

**UKRAINIAN WOMEN  
OF  
RAVENSBRÜCK  
CONCENTRATION CAMP**

**Voices of Prisoners**

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ISBN: 978-0-9696301-2-8

This book has been published with the financial assistance of the Ukrainian Canadian Research and Documentation Centre (UCRDC), Toronto, Canada.  
[www.UCRDC.org](http://www.UCRDC.org)

We gratefully acknowledge the financial assistance of the World League of Ukrainian Political Prisoners (WLUPP)

**We wish to acknowledge advice provided and contributions from:**

Orys'a Iryna Marciuk, Marc Infeld, Ivanka Miliyanchuk,  
Marta Litynska, Irene Buschtedt, Oxana Odajnyk  
and the Ukrainian Canadian Research and Documentation Centre, Toronto, Canada  
(Iroida Wynnyckyj and Nadia Luciw)

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Cover design and layout: Bozhena Gembatiuk Fedyna

Printed by:  
Trident Associates Printing  
[www.trident-printing.com](http://www.trident-printing.com)

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**This monograph includes the voices  
of Ukrainian women-prisoners of Ravensbrück themselves.**

**They will be our guide as to what really happened.**

# FOREWORD

## **The Fate of Ukrainian women after Ravensbrück concentration camp**

After the restoration of independence in Ukraine in 1991, it became possible to study the history of Ukraine and Ukrainians in World War II. Today, we know very little about the fate of Ukrainian prisoners of Nazi concentration camps. To date, only a few publications have appeared on this topic - mostly memoirs written by former prisoners. We do not know their stories or their approximate numbers. Therefore, this monograph about Ukrainian women in Ravensbrück concentration camp, which brings together and summarizes the fate of women prisoners from Ukraine, marks an extremely important step.

The history of Ukrainian women in Ravensbrück concentration camp would not be complete without an overview of their fate after the war. According to the agreements between the Allies of the anti-Hitler coalition, adopted at the Yalta and Potsdam Conferences in 1945, return (repatriation) to the Soviet Union was declared mandatory for all citizens who had resided in the Soviet Union before 1939.

After the end of the war in Europe, most former concentration camp inmates were temporarily interned in DP camps (camps for displaced persons). From the end of October to the beginning of November 1945, liberated Ravensbrück also had a Soviet repatriation camp, designated in documents as "Camp no. 222", administered by the NKVD.

If we examine the nationality composition of the prisoners of Ravensbrück concentration camp, the largest group included Poles (about 40,000 women), followed by Soviet women (about 23-25,000). Most of the Soviet women prisoners were Ostarbeiters from Ukraine, who had been sent to the concentration camp because they had committed some infraction; most often they were charged with attempting to escape. Among these Soviet civilians, there were also approximately 1,000 women prisoners of war.

After liberation, prisoners from the Soviet Union faced another tragic reality. The Stalinist government regarded them as deserters and "traitors to the Motherland". Therefore, before being released and allowed to return to their

homeland, they were thoroughly screened for political integrity by security officers of the NKVD and NKGB, and by counterintelligence officers from SMERSH (Russian: Death to Spies). For Soviet citizens, this meant new repressions and, most often, several months' detention in repatriation and so-called filtration camps.

According to a 1946 Soviet survey, only 58% of repatriated prisoners returned home to their families at their former place of residence. 19% were drafted into the Red Army, 14% were sent to serve in the so-called labour battalions, 6.5% were "handed over to the NKVD", that is, they were placed under arrest, and 2% were assigned to work in camps or other Soviet military units and institutions abroad.<sup>(1)</sup>

One such repatriated prisoner was Vira Franko, granddaughter of prominent Ukrainian writer Ivan Franko. Upon returning to Lviv, she was summarily arrested and in September 1945, transferred to a prison in Kyiv. "Once again, prison, solitary confinement, nighttime interrogations, and no chance to either sit or lie down during the day. Next, Butyrka, and later Vorkuta. Difficult, exhausting work in the mines; gross unsanitary conditions and hunger!"<sup>(2)</sup> - she wrote in her memoirs. Vira Franko was released on November 27, 1953. Her uncle, Taras, interceded on her behalf and even wrote to Stalin personally. Vira Franko was rehabilitated on December 14, 1959.

Only with the collapse of the Soviet Union did the women, who had returned to Ukraine after World War II, have the opportunity to attend international memorial events, to visit the former Ravensbrück concentration camp, and to lay flowers at the site where they had suffered for so many years and where many of their friends had died.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, the camp survivors, who had returned to Ukraine after World War II, were able to attend international commemorative events. The restoration of independence in Ukraine in 1991 also raised another important issue - highlighting the specific experience and commemorating the Ukrainian prisoners of Nazi concentration camps (i.e., persons who considered themselves as such by nationality or originated from the territory of Ukraine). Very little is known about their fate. To date, only a few publications have appeared on this topic - mostly memoirs written by former prisoners. We do not

<sup>1</sup> Zemskov, Viktor N. (2004). *Репатриация перемещенных советских граждан. Война и общество, 1941-1945. В 2-х кн. Кн.2. М. Р. 342.* [https://sceptis.net/library/id\\_1234.html](https://sceptis.net/library/id_1234.html)

<sup>2</sup> *Photo Lviv news.* (2021). *Віра Франко, або непростя доля онуки великого письменника.* <https://photo-lviv.in.ua/vira-franko-abo-neprosta-dolia-onuky-velykoho-pysmennyka/>

know their stories or their approximate numbers, which can be explained by the extremely complicated historical situation and geopolitical location of Ukrainian lands before, during and after World War II.

