Walz, 'Von Kaninchen zu Königinnen: Die medizinischen Versuche an polnischen Frauen in Ravensbrück am Beispiel von drei Polinnen', *Informationen*, 42 (1995), p. 13. Translation: For example, we should transport stones with a wagon, large blocks of stone. Pack boulders or gravel on the cart and then pull.

April 1941 that the SS authorities ordered the construction of a men's camp adjacent to Ravensbrück so that male prisoners could be responsible for further construction of the camp.²¹

In 1942, Ravensbrück embarked upon a period of significant change, beginning with its participation in the Nazi mass extermination project. Code-named *Aktion 14f13*, this genocidal programme aimed to eliminate prisoners deemed invalid and useless, particularly the ill and those unfit to work. Selected prisoners would be transferred to one of three euthanasia killing centres—Hertheim, Bernburg, or Sonnenstein—where they would be gassed.²² Historians estimate that 1,600 women from Ravensbrück were exterminated in the early months of 1942.²³

Previously, brutality and punishment at Ravensbrück had been minimal in comparison to the tortures common in male camps. However, with the establishment of mass killings, and the inclusion of women in this project, the sense of distinction between the sexes dissipated.²⁴ No longer would women be protected from elimination. After the *Aktion 14f13* programme concluded, Ravensbrück officials continued to use murder to dispose of weak or unruly prisoners. Killings at the 'shooting wall' became increasingly commonplace. In January 1945, the SS constructed a gas chamber on the outskirts of the camp.²⁵ By April, approximately 6,000 women had been exterminated.²⁶

In addition to the acts of murder occurring at Ravensbrück from 1942 onwards, general conditions at the camp began to deteriorate significantly. With a steady rise in the number of

²¹ Wachsmann, *KL*, p. 228.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 246-248.

²³ Helm, *Ravensbrück*, p. 150.

²⁴ Caplan, 'Gender and the concentration camps', p. 99.

²⁵ Helm, *Ravensbrück*, pp. 469-472.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 577.

prisoners, resources became increasingly scarce and blocks became progressively cramped. Eventually, the camp's thirty-two barracks each held approximately 500 prisoners despite their original intention to house only one-fifth of that figure.²⁷ Prisoner testimony paints an increasingly disparate picture of the camp. Upon first entering Ravensbrück in 1943, the Norwegian Sylvia Salvesen saw "a picture of Hell" with inmates walking around with "dead eyes".²⁸ The nature of work intensified during this period as the Nazis expanded economic activity within the concentration camp system.²⁹ By the third year of war, economic imperatives had become pressing and the shortage of labour increasingly acute. The Nazi elite responded by exploiting camp prisoners in support of the war effort, primarily through arms production.³⁰ Ravensbrück inmates were deployed as slave labourers to produce military equipment and soldier uniforms. The women toiled in SS workshops and at the German firm Siemens and Halske, which established twenty workshops adjacent to Ravensbrück in August 1942.³¹ Officials introduced eleven-hour shifts and stringent production quotas, punishing women who failed to meet the requirements.³² With this increase in war production came the establishment of subcamps near factory sites outside of Fürstenberg. By the end of the war, Ravensbrück boasted over forty affiliated subcamps.³³

²⁷ RMG, 'The Ravensbrück Women's Concentration Camp'.

²⁸ USHMM, 'Judge Advocate General's Office: War Crimes Case Files, Second World War', <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn509302>, Reel 10, 5 December 1946.

²⁹ Morrison *Ravensbrück*, p. 80.

³⁰ Wachsmann, *KL*, pp. 403-405. Buber-Neumann, *Under Two Dictators*, p. 175.

³¹ Helm, *Ravensbrück*, p. 239. RMG, '1939 - 1945 Ravensbrück Concentration Camp', <<https://www.ravensbrueck-sbg.de/en/history/1939-1945/>> [accessed 6 March 2020]. Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, p. 181. The SS textile factory in Ravensbrück employed thousands of inmates in the sewing plant, the fabric plant, the furriers' shop, and the straw-weaving plant.

³² Helm, *Ravensbrück*, pp. 197-199.

³³ USHMM, 'Ravensbrück', <<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/ravensbrueck>> [accessed 10 January 2020].

Finally, with the evolution of Ravensbrück into an inhumane venue of debilitation and death came forays into pseudo-scientific medical experimentation. By 1942, *Reichsführer-SS* Heinrich Himmler saw the concentration camp system as the ideal milieu for medical experiments using human guinea pigs.³⁴ Hoping to attain scientific innovation, Nazi officials ordered Ravensbrück authorities to select prisoners for a variety of tests, including body temperature experiments and sterilisations. The most extensive medical programme developed at the camp involved operations on the limbs of seventy-four Polish inmates between 1942 and 1943.³⁵ As a result of these crippling surgeries, the women were unable to walk properly and instead were forced to hop around the camp, earning them the designation ‘Rabbits’.³⁶ This dissertation recreates the experiences of these Polish women and studies their relationships with one another, with other prisoners, and with particular camp authorities. Through an analysis of numerous interactions, this study aims to understand the extent to which both direct and indirect support for the ‘Rabbits’ impacted their chances of survival.

The centrality of the *Konzentrationslager* to the Nazi period is evident. However, academic scholarship on the concentration camp system has been slow to evolve. For many years after the war, both the concentration camp system and the Holocaust “were not prominent on the agenda of academic historians”.³⁷ A plethora of survivor accounts published directly after the war, as well as numerous foreign media revelations, placed the concentration camps in the “public eye”, yet also led to a common misconception amongst academics that the camps had already been

³⁴ Helm, *Ravensbrück*, p. 212.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 226-228, 480-481.

³⁶ Urzula Winska, “Zwycięzcy wartości” *Die Werte Siegen, Erinnerungen an Ravensbrück*, (Gdansk, 1985), p. 384. Bernhard Strebel, *Das KZ Ravensbrück: Geschichte eines Lagerkomplexes* (Paderborn, 2003), p. 258.

³⁷ Nikolaus Wachsmann and Jane Caplan, ‘Introduction’, in Jane Caplan and Nikolaus Wachsmann (eds.), *Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany: The New Histories* (Milton Park, 2010), p. 4.

explored in great detail.³⁸ Additionally, interest in the *Konzentrationslager* became overshadowed within a few years by discussions of post-war reconstruction.³⁹ In the 1960s and 1970s, academic historians published preliminary surveys of individual Nazi camps and the wider camp complex, although such pieces remained exceptions. It was not until the 1980s and 1990s that scholarly texts on the camps began appearing more consistently. At the same time, camp memorials moved beyond remembrance and developed into places of scholarship, producing their own literature on the camps and offering an environment for historians to study the period and publish their own works. The majority of early texts were published in German with very few translations into English, as many American publishers assumed the public would view such pieces with apathy.⁴⁰ Only in recent decades have more works become accessible to the English-speaking audience.

Despite its significance as the primary female concentration camp, Ravensbrück has remained fairly obscured within the historiography of the Third Reich and its systems of imprisonment and extermination. Not until the 1970s and 1980s, with the general surge in women's history, did scholars begin to explore the experiences of female inmates.⁴¹ The first scholarly text on Ravensbrück appeared in 1987 when Ino Arndt produced an article that focused on the history of the camp. Even today, English-language studies of Ravensbrück are scarce, although the camp is mentioned in exploratory texts on the concentration camp system or World War II. Whilst a number of historians discuss the experiments performed at the camp, some dedicating up to an entire chapter on the subject, no scholars have focused solely on the 'Rabbits' and their

³⁸ Wachsmann and Caplan, 'Introduction', p. 5. Wachsmann, *KL*, pp. 10-11.

³⁹ Wachsmann, *KL*, p. 12.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁴¹ Caplan, 'Gender and the concentration camps', p. 82.

exceptional survival. Paul Weindling appears to be the only scholar to form an argument directly linking the ‘Rabbits’ survival to the actions of other inmates. However, he neglects to consider the full extent of the support provided for these women, concentrating on 1945 rather than exploring the entire period from 1942 onwards. By reconstructing the experiences of the ‘Rabbits’ from the beginning of the operations to the liberation of Ravensbrück, as well as analysing the relationships both amongst the ‘Rabbits’ themselves and with others in the camp, this dissertation addresses a gap in the present historiography.

The limited scholarship on Ravensbrück is a product of its gendered history as well as the post-war conditions of the site and lack of original documentation. From 1945 to 1994, Soviet forces occupied the former camp grounds, using the space for military purposes.⁴² Although a camp museum was established in 1959, it offered a narrow presentation of the former *Konzentrationslager*, focusing overwhelmingly on anti-fascist resistance and the Soviet prisoners of Ravensbrück. Not until after the reunification of Germany in 1990 did Ravensbrück become an exhibition and archival site fully open to the public. The camp museum now offers a complete history of the camp and addresses the experiences of prisoners from all national and ethnic backgrounds.

As in other camps, the SS destroyed many original documents prior to liberation.⁴³ Thus, scholars rely heavily on prisoners’ recollections in memoirs and interviews as well as post-war

⁴² RMG, ‘1959 - 1992 National Memorial’, <https://www.ravensbrueck-sbg.de/en/history/1959-1992/> [accessed 8 February 2020].

