

Ravensbruck concentration camp



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Located just fifty miles from the renowned Holocaust concentration camp of Auschwitz is another camp of equal status. Ravensbruck was the only major concentration camp for women during World War II. It was established by the SS leader Heinrich Himmler in November of 1938. He chose to locate his new camp at a small town called Ravensbruck because it was hidden and out of sight, but also centrally located and therefore easy to reach. The town was not far from Furstenburg, Germany, a city with a direct railroad to Berlin.

In the winter of 1938, five hundred prisoners were transferred to the town of Ravensbruck to build the actual concentration camp, which consisted of fourteen barracks, an infirmary, and a kitchen. In the spring, a small men's camp was also built. It was completely isolated from the women's camp, which was surrounded by a tall electrical fence. The camp officially opened on May 18th, 1939, with the arrival of eight hundred and sixty German prisoners and seven Austrian prisoners. All in all, it is estimated that over 132,000 women and children were imprisoned at Ravensbruck, and out of that number at least 92,000 died or were killed.

The women living at Ravensbruck were identified by a colored triangular badge (called a Winkel) that they wore. Jewish women wore two yellow triangles on top of each other, forming a Jewish Star, unless they were also part of another category. In that case, one of the triangles would be the other color. For example, "criminals" wore green triangles, "asocials" such as Gypsies, vagrants, lesbians, and prostitutes wore black or brown, political prisoners wore red, and Jehovah's Witnesses wore lavender.

If a Jewish woman was also a political prisoner, she would be identified by a red triangle beneath a yellow one. Like any other concentration camp, the conditions were horrible, and the women there lived in fear of death and assault every day. The main causes of death were disease, starvation, beating, exhaustion, torture, gunfire, and hanging. Many other women were sent to extermination camps where they were gassed by the thousands.

When a woman first arrived at Ravensbruck, she was required to have all of her hair shaved off, unless the Nazis deemed that she was

Aryan (in which case she was allowed to keep her hair). Life at Ravensbruck was a struggle for survival, and only the strongest and most determined made it out alive. According to some personal accounts of women, one of the ways to survive was to have a distraction. Some women resisted the Nazis by holding secretive educational programs. The most extensive forms of this were among Polish women, where high-school level classes were held by experienced teachers. Almost all the women in Ravensbruck were required to work, usually building rocket parts, weapons, and clothing for the German soldiers.

Some of these women and girls rebelled by sabotaging the rockets. For the women in the camp, it was important to keep some of their dignity. Many would risk their lives to keep a personal possession such as a necklace or a doll. Children in Ravensbruck were not a rare sight, but many were sentenced to death before they were even born. Newborns were often immediately killed, usually in front of their mothers. It was not uncommon for doctors to throw living babies into the crematory, or bury them alive. Often

they were poisoned, strangled, or drowned, if they were not aborted by force before they were born.

In the beginning of Ravensbruck, no children were allowed to live. Later, newborns were occasionally allowed to survive, but because of the lack of food and health care, they almost always died. The only kids who made it were the ones who could work alongside the grown women day and night doing adult jobs. Even so, it was extremely uncommon for children to survive incarceration at Ravensbruck. Many women and young girls were used for medical experiments (without their consent), starting in the summer of 1942.

Germany was looking for new cures and medicines to help their soldiers with battle wounds, so they used women to test theories. " Among the first two groups of experimentees, involving fifteen women, none died. SS Dr. Grawitz then questioned the validity of the experiments on the grounds they ' did not replicate battlefield conditions. ' As a result, in the experiments that followed, women were given authentic gunshot wounds, after which dirt and other foreign materials were stuffed into the open wounds. In one experiment, in October 1942, four women were infected with gangrene.

Only one survived. The second type of experimental operation carried out by SS doctors, notably Dr. Stumpfegger, involved severing muscles and breaking bones, sometimes using hammers, ostensibly to learn more about regeneration. About twenty Polish women were subjected to these methods, and although this was not in itself life-threatening, it left the women permanently crippled. " (Morrison, 247). Out of the seventy-four Polish victims, five died, six had unhealed wounds, and the rest survived with

permanent physical damage. Four of those women testified against the SS doctors in 1946.

Other experiments included the forced sterilization of women and girls, sometimes as young as eight. This was done by direct exposure to x-rays, because the Nazis didn't want them reproducing and ruining racial purity. Some women did agree to this because they were told that they would be freed if they consented, which did not happen. The Ravensbruck concentration camp was controlled by Nazi guards, including one hundred and fifty SS guards. The camp also served as a training camp for over four thousand overseers, who either stayed at Ravensbruck or went to work at other camps.

Several dozen overseers, along with SS men, whips, and dogs oversaw the prisoners when they were in the barracks, during roll call, and during meal times. These overseers were described as "inhumane and sadistic", and they treated the prisoners in a brutal manner. One SS overseer was so cruel that she was nicknamed the "Beast of Ravensbruck". Many of these overseers and guards were eventually tried for war crimes. In 2006, the United States government deported an eighty-four year old woman who had been living in California since 1959, because they had found out that she had been a guard at Ravensbruck for a year.

The Ravensbruck concentration camp was officially liberated on April 30th, 1945, by the Russian communist army. In the last few months of World War II, because of the advance of the Russians, the Nazis decided to kill as many of their prisoners as possible to avoid testimony about the horrible things

that happened at camp. For example, in March, 1945, one hundred and thirty pregnant women and babies were gassed. In April, the Nazis forced all the women who were able to walk (about twenty thousand) on a Death March. Only three thousand women were left behind.

The women at camp were liberated three days later by the Russian army, and the survivors of the Death March were liberated the following day by a Russian scout unit. Many of the SS guards were tried at the Hamburg Ravensbruck Trials two years after the liberation, and many were sentenced to death for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Today, the former site of Ravensbruck is a memorial to honor the women who died along with the women who made it out alive. The women who persevered through the hell of Ravensbruck have left a legacy and a lesson to be learned, and they will never be forgotten.