⁴³ Arndt, ‘Das Frauenkonzentrationslager Ravensbrück’, p. 93. Helm, *Ravensbrück*, p. 630. Camp Commandant Fritz Suhren is said to have burned the official camp documents in a large bonfire after fleeing Ravensbrück in April 1945.

trial documentation for authentic information about the camp. The number of memoirs written by Ravensbrück inmates is fairly minimal. One notable example is that of Wanda Połtawska, a Polish inmate selected for the first round of operations in August 1942.⁴⁴ Aside from a collection of essays written by a number of ‘Rabbits’ after the war and a few articles, Połtawska’s autobiography remains the only extended text written by one of the victims of experimentation. Memoirs of other prisoners, such as French inmate Germaine Tillion, Norwegian inmate Sylvia Salvesen, and Polish inmate Karolina Lanckoronska, discuss the experimental operations from an outside perspective, confirming that knowledge of the ‘Rabbits’ plight prevailed across the camp.⁴⁵ Narratives such as these add further credibility to the argument that prisoners of various nationalities undertook a concerted effort to aid the ‘Rabbits’ in the months and years following their debilitating operations.

⁴⁴ Wanda Połtawska, *And I Am Afraid of My Dreams* (London, 1964). Originally published in 1964, translated into English in 1987.

⁴⁵ Germaine Tillion, *Ravensbrück* (Norwell, 1975). Sylvia Salvesen, *Forgive – But Do Not Forget*, trans. Evelyn Ramsden (London, 1958). Karolina Lanckoronska, *Those Who Trespass Against Us: One Woman’s War against the Nazis*, trans. Noel Clark (London, 2005).

Experiments on Polish Inmates at Ravensbrück

On the evening of 29 September 1942, camp personnel summoned Polish prisoner Stefania Łotocka and nine other inmates to the *Revier*. After bathing in warm water and donning cotton nightdresses, the women fell asleep in hospital beds. The following morning, nurses shaved the women's legs and gave them injections of morphine. Soon after, nurses wheeled Stefania on a stretcher to the *Revier's* operating theatre where she was given an intravenous injection; this is the Polish inmate's last memory before losing consciousness. Upon waking, Stefania found herself back in a hospital bed experiencing severe pain. With her leg wrapped in thick white bandages, only her foot was visible: "enormous, square and covered with blisters full of a colourless fluid". Stefania spent six weeks lying in the *Revier* amongst other experimental victims, with terrible pain and the "foul smell of [...] rotting legs". She finally returned to her block in mid-November a permanently-crippled woman.⁴⁶

Pseudo-medical experimentation in the concentration camps remains a fairly obscured component of Nazi domination and occupation across Europe. Approximately 350 doctors took part in illegal experiments on an estimated 7,000 to 15,000 individuals in a number of camps.⁴⁷ These victims were treated not as human beings but as lab rats identifiable only by their camp numbers and subjected to unmitigated cruelty without consent. Such experiments were not

⁴⁶ Stefania Łotocka, 'Stefania Łotocka: Camp No. 7707', in Wanda Symonowicz (ed.), *Beyond Human Endurance: The Ravensbrück Women Tell Their Stories*, trans. Doris Ronowicz (Warsaw, 1987), pp. 101-108.

⁴⁷ Wanda Kiedrzyńska, 'Introduction', in Wanda Symonowicz (ed.), *Beyond Human Endurance: The Ravensbrück Women Tell Their Stories*, trans. Doris Ronowicz (Warsaw, 1987), p. 15. Paul Weindling, *Victims and Survivors of Nazi Human Experiments: Science and Suffering in the Holocaust* (London, 2015), pp. 223-225. The figures of those experimented on remain debated. Weindling contends that the total of confirmed victims falls at 15,744; 4,201 of those individuals died from the experiments or were killed.

isolated actions undertaken by concentration camp doctors but rather part of a coordinated programme dictated by the top echelons of the Nazi party, particularly Himmler.⁴⁸

Experimentation in the camps served three central purposes: to advance Nazi racial and ideological goals, to test new drugs and treatments, and to facilitate the survival of military personnel.⁴⁹ The first experiments took place at Sachsenhausen *Konzentrationslager* in late 1939. Himmler, “gripped by widespread hysteria” over the possibility of chemical attacks on German soldiers, ordered SS doctors to poison prisoners with mustard gas and test the effectiveness of two promising remedies.⁵⁰ Dozens of Sachsenhausen prisoners sustained severe burns and, in the end, the drugs proved useless.

Less than three years later, spurred by the death of a powerful Nazi figure, doctors at Ravensbrück embarked on their own experimentation programme. On 27 May 1942, two British-trained Czechoslovak agents threw an anti-tank mine at SS *Obergruppenführer* Reinhard Heydrich’s car as it crossed the border into Germany.⁵¹ The explosion sent pieces of cloth, wire, and wool from the seat into his body, causing the wound to become gangrenous and resulting in his death eight days later.⁵² The assassination focused attention on the growing number of fatalities of German soldiers from gangrene, and it spurred an interest in sulphonamide drugs for the treatment of wound infections. Following Heydrich’s death, Himmler ordered a study on the

⁴⁸ Kazimierz Leszczynski, ‘Guinea-Pigs of Ravensbrück: A Retrospection’, in Wanda Machlejd (ed.), *Studies and Monographs: Experimental Operations on Prisoners of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp* (Warsaw, 1960), p. 10.

⁴⁹ USHMM, ‘Nazi Medical Experiments’, <<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/nazi-medical-experiments>> [accessed 15 January 2020].

⁵⁰ Wachsmann, *KL*, p. 429.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

⁵² Paul Weindling, *Nazi Medicine and the Nuremberg Trials: From Medical Warcrimes to Informed Consent* (New York, 2004), p. 11. Helm, *Ravensbrück*, p. 210. Weindling, *Victims*, p. 89. SS Dr Karl Gebhardt, ordered to Prague to attend to Heydrich, could not prevent the spread of the infection. Historians speculate that as the leading doctor in the Ravensbrück experiments, Gebhardt wanted to exonerate himself from claims of incompetence after Heydrich’s death.

effectiveness of sulpha drugs at Ravensbrück. SS Dr Karl Gebhardt performed the first twenty operations on a group of male inmates brought from Sachsenhausen on 20 July 1942.⁵³ Little is known about these initial experiments, although Keith Mant, a medical examiner investigating Nazi war crimes, stated in a 1946 report that the male testing group was injected with gas-infused organisms producing only mild infections.⁵⁴ The operations failed to achieve the intended result, and the SS authorities commanded Gebhardt to escalate the nature of the operations. By including more severe pathogens, the doctors hoped to produce wounds akin to those suffered on the battlefield.⁵⁵ As a result, the later victims experienced serious infections and permanent impairment.

Seventy-four Polish inmates at Ravensbrück underwent experimental operations between 1 August 1942 and 16 August 1943. Camp doctors selected this particular group of women as experimental victims due to their pre-existing death sentences.⁵⁶ All of the victims were political prisoners arrested for their resistance activities primarily as members of the Union of Armed Struggle (ZWZ), the Polish underground army.⁵⁷ Sixty-six of the victims arrived at Ravensbrück from Gestapo prisons in Lublin and Warsaw on 23 September 1941 and an additional eight arrived on 31 May 1942.⁵⁸ Prior to their transfer, these women had been subjected to brutal physical and emotional torture at the hands of the Gestapo.⁵⁹ Remembering her transfer to Ravensbrück, Wladyslawa Marczewska remarked that she believed the situation in the camp

⁵³ Weindling, *Victims*, p. 89.

⁵⁴ Keith Mant, 'The Medical Services in the Concentration Camp of Ravensbrück', *The Medico-Legal Journal*, 17: 3 (1949), p. 111.

⁵⁵ Leszczynski, 'Guinea-Pigs of Ravensbrück', p. 13.

⁵⁶ Helm, *Ravensbrück*, p. 213.

⁵⁷ Strebel, *Das KZ Ravensbrück*, p. 142. The women "had been entrusted with courier activities [...] as well as the dissemination of illegal press, leaflets and radio news."

⁵⁸ Kiedrzyńska, 'Introduction', p. 16. Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, p. 245.

⁵⁹ Strebel, *Das KZ Ravensbrück*, p. 142.

could not be worse than her experiences in prison, an ironic statement given the brutality of the experimental programme she would soon find herself subject to; “*wir freuten uns fast schon darauf, weil Gefängnis und Gestapo schrecklich waren. Wir glaubten, dass es im Lager besser sein muss. Wir dachten, es könnte gar nicht schlimmer werden*”.⁶⁰

On 1 August, when camp guards directed the initial experimental group of ten Polish inmates out of their block, the women believed they faced impending death. In the previous months, a number of Polish political prisoners had been shot.⁶¹ Instead these women were led to the *Revier* and prepped for operations. Ravensbrück doctors performed two types of surgeries on the Polish women. The first involved the aforementioned aim of understanding the value of sulphonamides in treating infections. The doctors cut into the legs of their victims and inserted bacterial pathogens, as well as fragments of wood, earth, and glass, into the open wound to produce an infection. The wounds were then sewn shut until they later opened on their own as a result of acute swelling or were forced open by a doctor while redressing bandages. Doctors provided those in the experimental group with sulphonamides to test the effectivity of these drugs depending on pathogen type and dosage.⁶²

As infections developed in the victims, the lower extremities reacted foremost with inflammation and suppuration.⁶³ Upon waking up, the women experienced “*schreckliche Schmerzen*” and found their legs to be severely swollen.⁶⁴ Prisoner doctor Zofia Maczka remembered the “serious

⁶⁰ Walz, ‘Informationen’, p. 13. Translation: We were almost looking forward to it because the prison and the Gestapo were terrible. We believed that the camp had to be better. We thought it couldn't get any worse.

⁶¹ Walz, ‘Informationen’, p. 13. Loretta Walz, “‘They have called us rabbits’ The medical experiments on Polish women in Ravensbrück”, Loretta Walz Videoproduktion, 1995.

⁶² LUWG, ‘Record of witness testimony No. 228’, 29 January 1946. Wachsmann, *KL*, p. 434.

⁶³ LUWG, ‘Record of witness testimony No. 228’, 29 January 1946.

⁶⁴ Walz, ‘Informationen’, p. 14. Translation: Terrible pain.

condition” of the victims in the aftermath of their operations, with temperatures up to forty degrees Celsius, and “changes in their blood and urine indicative of severe infection”.⁶⁵ Three days after her operation, Eugenia Mikulska-Turowska believed she was near death; although she was conscious, Eugenia felt as if she were continually falling through the air. When the doctors uncovered the dressings on her leg, her shin bone was visible and part of her muscle had been removed, leaving a dent “the size of a large fist”.⁶⁶ Five women subjected to this type of experiment—Weronika Kraska, Zofia Kiecol, Alfreda Prus, Aniela Lefanowicz, and Kazimiera Kurowska—died in the *Revier* shortly after their operations.⁶⁷ An additional five women were shot by the SS in February and September 1943 after their use as experimental material had come to an end.⁶⁸

The second type of operation was designed to study tissue regeneration. Doctors would remove pieces of bone, muscle, and nerve from the victims’ legs and then sew up the wound and assess the healing process. Many of the women in this group were operated on multiple times. Maczka reported that aside from a small number of x-rays, the results of the experiments were not monitored and contributed no scientific benefit.⁶⁹ Tissue regeneration research requires monitoring of the subject for months or even years, whereas the follow-up in Ravensbrück lasted

⁶⁵ LUWG, ‘Record of witness testimony No. 228’, 29 January 1946.

⁶⁶ Eugenia Mikulska-Turowska, ‘Eugenia Mikulska-Turowska: Camp No. 7897’, in Wanda Symonowicz (ed.), *Beyond Human Endurance: The Ravensbrück Women Tell Their Stories*, trans. Doris Ronowicz (Warsaw, 1987), pp. 129-130.

⁶⁷ Maria Grabowska, ‘Maria Grabowska: Camp No. 7674’, in Wanda Symonowicz (ed.), *Beyond Human Endurance: The Ravensbrück Women Tell Their Stories*, trans. Doris Ronowicz (Warsaw, 1987), p. 75. Weindling, *Victims*, p. 215.

⁶⁸ ‘Liste der Operierten’, in Andrea Genest (ed.), *Damit die Welt es erfährt...: Illegale Dokumente von polnischen Häftlingen aus dem Konzentrationslager Ravensbrück* (Berlin, 2015), pp. 109-114. LUWG, ‘Record of witness testimony No. 228’, 29 January 1946. These women were Maria Pajaczkowska, Rozalia Gutek, Maria Gnaś, Maria Zielonka and Apolonia Rakowska.

⁶⁹ LUWG, ‘Record of witness testimony No. 228’, 29 January 1946.

weeks.⁷⁰ Stanisława Michalik described removing the stitches of her wounds in the hope that letting the pus out would relieve some of the physical anguish brought on by the removal of parts of her leg bones.⁷¹ Aniela Sobolewska, who suffered bone operations in August 1942, was shot by the SS in September 1943.⁷² Victims' testimonies emphasise that the doctors ignored hygiene standards during and after the operations; compresses and medical instruments were unsterilised and the principles of asepsis were not observed.⁷³ Attesting to the lack of sanitation, Zofia Stefaniak-Mrówczyńska recalled that when doctors removed the plaster from her leg, they found a nest of bugs in the wound.⁷⁴

Gebhardt performed many of the early surgeries, after which he primarily evaluated the experiments from his office at the Hohenlychen Sanatorium, situated fifteen kilometres east of Fürstenberg. He continued travelling to Ravensbrück to personally assess the results.⁷⁵

Stanisława Młodkowska-Bielawska described him as “the hangman who tortured us so”.⁷⁶

Gebhardt, who chose to forego the use of sulfonamides whilst treating Heydrich, hoped to prove through the Ravensbrück experiments that sulfonamides were not suitable for the treatment of wound infections.⁷⁷ Dr Fritz Fischer, acting as Gebhardt's primary assistant, performed many of the later operations.⁷⁸ A number of other Ravensbrück doctors, most notably Dr Herta

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Stanisława Michalik, ‘Stanisława Michalik: Camp No. 7907’, in Wanda Symonowicz (ed.), *Beyond Human Endurance: The Ravensbrück Women Tell Their Stories*, trans. Doris Ronowicz (Warsaw, 1987), p. 59.

⁷² ‘Liste der Operierten’, in Andrea Genest (ed.), *Damit die Welt es erfährt*, pp. 109-114.

⁷³ LUWG, ‘Record of witness testimony No. 228’, 29 January 1946.

⁷⁴ Zofia Stefaniak-Mrówczyńska, ‘Zofia Stefaniak-Mrówczyńska: Camp No. 7697’, in Wanda Symonowicz (ed.), *Beyond Human Endurance: The Ravensbrück Women Tell Their Stories*, trans. Doris Ronowicz (Warsaw, 1987), p. 178.

⁷⁵ Walz, ‘Informationen’, p.14. Numerous women recall seeing Gebhardt sometime after their operations.

⁷⁶ Stanisława Młodkowska-Bielawska, ‘Stanisława Młodkowska-Bielawska: Camp No. 7680’, in Wanda Symonowicz (ed.), *Beyond Human Endurance: The Ravensbrück Women Tell Their Stories*, trans. Doris Ronowicz (Warsaw, 1987), p. 37.

⁷⁷ Strebel, *Das KZ Ravensbrück*, p. 257.

⁷⁸ Mant, ‘The Medical Services’, p. 111.

Oberheuser, were responsible for selecting the victims, assisting in operations, and performing post-operative care.⁷⁹ In his medical report, Mant characterised Oberheuser's care of the 'Rabbits' as "little better than sadistic".⁸⁰ Marta Baranowska described Oberheuser as "a terrible woman" and Maria Plater-Skassa held her, not Gebhardt or Fischer, responsible for their pain.⁸¹ Pelagia Maćkowska remembered the doctors as being "devoid of human feelings".⁸² Despite the brutality they had inflicted, the doctors retained high spirits and a "jocular mood".⁸³

The 'Rabbits' were not the only ones to speak ill of the camp doctors; Maczka described Oberheuser as committed to the "heinous" experiments with her "heart and soul".⁸⁴ The victims were sequestered into their own ward in the *Revier* for weeks or sometimes months. Entry was forbidden with the exception of a limited number of doctors and nurses who provided little to no care.⁸⁵ The 'Rabbits' returned to their block permanently disabled with unhealed wounds. These women were unable to undertake common work assignments, and instead they remained in their block during the day, often tasked with knitting socks for soldiers at the front, as "*niemand konnte im Lager ohne Arbeit bleiben*".⁸⁶

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 103. Dr Oberheuser is mentioned most often by former inmates in their memoirs and interviews.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁸¹ Die Frauen von Ravensbrück - Das Videoarchiv, 'Interview with Marta Baranowska', 1997, video 5. Walz, 'Informationen', p.14.

⁸² Pelagia Maćkowska, 'Experimental Operations in Ravensbrück: A Reminiscence', in Wanda Machlejd (ed.), *Studies and Monographs: Experimental Operations on Prisoners of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp* (Warsaw, 1960), p. 48.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁸⁴ LUWG, 'Record of witness testimony No. 228', 29 January 1946.

⁸⁵ Mant, 'The Medical Services', p. 105.

⁸⁶ Walz, 'Informationen', p. 15. Translation: Nobody could stay in the camp without work. Symonowicz, *Beyond Human Endurance*, p. 71.

Solidarity Amongst the ‘Rabbits’

The ‘Rabbits’ developed relationships with one another which extended far beyond companionship. Considering their similar experiences as experimental victims, the connections these women built are not surprising. As Aleksandra Loewenau points out, “the common experience of pain and the feelings of injustice and violation that they shared resulted in powerful bonds based upon mutual understanding, compassion, and assistance in the provision of care”.⁸⁷ These women were initially bound by their arrival together in the camp and by their shared Polish identity. Divisions between prisoners in Nazi concentration camps often fell along class and national lines.⁸⁸ Men and women lived together amongst a myriad of backgrounds, and boundaries such as class, education, and age developed easily in a context of competition for survival. When inmates sought companionship, for as in the words of one prisoner, “you simply couldn’t survive alone”, they looked to those of similar background, most notably prisoners from the same country.⁸⁹ Whilst a yearning for a sense of home likely strengthened the desire to form friendships with those from the same region, language also heavily dictated the bonds which emerged in concentration camps.⁹⁰

The ‘Rabbits’ support for one another emerged initially in the immediate aftermath of their operations. Sequestered together in a separate room of the *Revier*, the women tried to offer comfort and aid to their companions by feeding the weakest victims or changing each other’s

⁸⁷ Aleksandra Loewenau, ‘The story of how the Ravensbrück “Rabbits” were captured in photos’, in Paul Weindling (ed.), *From Clinic to Concentration Camp: Reassessing Nazi Medical and Racial Research, 1933-1945* (New York, 2017), p. 224.

⁸⁸ Caplan, ‘Gender and the concentration camps’, p. 94. Wachsmann, *KL*, p. 183.

⁸⁹ Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, p. 125.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

bandages.⁹¹ Stanisława Młodkowska-Bielawska recalled that fellow ‘Rabbits’, although ill themselves, hopped across the room on their “sound legs” to wipe sweat from the faces of victims, and bring blankets and bedpans.⁹² She specifically praised Jadwiga Kaminska who got out of bed for every groan or request. The women also tried to “dispel the gloomy atmosphere” in the *Revier* and lift the spirits of the others.⁹³ Leokadia Kwiecińska, one of the oldest Polish women to be operated on at 43 years of age, would recount stories such as *Gone With the Wind* to cheer up the other victims and allow them to forget their pain for a short while.⁹⁴ Recalling her time in Ravensbrück, Leokadia declared that “there undoubtedly would have been more deaths if it had not been for the selfless aid we gave each other”.⁹⁵

Solidarity amongst the ‘Rabbits’ also took the form of unified protests against the operations. Such actions further attest to the extent to which these women identified with and relied upon one another. On 14 March 1943, seven months after the start of the experiments, the “handicapped and half dead women” marched slowly together from Block 15, where many of the ‘Rabbits’ resided, to the *Politische Abteilung* where *Oberaufseherin* Johanna Langefeld was stationed, and demanded an explanation for the illegal experiments.⁹⁶ The executions of three victims in February, as well as the most recent operations on five healthy women on 12th March, likely spurred the demonstration.⁹⁷ According to Krystyna Czyż-Wilgat, this march had no

⁹¹ Loewenau, ‘The story of how the Ravensbrück “Rabbits” were captured in photos’, p. 224.

⁹² Młodkowska-Bielawska, ‘Stanisława Młodkowska-Bielawska’, pp. 38-39.

⁹³ Maćkowska, ‘Experimental Operations in Ravensbrück’, p. 46.

⁹⁴ Winska, “*Zwycięzyły wartości*”, p. 384.

⁹⁵ Leokadia Kwiecińska, ‘Leokadia Kwiecińska: Camp No. 7682’, in Wanda Symonowicz (ed.), *Beyond Human Endurance: The Ravensbrück Women Tell Their Stories*, trans. Doris Ronowicz (Warsaw, 1987), p. 90.

⁹⁶ Czyż-Wilgat, ‘Krystyna Czyż-Wilgat’, p. 69. Lund University, ‘Interview with Joanna Muszkowska-Penson Regarding the Medical Experiments in the Ravensbrück Concentration Camp’, Witnessing Genocide Digital Collection, 2016.

⁹⁷ Winska, “*Zwycięzyły wartości*”, p. 456. Czyż-Wilgat, ‘Krystyna Czyż-Wilgat’, p. 69.

effect. Langefeld briefly appeared before the women, surveyed the situation but remained silent, and then went back into her office.⁹⁸ Following the unsuccessful march to Langefeld, the women sent a written demonstration against the operations to the camp *Kommandant* Fritz Suhren. This act highlights the continued persistence of the victims to secure a response from camp authorities. In their letter, the ‘Rabbits’ demonstrated “extraordinary political acumen in arguing that international law prohibits captors from harming political prisoners”.⁹⁹ Again, the women received no reply.¹⁰⁰ According to Leokadia Kwiecińska, the protests were not entirely without effect though, for across the “whole camp”, they “stirred” feelings of sympathy for the victims.¹⁰¹

In addition to aiding one another after operations and protesting against the experiments, the women came together to inform the outside world of the atrocities occurring at Ravensbrück through clandestine letters and photographs. Krystyna Czyż-Wilgat, Janina Iwańska, Krystyna Iwańska, and Wanda Połtawska smuggled information about the experiments out of Ravensbrück through the official camp post between January 1943 and June 1944.¹⁰² Using urine to write hidden messages in between the lines of their letters and on envelopes, these women informed their families of the criminal operations. The writers hoped to expose the “shameful acts of the German doctors” and spur outside action that would pressure authorities into ending the operations.¹⁰³ These efforts were limited by rules regarding correspondence at Ravensbrück;

⁹⁸ Helm, *Ravensbrück*, p. 255. Pelagia Maćkowska, ‘Pelagia Maćkowska: Camp No. 7886’, in Wanda Symonowicz (ed.), *Beyond Human Endurance: The Ravensbrück Women Tell Their Stories*, trans. Doris Ronowicz (Warsaw, 1987), p. 122.

⁹⁹ Weindling, *Nazi Medicine*, p. 14. Mikulska-Turowska, ‘Eugenia Mikulska-Turowska’, p. 127.

¹⁰⁰ Helm, *Ravensbrück*, p. 245.

¹⁰¹ Kwiecińska, ‘Leokadia Kwiecińska’, p. 92.

¹⁰² Czyż-Wilgat, ‘Krystyna Czyż-Wilgat’, pp. 64-65.

¹⁰³ Helm, *Ravensbrück*, p. 249.

inmates could only write one letter consisting of sixteen lines in German each month.¹⁰⁴ Due to camp censorship, the letters contained stereotypical references to good health and questions about loved ones back home.

In the first letter to her family, Krystyna Czyż-Wilgat used vague references to a children's book in which the main character penned coded letters; thus she signalled to the reader that important content was present although not immediately apparent.¹⁰⁵ The recipients used irons to make the writing visible and passed the information to the Polish underground movement.¹⁰⁶ Their efforts proved successful. A report from the Polish underground press published in August 1943 entitled 'Horrific atrocities in Ravensbrück' described the operations and revealed the names of the doctors involved.¹⁰⁷ A group of French prisoners who arrived in Ravensbrück in 1944 provided the 'Rabbits' with news of their success; the French women reported having heard about the experimental operations on the French service of the BBC radio.¹⁰⁸ By this point, the British were broadcasting news of the conditions in Ravensbrück in a number of languages and warning the Germans involved of the consequences of their actions.¹⁰⁹

Shortly after these 'Rabbits' began sending letters through the camp post, they also managed to have a number of letters sent through the normal postal service. In 1943, Krystyna Czyż-Wilgat and Wanda Poławska travelled north on a weekly work assignment and made contact with

¹⁰⁴ Czyż-Wilgat, 'Krystyna Czyż-Wilgat', pp. 62-63. Buber-Neumann, *Under Two Dictators*, p. 176.

¹⁰⁵ Czyż-Wilgat, 'Krystyna Czyż-Wilgat', p. 64. In the children's book *The Demon of the Seventh Form*, the key to the code was to read the first letter of each line. In their first letter, the 'Rabbits' designed the contents so that the first letters of each line spelled out "list moczem" (letter written in urine).

¹⁰⁶ RMG, 'The Ravensbrück Women's Concentration Camp'.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Helm, *Ravensbrück*, p. 390.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

Polish POWs imprisoned in a camp adjoining the Ravensbrück subcamp at Neustrelitz. These men offered to post the ‘Rabbits’ letters via the International Red Cross.¹¹⁰ Believing the POWs had a greater chance of surviving until liberation, the women gave them material documenting the experiments, including names of the victims and details of the operations.¹¹¹ One of the POWs, officer Eugeniusz Swiderski, also passed information from the ‘Rabbits’ onto a mutual friend in Lublin who then brought the information to Krystyna’s family.¹¹²

In addition to their letters, the ‘Rabbits’ produced photographic evidence so that their wounds could remain visible even if they did not leave the camp alive. A group of women managed to acquire a camera brought into the camp by an inmate from Warsaw in 1944.¹¹³ Hiding behind barracks, the women secretly documented their injuries by photographing the legs of three ‘Rabbits’. Five of these photographs exist today, and the disfigured legs and unhealed wounds are apparent.¹¹⁴ French inmate Germaine Tillion smuggled the roll of undeveloped film out of the camp when she was rescued by the Swedish Red Cross on 23 April 1945.¹¹⁵ The ‘Rabbits’ determination to ensure that news of the experiments reached the outside world is indisputable.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 291.

¹¹¹ RMG, ‘The Ravensbrück Women’s Concentration Camp’. The POWs buried the materials in a glass jar for safe keeping until their release. It was uncovered in 1975.

¹¹² Czyż-Wilgat, ‘Krystyna Czyż-Wilgat’, p. 66.

¹¹³ RMG, ‘The Ravensbrück Women’s Concentration Camp’. Walz, ‘Informationen’, p. 15.

¹¹⁴ USHMM, ‘Clandestine photograph of a Polish political prisoner and medical experimentation victim in the Ravensbrueck concentration camp’, October 1944, Photograph 69341, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1156938>. USHMM, ‘Clandestine photograph of a Polish political prisoner and medical experimentation victim in the Ravensbrueck concentration camp’, October 1944, Photograph 69342, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1156939>. USHMM, ‘Clandestine photograph of a Polish political prisoner and medical experimentation victim in the Ravensbrueck concentration camp’, October 1944, Photograph 69343, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1156940>. USHMM, ‘Clandestine photograph of the disfigured leg of Maria Kusmierczuk, a Polish political prisoner in the Ravensbrueck concentration camp’, October 1944, Photograph 69339, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1156936>. USHMM, ‘Clandestine photograph of the disfigured leg of Polish political prisoner, Bogumila Babinska (Jasiuk), in the Ravensbrueck concentration camp’, October 1944, Photograph 69340, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1156937>.

¹¹⁵ Tillion, *Ravensbrück*, p. xxi.

The solidarity amongst this group of women allowed them to undertake concerted efforts to make the global public aware of the brutality in Ravensbrück.

Camp-Wide Efforts to Save the ‘Rabbits’

Support, solidarity, and resistance existed amongst the ‘Rabbits’ themselves, as well as across different cleavages of prisoners in Ravensbrück. Despite the intended secrecy of the experimental programme, prisoners outside the *Revier* discerned the horrors occurring in the hospital barracks. One ‘Rabbit’, Irena Krawczyk, heard rumours about the experiments prior to her summons to the *Revier* in October 1942 as part of the fourth round of operations.¹¹⁶ At the start of the experiments, only SS nurses could enter the ward. However, an eventual relaxing of regulations, when the SS nurses became tired of precautions, meant that prisoner nurses could access the ‘Rabbits’ and report evidence of the crimes to their fellow inmates.¹¹⁷ When victims returned to their blocks, their open wounds provided visible confirmation of these atrocities. As knowledge of the operations spread, inmates from across the camp began to display a unique compassion for the victims which translated into assistance in the months and years after the criminal operations. This solidarity transcended the conventional boundaries of the camp and conceivably aided the victims’ survival.

The first instances of support for the ‘Rabbits’ occurred whilst the victims lay in the *Revier* after their operations, as prisoners clandestinely made contact with the injured women. Polish prisoners working in the SS staff kitchens set up an informal aid committee and began smuggling food into the *Revier* to supplement the meagre prisoner rations and keep the ‘Rabbits’ strength

¹¹⁶ Irena Krawczyk, ‘Irena Krawczyk: Camp No. 11329’, in Wanda Symonowicz (ed.), *Beyond Human Endurance: The Ravensbrück Women Tell Their Stories*, trans. Doris Ronowicz (Warsaw, 1987), p. 167.

¹¹⁷ Buber-Neumann, *Under Two Dictators*, p. 218.

up.¹¹⁸ This network of aid became a vital source of physical support for the victims in the fragile post-operative period. Maria Grabowska said that she would always remember the day a fellow Polish inmate brought her a little sugar.¹¹⁹ Eventually each ‘Rabbit’ had her own “Fairy-Godmother” to watch over her and bring bits of food.¹²⁰ Raw vegetables, cheese, margarine, and buckwheat groats are a sampling of the foodstuffs the ‘Rabbits’ recall receiving.¹²¹

The system of aid enacted between the SS kitchens and the *Revier* would not have been possible without the advantageous positions Polish inmates held in Ravensbrück by 1942. Helena Korewina, working as camp supervisor Johanna Langefeld’s translator, managed to win the *Oberaufseherins’* sympathy and encouraged her to place Polish inmates in coveted positions as block leaders and in the kitchens.¹²² Due in part to Langefeld’s actions, Polish inmates largely occupied the middle and lower levels of the camp prisoner administration.¹²³ Such positions granted the Poles access to foodstuffs, thus providing them the opportunity to offer further support to the ‘Rabbits’.

Langefeld’s compassion for Ravensbrück inmates, and particularly for the Poles and the ‘Rabbits’, has been highlighted by both former prisoners and historians.¹²⁴ In the spring of 1943, two ‘Rabbits’ were selected for execution. As these women walked across the camp to the

¹¹⁸ Helm, *Ravensbrück*, p. 236. Waława Andrzejak-Gnatowska, ‘Waława Andrzejak-Gnatowska: Camp No. 7718’, in Wanda Symonowicz (ed.), *Beyond Human Endurance: The Ravensbrück Women Tell Their Stories*, trans. Doris Ronowicz (Warsaw, 1987), p. 138. Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, p. 93. Poles made up the majority of the kitchen crew. The remaining positions in the kitchens were held primarily by Czech prisoners.

¹¹⁹ Grabowska, ‘Maria Grabowska’, p. 81.

¹²⁰ Maćkowska, ‘Experimental Operations’, pp. 46 and 48.

¹²¹ Poławska, *And I Am Afraid*, p. 102. Maćkowska, ‘Experimental Operations’, pp. 46 and 48.

¹²² Strebel, *Das KZ Ravensbrück*, p. 238.

¹²³ *Ibid.* Poles were generally excluded from roles at the upper levels, which remained predominantly in the hands of communist inmates.

¹²⁴ Helm, *Ravensbrück*, pp. 257-258. Buber-Neumann, *Under Two Dictators*, pp. 228-234.

shooting wall, Langefeld intervened and instructed the women to return to their block, thereby saving the ‘Rabbits’ from execution. In the words of Marta Baranowska, “*sie hatten den Mut, zu intervenieren*”.¹²⁵ Margarete Buber-Neumann, who worked as Langefeld’s personal secretary for a period, remembered Langefeld speaking to prisoners “consolingly and with such great kindness”.¹²⁶ Baranowska mentioned Langefeld’s order to allow women entering the camp to keep their wedding rings, after which the former inmate deems her the only *Oberaufseherin* who treated the prisoners humanely.¹²⁷ Helena Korewina convinced the *Oberaufseherin* to allow the Polish women to be moved into blocks together, despite orders to separate nationalities as a way of eliminating friendships.¹²⁸

Two weeks after intervening in the executions of the ‘Rabbits’, Langefeld was arrested and tried before an SS court, charged with possessing excessive sympathy for prisoners.¹²⁹ The court acquitted Langefeld due to a lack of evidence but permanently removed her from her position at Ravensbrück. Perhaps the most telling confirmation of Langefeld’s compassion for the Ravensbrück inmates occurred after the camp’s liberation. When the former *Oberaufseherin* was arrested by the U.S. Army in 1945 for her work in Ravensbrück and Auschwitz, and extradited to judicial authorities in Poland, a group of former Ravensbrück inmates smuggled her out of prison.¹³⁰ Such unconventional action to help their former captor demonstrates reciprocal

¹²⁵ Die Frauen von Ravensbrück - Das Videoarchiv, ‘Interview with Marta Baranowska’, 1997, video 5. Translation: She had the courage to intervene.

¹²⁶ Buber-Neumann, *Under Two Dictators*, p. 230.

¹²⁷ Die Frauen von Ravensbrück - Das Videoarchiv, ‘Interview with Marta Baranowska’, 1997, video 18.

¹²⁸ Helm, *Ravensbrück*, pp. 174, 177.

¹²⁹ Helm, *Ravensbrück*, pp. 257-258. Buber-Neumann, *Under Two Dictators*, p. 244.

¹³⁰ RMG, ‘The Ravensbrück Women’s Concentration Camp’. Langefeld was never prosecuted by Allied tribunals for her involvement with the Nazis. She lived illegally in Poland and Germany until her death in 1974.

empathy and corroborates the risks Langefeld took to lessen the plight of the Polish inmates at Ravensbrück.

In addition to aiding their recuperation with food and drink, prisoners indirectly supported the ‘Rabbits’ survival by keeping their spirits high. Maria Plater-Skassa remembered two prisoners bringing a Christmas tree into the *Revier*.¹³¹ This gift brought some comfort and distraction from the pain. Norwegian prisoner Sylvia Salvesen, employed in the *Revier*, taught the ‘Rabbits’ English in her free time.¹³² She remembered the victims’ cheerful attitudes despite the horrors they had experienced.¹³³ Jadwiga Dzido received multiple cards from fellow prisoners with good wishes. The text of one card dated 25 December 1942 reads, “Dear Jadzienko Little Rabbit, For Christmas I wish that baby Jesus will grant you health and hope and that you will get back home”.¹³⁴ With smiling faces peering in through the *Revier* windows, inmates tried to cheer up the ‘Rabbits’ whilst they lay immobile after the operations.¹³⁵ Leokadia Kwiecińska spoke of the immense comfort even such trivial actions provided for the suffering women; “sometimes it was enough to see a pleasant smile, to hear kind warm words, to have some friendly service done for one. These were seemingly only trifles, but in those conditions they became something great”.¹³⁶ Such acts of support offered reciprocal benefit as well, particularly in times of low morale.

¹³¹ Maria Plater-Skassa, ‘Maria Plater-Skassa: Camp No. 7911’, in Wanda Symonowicz (ed.), *Beyond Human Endurance: The Ravensbrück Women Tell Their Stories*, trans. Doris Ronowicz (Warsaw, 1987), p. 50.

¹³² Salvesen, *Forgive*, pp. 117-118. Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, p. 168. Secret lectures became common across the camp, most prominently amongst Polish inmates; women relied on learning as a source of distraction and cheer. The LUWG archives contain notes and schoolbooks created by Ravensbrück inmates during captivity.

¹³³ Salvesen, *Forgive*, p. 113.

¹³⁴ USHMM, Christmas card given to Polish political prisoner, Jadwiga Dzido by a fellow inmate of the Ravensbrueck concentration camp. <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1154005>. USHMM, Greeting card given to Polish political prisoner, Jadwiga Dzido by Jadwiga Solecka, a fellow inmate of the Ravensbrueck concentration camp. <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1154009>.

¹³⁵ Połtawska, *And I Am Afraid*, p. 85.

¹³⁶ Kwiecińska, ‘Leokadia Kwiecińska’, pp. 93-94.

Margarete Buber-Neumann asserted that by caring for fellow prisoners, the women could protest against the debilitating treatment in the camp in a discreet manner.¹³⁷

Whilst Polish inmates provided a considerable amount of support, prisoners from other categories aided the ‘Rabbits’ in the immediate post-operative period as well. Wanda Połtawska recalled that “anonymous strangers” would appear at the *Revier* window and “furtively throw inside a bunch of raw carrots, an apple or a tomato”.¹³⁸ Maria Grabowska remembered a Czech prisoner handing her a few red apples and biscuits through the window.¹³⁹ Thus, support for the ‘Rabbits’ extended beyond the national boundaries which traditionally guided prisoners’ relationships in the camps. These prisoners demonstrated exceptional courage when transferring food to the *Revier*. If caught by guards they faced twenty-five lashes of the whip, time in the camp prison, and eventually an assignment to a hard-labour work detail.¹⁴⁰ The ‘Rabbits’ recognised the substantial risks prisoners took to care for them. In her memoir, Połtawska remarked that,

It is no exaggeration to say that hundreds of women risked their lives for us like this [...] It was automatically accepted that we, the weakest and most ill-treated of all the women, were the ones in greatest need of care. Those wonderfully noble women regarded it as their sacred duty to look after us and, to the best of their ability, to help those who suffered most.¹⁴¹

In March 1943, the pseudo-medical operations paused for a period of four months. It appears the doctors experimented on dogs during this interlude, although the reason for this remains

¹³⁷ Camila Loew, *The Memory of Pain: Women’s Testimonies of the Holocaust* (New York, 2011), p. 82.

¹³⁸ Połtawska, *And I Am Afraid*, p. 102.

¹³⁹ Grabowska, ‘Maria Grabowska’, p. 81.

¹⁴⁰ Andrzejak-Gnatowska, ‘Wacława Andrzejak-Gnatowska’, p. 138.

¹⁴¹ Połtawska, *And I Am Afraid*, p. 102.

unknown.¹⁴² When the human experiments resumed in August, the Polish women protested against their impending mutilation by refusing to leave their block. SS officers, guards, and prisoner policewomen forcibly entered and dragged ten women to the punishment block, a prison-like building described by one prisoner as the “inner sanctum of hell”.¹⁴³ Twenty-four hours later, the women were subjected to operations in the dusty and dirt-filled cells.¹⁴⁴ Helena Piasecka, one of these victims, spoke of her experiences at the Hamburg Ravensbrück Trial. She recalled that a doctor threw her onto a bed and poured ether on her face. When she awoke, she was in a cell and experiencing “very strong pains almost unbearable in both of my legs”.¹⁴⁵

Prisoners of various nationalities living with the ‘Rabbits’ in Block 15, including Czech *Blockälteste* Mařenka Švédíková, joined in this protest against further experiments by refusing to hand over the victims.¹⁴⁶ As punishment for the failure to comply with orders, camp authorities locked all 500 women inside the block for four days without food, water, or electricity, and with the windows blacked out.¹⁴⁷ This final protest, although unsuccessful, further demonstrates the solidarity of various groups of women around the victims. It also highlights the evolution from clandestine support, such as throwing bits of food through a window, to explicit support visible to camp authorities; prisoners gradually exhibited greater willingness to speak out against the

¹⁴² Helm, *Ravensbrück*, p. 290. USHMM, ‘Caroline Ferriday collection’, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn508306>, series 1.2.

¹⁴³ Buber-Neumann, *Under Two Dictators*, p. 162.

¹⁴⁴ Helm, *Ravensbrück*, pp. 334-335.

¹⁴⁵ USHMM, ‘Judge Advocate General's Office: War Crimes Case Files, Second World War’, Reel 10, 30 December 1946.

¹⁴⁶ Młodkowska-Bielawska, ‘Stanisława Młodkowska-Bielawska’, p. 42. Winska, “Zwycięzyły wartości”, p. 460.

¹⁴⁷ Helm, *Ravensbrück*, p. 335. Jadwiga Dzido-Hassa and Pelagia Maćkowska, ‘Human “Guinea-Pigs” of Ravensbrück: A Historical Sketch’, in Wanda Machlejd (ed.), *Studies and Monographs: Experimental Operations on Prisoners of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp* (Warsaw, 1960), p. 36.

experiments. The prisoners of Block 15 stood by the Poles, risking their lives and receiving severe punishment for their mutiny.

The most powerful demonstration of support for the ‘Rabbits’, and the actions which most directly correspond to their survival, came at the start of 1945. In February, SS leadership at the camp received orders from Gebhardt to liquidate the ‘Rabbits’.¹⁴⁸ Armed with the realisation that they were losing the war, Nazi leadership began ordering executions in an attempt to cover up their gross violation of human rights in the camps. Ravensbrück guards instructed the ‘Rabbits’ to remain in their block as they were to be transferred to the camp at Gross-Rosen.¹⁴⁹ The women understood they were to be killed; prisoners knew that Gross-Rosen was already in Soviet hands.¹⁵⁰ In her memoir, Połtawska recalls that women of all nationalities from blocks across the camp came together to discuss the situation and decided the ‘Rabbits’ must be saved.¹⁵¹

In the weeks and months that followed, prisoners took part in a “fearful game of hide-and-seek”, ensuring the ‘Rabbits’ were constantly hidden from guards, particularly during roll calls. Despite the threat of severe punishment for subversion, inmates offered to conceal the injured women in various barracks across the camp and provided coats to cover their camp numbers, allowing the women to clandestinely move from one location to another.¹⁵² In the instances when guards surrounded the ‘Rabbits’ block, Soviet prisoners, who worked as electricians, switched the power off and encompassed the area in darkness. Meanwhile, Roma prisoners began shouting

¹⁴⁸ Helm, *Ravensbrück*, p. 521.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 517.

¹⁵⁰ Kwiecińska, ‘Leokadia Kwiecińska’, p. 94.

¹⁵¹ Połtawska, *And I Am Afraid*, p. 143.

¹⁵² Loewenau, ‘The story of how the Ravensbrück “Rabbits” were captured in photos’, pp. 227-228.

and running back and forth to generate further distraction.¹⁵³ The chaotic atmosphere allowed the ‘Rabbits’ to find hiding spots or jump out the windows. Marta Baranowska, speaking in a 1997 interview, remembered the period of hiding well; “yes, that was a difficult time. They were so badly damaged [...] So we did everything for them to come out [of the camp alive]. And all succeeded, remained alive”.¹⁵⁴ According to Baranowska, several of the ‘Rabbits’ were tucked away in the attic of the block for a period of time, with the boards shifted so that the women could lay down out of sight.¹⁵⁵

The ‘Rabbits’ personal reminiscences shed light on the various methods of concealment and further reveal the exceptional actions that other prisoners took to aid the surviving victims. Poławska recalled that “broad-shouldered Russian girls would cheerfully fill any gaps” in roll call lines.¹⁵⁶ In one instance, an older inmate offered to save Poławska by exchanging camp numbers, which ensured her own death.¹⁵⁷ Maria Cabaj hid in the *Revier* amongst the dying, knowing the guards were reluctant to enter the wards with the seriously ill women. Another ‘Rabbit’ went to the crematorium and took the camp number off of a dead woman’s clothes.¹⁵⁸ Seven ‘Rabbits’ dug and concealed a hole in the ground and lay there for seven days and nights to escape the guards’ hunt.¹⁵⁹ The women disguised themselves so as to be lost amongst the

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ Die Frauen von Ravensbrück - Das Videoarchiv, ‘Interview with Marta Baranowska’, 1997, video 19.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ Poławska, *And I Am Afraid*, p. 153.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

¹⁵⁸ Maria Cabaj, ‘Maria Cabaj: Camp No. 11306’, in Wanda Symonowicz (ed.), *Beyond Human Endurance: The Ravensbrück Women Tell Their Stories*, trans. Doris Ronowicz (Warsaw, 1987), p. 54. Loretta Walz, ‘Remembering Ravensbrück: Survivors of the women’s concentration camp testify,’ Loretta Walz Videoproduktion, 1995. Walz, “‘They have called us rabbits’”.

¹⁵⁹ Poławska, *And I Am Afraid*, p. 151.

masses, changing their appearance by cutting off hair, removing glasses, and attempting to hide their disfigured limbs.¹⁶⁰

This “extraordinary rescue operation” undertaken by Ravensbrück inmates appears incompatible with the harsh systems of control and punishment which characterised the Nazi concentration camps.¹⁶¹ However, a unique situation developed in Ravensbrück in the final months of the war; widespread chaos and a breakdown in camp authority created an environment which allowed prisoners to successfully hide the ‘Rabbits’ and thwarted authorities’ attempts to locate the victims. Conditions in Ravensbrück had deteriorated substantially by 1945. Beginning the previous autumn, transports of female prisoners from camps in the east flowed into Ravensbrück, precipitating phenomenal disorder in an already critically-overcrowded camp. Ravensbrück, designed to house 8,000 to 10,000 prisoners, was soon holding up to 40,000.¹⁶² Guards erected a tent in between barracks to house the extra women; however, no increase in provisions or proper accommodation meant that those sent to the tent faced starvation, freezing, and disease.¹⁶³ Ravensbrück’s infrastructure was crumbling and resources were severely reduced.¹⁶⁴ With new prisoners arriving in Ravensbrück daily at the same time as others were departing for subcamps, it became difficult for camp authorities to keep track of prisoners. Inmates’ contact with the guards became increasingly less frequent as the camp continued to burgeon.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁰ Kwiecińska, ‘Leokadia Kwiecińska’, p. 95.

¹⁶¹ Strebel, *Das KZ Ravensbrück*, p. 258.

¹⁶² Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, p. 277.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 291-292.

¹⁶⁴ Helm, *Ravensbrück*, pp. 404-405, 462-464.

¹⁶⁵ Falk Pingel, ‘Social life in an unsocial environment: the inmates’ struggle for survival’, in Jane Caplan and Nikolaus Wachsmann (eds.), *Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany: The New Histories* (Milton Park, 2010), p. 62. Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, p. 292.

The systems of order, discipline, and punishment that had long governed the women's concentration camp faded as chaos spread and Ravensbrück "drifted deeper into anarchy".¹⁶⁶ As a result of this rapid deterioration, attempts by the SS to maintain control proved "impossible", and prisoners exploited this situation for their own benefit and that of their companions.¹⁶⁷ Such a context provided space and relative protection for inmates to hide the 'Rabbits'. Wanda Kiedrzynska underscored that this concealment scheme was only possible in the period of "complete overcrowding" and "indescribable chaos" in the camp's final phase.¹⁶⁸ However, despite its pervasiveness, the disarray in Ravensbrück may not fully explain why the camp authorities failed to follow through on the liquidation orders.¹⁶⁹ In post-war testimonies, former prisoners indicated that although it would have been difficult for officials to locate all of the victims, they believed "it was not impossible".¹⁷⁰ An additional factor which may have contributed to the survival of the 'Rabbits' was camp authorities' knowledge that information about the operations and camp conditions had been published abroad. Ravensbrück leadership and high-ranking Nazis knew that word of their brutality could impact post-war trials.¹⁷¹

Camp authorities displayed a "softer stance" towards prisoners in the months prior to liberation.¹⁷² Alicja Jurkowska-Serafinowa surmised that this reflected their attempts to seek out sympathy as Germany's defeat appeared increasingly inevitable.¹⁷³ In the weeks leading up to the Red Army's arrival, the Ravensbrück staff attempted to mask the camp's inhumanity by

¹⁶⁶ Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, p. 294.

¹⁶⁷ Buber-Neumann, *Under Two Dictators*, p. 219.

¹⁶⁸ Strebel, *Das KZ Ravensbrück*, p. 556.

¹⁶⁹ Poławska, *And I Am Afraid*, p. 145.

¹⁷⁰ LUWG, 'Record of witness testimony No. 513', 7 July 1946, <https://www.ub.lu.se/witnessing-genocide>.

¹⁷¹ Loewenau, 'The story of how the Ravensbrück "Rabbits" were captured in photos', pp. 228-229.

¹⁷² LUWG, 'Record of witness testimony No. 513', 7 July 1946.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

tidying and painting the blocks, disposing of stacks of dead bodies lying around the camp, and installing mirrors and furniture in the punishment block.¹⁷⁴ The behaviour of camp staff towards all inmates eased in the final months. “What a difference the advancing front can make”, French prisoner Marie-Claude Vaillant-Couturier noted in her diary.¹⁷⁵ Attempts by those involved in the concentration camp system to portray the camps in a gentler light were not uncommon, even within the Nazi elite. By 1944, Himmler recognised the possibility of German defeat and began instructing aides to seek out possible Allied sympathisers who would be willing to draw up a separate peace.¹⁷⁶ Himmler’s negotiations with the Swedish Red Cross in early 1945 resulted in the release of 20,000 to 30,000 inmates from a number of concentration camps, including thousands of women from Ravensbrück.¹⁷⁷ It appears Himmler hoped to attain favour with the Allies in order to lessen the potential consequences for his actions.

Authorities’ reluctance to locate the ‘Rabbits’ in the final months aligns with their endeavours to make the camp appear humane. The Camp *Kommandant* Fritz Suhren in particular displayed strong hesitancy to track down the ‘Rabbits’, and even promised Jadwiga Kamińska that nothing would happen to her or any of the other victims.¹⁷⁸ By breaking the inherent rules of his position, Suhren arguably prolonged the ‘Rabbits’ existence. It is possible as well that the *Kommandant*, like Langefeld, felt some empathy for the victims. Evidence demonstrates that Suhren had been wary of the pseudo-medical experimentation programme. In 1943, he refused to authorise additional experiments and was subsequently forced to report to the Inspector of the

¹⁷⁴ Helm, *Ravensbrück*, pp. 598, 604.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 586.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 351-352.

¹⁷⁷ Sune Persson, ‘Folke Bernadotte and the White Buses’ in David Cesarani and Paul A. Levine (eds.), *Bystanders to the Holocaust: A Re-Evaluation* (New York, 2002), p. 243.

¹⁷⁸ Helm, *Ravensbrück*, p. 595.

Concentration Camps, Richard Glucks, and apologise to Gebhardt for his interference. However, it is perhaps most likely that by indirectly allowing the ‘Rabbits’ survival in the final months of the camp’s existence, Suhren was hoping to re-mould his image as a camp *Kommandant*. He offered to free one of the victims, Maria Plater-Skassa, if she would sign a document acknowledging that her scars were the results of an accident in a workshop, not by experimentation.¹⁷⁹ Such action clearly demonstrates concern with the impending repercussions for his involvement in the criminal operations.

From first-hand accounts, it is apparent that efforts to protect the ‘Rabbits’ involved inmates of numerous nationalities who lived in blocks across the camp. The initial aid offered, mainly through the smuggling of food, enabled the ‘Rabbits’ survival during the fragile post-operative period. Continued support during protests and after the call for liquidation ensured the victims lived to walk away from the camp after the end of the war. Not a single prisoner denounced a ‘Rabbit’ who had gone into hiding.¹⁸⁰ Overall, numerous factors—notably the advantageous positions of Polish prisoners and the chaos of the final months—generated a unique environment in Ravensbrück which allowed prisoners to successfully aid the ‘Rabbits’.

The comprehensive survival rate for women imprisoned in Ravensbrück between 1939 and 1945 was approximately seventy-seven percent. The survival rate of the ‘Rabbits’, on the other hand, was just above eighty-five percent. Arguably, the widespread assistance provided for the ‘Rabbits’ contributed to this all-important eight percent difference. Such support was remarkable given the circumstances in Ravensbrück. Conditions and rules were designed to encourage

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 520.

¹⁸⁰ Kwiecińska, ‘Leokadia Kwiecińska’, p. 96.

inmates to compete for power, influence and survival, and to eliminate friendship.¹⁸¹ In a context of scarce resources, prisoners often fought or stole from one another to attain the food and clothing necessary for survival.¹⁸² In a camp where subcultures based upon nationality and language prevailed, the camp-wide cooperation to assist the ‘Rabbits’ was extraordinary.¹⁸³ The women who performed acts of resistance and broke rules risked their own lives to help the victims of pseudo-medical experiments survive and tell their story. As a result, the perpetrators were brought to trial, and the global public became aware of yet another form of Nazi atrocities.

¹⁸¹ Caplan, ‘Gender and the concentration camps’, p. 92. Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, p. 308.

¹⁸² RMG, ‘The Ravensbrück Women’s Concentration Camp’.

¹⁸³ Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, p. 308.

Conclusion

On 28 April 1945, with the knowledge that Soviet forces were approaching Ravensbrück, camp authorities evacuated the majority of prisoners and marched the women towards camps in the north and west.¹⁸⁴ The Soviets liberated Ravensbrück two days later, on 30 April 1945, freeing the estimated 2,000 to 3,500 women remaining in the camp, including numerous ‘Rabbits’ who had managed to evade attempts at execution.¹⁸⁵ After the war’s end, the Allies put Nazi leaders and those employed in concentration camps on trial in an effort to account for the horrors inflicted on prisoners across the Third Reich. In *The United States of America v. Karl Brandt et al.*, also known as the ‘Doctors’ Trial’, twenty medical doctors and three Nazi officials, including Drs Gebhardt, Fischer, and Oberheuser, were tried for their involvement in experimentation and mass murder in the concentration camps.¹⁸⁶ From 21 November 1946 to 20 August 1947, judges called upon thousands of pages of documents and numerous witnesses to determine the fate of these individuals.

All three Ravensbrück doctors pleaded not guilty, despite the extensive evidence against them. In his affidavit, Fischer claimed Gebhardt ordered him to participate in the experiments at Ravensbrück. He presented his behaviour toward patients as “considerate” and contended to have followed “standard professional procedure”, arguing that “no serious illnesses resulted”

¹⁸⁴ Helm, *Ravensbrück*, p. 614.

¹⁸⁵ Dublon-Knebel, *A Holocaust Crossroads*, p. 31. In the weeks prior to liberation, some ‘Rabbits’ had escaped under assumed names to other camps.

¹⁸⁶ USHMM, ‘The Doctors Trial: The Medical Case of the Subsequent Nuremberg Proceedings’, <<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-doctors-trial-the-medical-case-of-the-subsequent-nuremberg-proceedings>> [accessed 15 January 2020].

from the operations.¹⁸⁷ Prisoner testimonies revealed the truth. Maria Broel-Plater described the treatment received at Ravensbrück for the court: “We were not treated like human beings, but like numbers”.¹⁸⁸ All four ‘Rabbits’ called to testify at the trial attest to the permanent consequences of their operations. The women described their continued suffering: frequent fevers, difficulty walking, and the necessity of wearing special shoes.¹⁸⁹ The court summoned Dr Leo Alexander to examine the women’s wounds and provide a professional opinion on the nature of the experiments. He described Maria Kuzmierczuk’s muscles as “destroyed” and her scars as “mutilating”.¹⁹⁰

Like Fischer, Oberheuser maintained that she had no choice but to participate in the experiments at Gebhardt’s insistence.¹⁹¹ She claimed that, “in administering therapeutic care [...] I did everything I could as a woman in a difficult position”.¹⁹² All three of the Ravensbrück doctors were found guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Gebhardt was sentenced to death and executed on 2 June 1948.¹⁹³ The court sentenced Fischer to life imprisonment; however, he was released in 1954 and soon after began a research assignment at the pharmaceutical company Boehringer Ingelheim.¹⁹⁴ Oberheuser was sentenced to twenty years imprisonment, but like Fischer, was freed early after serving only five years.

¹⁸⁷ USHMM, ‘United States of America v. Karl Brandt et al., Nov. 21, 1946 - Aug. 20, 1947’, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn504191>.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁰ USHMM, ‘United States of America v. Karl Brandt et al., Nov. 21, 1946 - Aug. 20, 1947’, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn504191>. Washington D.C., USHMM, ‘Polish survivor Jadwiga Dzido shows her scarred leg to the court, while expert witness Dr. Alexander explains the nature of the medical experiment performed on her in the Ravensbrueck concentration camp. Dzido and Alexander were appearing as witnesses at the Doctors Trial’, 20 December 1946, Photograph 79809, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa11987>.

¹⁹¹ Wendy Maier, ‘Aufseherinnen und andere Frauen: An investigation of female perpetrators of genocide and other crimes during the Nazi regime, 1933–1945’, Roosevelt University, (2002), p. 113.

¹⁹² RMG, ‘The Ravensbrück Women’s Concentration Camp’.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

After her release, Oberheuser began working as a doctor in Stocksee, Germany. According to former inmate Wanda Kiedrzyńska, the West German government gave Oberheuser “strangely favourable opportunity” to start over by providing her with a letter stating that she should be “given every facility in finding employment”.¹⁹⁵ As news of her return to the medical profession spread throughout the 1950s, various individuals, notably former Ravensbrück inmates, made attempts to have her name removed from the medical register.¹⁹⁶ Finally, with the involvement of the British Medical Association in 1958, the West German Minister of Internal Affairs succumbed to the overwhelming objection and removed Oberheuser’s right to practice medicine. Details on Oberheuser after this date are scarce; one historian believes she worked for a pharmaceutical laboratory in Germany, a documentary filmmaker studying the ‘Rabbits’ speculates that Oberheuser may have immigrated to America.¹⁹⁷ Fischer and Oberheuser are two of many who did not face suitable retribution for their crimes. Of the 4,550 guards, doctors, and SS authorities that worked at Ravensbrück and its subcamps between 1939 and 1945, only 114 were put on trial, and even fewer were convicted.¹⁹⁸

The ‘Rabbits’ bonds with one another did not disappear after their captivity ended. In memoirs, interviews, and articles, many of the women mentioned the support and comfort their fellow ‘Rabbits’ continued to provide after the war. Writing in the 1960s, Wanda Kiedrzyńska underscored the continuity of their friendships which have “lasted til today”.¹⁹⁹ Outside support

¹⁹⁵ Wanda Kiedrzyńska, ‘Herta Oberheuser’s Guilt’, in Wanda Machlejd (ed.), *Studies and Monographs: Experimental Operations on Prisoners of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp* (Warsaw, 1960), p. 56.

¹⁹⁶ USHMM, ‘Caroline Ferriday collection’, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn508306>, series 4.

¹⁹⁷ Maier, ‘Aufseherinnen’, pp. 114-115. Walz, ‘Informationen’, p. 17.

¹⁹⁸ RMG, ‘The Ravensbrück Women’s Concentration Camp’.

¹⁹⁹ Kiedrzyńska, ‘Introduction’, p. 24.

for the ‘Rabbits’ continued after liberation as well. In their efforts to gain monetary compensation from the West German government, the victims were aided by Anise Postel-Vinay, a former French inmate, who penned a report in 1952 pressing for restitution for the surviving ‘Rabbits’.²⁰⁰ Furthermore, the numerous memoirs written by non-Polish inmates in the decades following liberation, many of which contained descriptions of the ‘Rabbits’ plight and the support offered to them, attest to the lingering sentiment for these victims.

Support came from individuals not directly associated with Ravensbrück as well. In 1958, American philanthropist Caroline Ferriday learned about the ‘Rabbits’ experiences in Ravensbrück. Inspired by the 1955 Hiroshima Maidens project, in which twenty-five Japanese women travelled to the United States for reconstructive surgery, Ferriday worked to bring the surviving ‘Rabbits’ across the Atlantic for treatment and convalescence.²⁰¹ In partnership with Norman Cousins and Dr William Hitzig, Ferriday succeeded in bringing thirty-five ‘Rabbits’ to the United States from December 1958 to December 1959.²⁰² Their arrival and travels across the country were widely reported in the American press, most notably in the *Saturday Review* weekly magazine, and the atrocities which occurred at Ravensbrück became even more widely recognised.²⁰³ This trip speaks not only to the enduring bonds between the ‘Rabbits’ but also to the aid they received even after liberation.

²⁰⁰ USHMM, ‘Caroline Ferriday collection’, series 3.2.

²⁰¹ USHMM, ‘Caroline Ferriday collection’, series 3.1 and 3.3.

²⁰² USHMM, ‘Caroline Ferriday collection’, series 3.2.

²⁰³ USHMM, ‘Caroline Ferriday collection’, series 3.3-3.5. ‘Nazi Camp Victims at Senate Hearing’, *The New York Times*, New York, 20 May 1959, p. 14, < <https://www.nytimes.com/1959/05/20/archives/nazi-camp-victims-at-senate-hearing.html> > [accessed 30 December 2019].

The illegal experimental operations performed on the ‘Rabbits’ at Ravensbrück left the victims permanently crippled, shaping the remainder of their lives physically, emotionally, and financially. In their applications for restitution in the late 1950s, the women completed questionnaires establishing the nature of their injuries and their current state of being. A compiled picture of the victims’ situation is disheartening; fifteen years after liberation, these women suffered from heart trouble, neurosis, general exhaustion, severe weakness, and difficulty walking. The majority of the surviving ‘Rabbits’ indicated that they were no longer able to work due to continuing medical complications.²⁰⁴ Although many of the women received a small pension from the Polish Government, none of the victims received proper financial compensation from Germany.²⁰⁵ Despite the ‘Rabbits’ remarkable survival, due significantly to the support provided for them in Ravensbrück, the women’s lives were forever altered. Maria Cabaj, reflecting on the horrors experienced in Ravensbrück and the devastating effect of the operations, remarked, “sometimes I wonder if it was true, if it was not all a bad dream that I lived through that hell and survived it; but I look at the scars on the legs and know that it is true, and those scars will never let me forget”.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁴ USHMM, ‘Caroline Ferriday collection’, series 1.1-1.12.

²⁰⁵ Walz, ‘Informationen’, p. 17. Weindling, *Nazi Medicine*, p. 338.

²⁰⁶ Cabaj, ‘Maria Cabaj’, p. 55.

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