In fact, Ukraine as a state did not exist at that time, so the prisoner category system used by the Nazis did not designate these prisoners as “Ukrainians”. After the war, Ukrainian lands were integrated into the Soviet Union, where it was dangerous to admit to having been in a Nazi concentration camp, not to mention distinguishing oneself among other Soviet prisoners. The mere fact of surviving a concentration camp put any former camp prisoner under suspicion by the Soviet security services. In camp documents, prisoners of Ukrainian origin were most often designated as Poles, Russians (Soviet), Czechs or Romanians. As Mykhailo Marunchak, a former prisoner of Auschwitz and Mauthausen concentration camps, noted in his memoirs: “The Ukrainian giant was concealed behind Latin letters referring to foreign nations. Ukrainians were insultingly labelled as citizens of an occupying foreign regime.”<sup>(3)</sup>

Many Ukrainian prisoners did not survive to tell their story. This monograph speaks for these women.

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<sup>3</sup> *Marunchak, Mykhailo H. (1996). Українські політичні в'язні в нацистських концентраційних таборax = Ukrainian political prisoners in Nazi concentration camps. Вінніпег, Канада : Svitova liga ukrainskykh politychnykh v'iazniv. (Text in Ukrainian. Summaries in English and German). pp. 59 - 60.*





## PREFACE

This monograph is written to honour and commemorate the thousands of Ukrainian women who were incarcerated in Nazi concentration camps, and specifically Ravensbrück concentration camp, during the Second World War.

Working as a volunteer at the Ukrainian Canadian Research and Documentation Centre (UCRDC) in Toronto, Canada, I was asked to summarize oral histories, which we had on file, of Ukrainian women who were imprisoned at Ravensbrück concentration camp. As I was not familiar with this specific concentration camp, my first task was to do research on Ravensbrück and the women who were incarcerated there.

I reached out to librarians at the Petro Jacyk Resource Centre at the Robarts Library, University of Toronto, and to the Ekstein Holocaust Resource Library. Both librarians provided me with reference texts and internet data on Ravensbrück, and I was surprised to discover that up to 8,000 Ukrainian women were imprisoned there; many did not survive! I became curious – Who were they? Why were they imprisoned?

I contacted the Ravensbrück Memorial Museum in Germany and was given advice on how to access databases of prisoners who were at this camp.

I reviewed the oral histories that UCRDC had on file and listened as each woman related her personal story of incarceration and provided names of fellow Ukrainian prisoners at the camp. These histories were the beginnings of my database of Ukrainian prisoners at Ravensbrück.

On its website UCRDC put out a search for individuals who had family members imprisoned at Ravensbrück and the daughter of Olha Froliak Eliashevskaya responded. She in turn put me in touch with family members of another prisoner (Lidia Ukarma Marciuk), and we began corresponding and collaborating. These descendants had personal knowledge of their mothers' imprisonments and were able to provide me with new information on Ravensbrück, as well as names of other descendants, for which I am grateful (they are acknowledged as contributors or co-editors to this monograph).

Our collaboration led to a Webinar presentation, in English, on Women Prisoners at Ravensbrück held on February 21, 2021. This presentation attracted a lot of interest, including that of a historian and a film-maker – both from Ukraine, as well as several new descendants of prisoners – we were able to involve them in another Webinar, in Ukrainian, held on October 17, 2021. Both Webinars can be accessed on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OS9IOE9O1ZI> (in English) and [https://youtu.be/sa\\_TUclppE0](https://youtu.be/sa_TUclppE0) (in Ukrainian).

I have continued to compile a database listing the name of Ukrainian prisoners of Ravensbrück, and it currently lists over 5,000 names of women from different areas of Ukraine. It can be found on the UCRDC website at: [www.ucrdc.org](http://www.ucrdc.org)

When writing this monograph, I wanted to include personal stories and experiences of some of the Ukrainian women who were incarcerated at Ravensbrück, but it is sad to say that there were few such publications. Women who were sent back to the Soviet Union were discouraged to speak of their imprisonment at the camp; some were marked as ‘traitors’ and prosecuted as collaborators with the Nazis. Women who emigrated to western countries wanted to start their lives anew and rarely shared their experiences at Ravensbrück with others, including family members. Some, however, became involved in Ukrainian organizations in their adopted country, and commemorated their experiences in concentration camps so that this horrific period in history would not be forgotten.

It is my hope that this monograph will give the reader a glimpse into the lives of Ukrainian women who were imprisoned at Ravensbrück – perhaps it is a window into the experiences of many Ukrainian men and women who were incarcerated in different Nazi concentration camps during the Second World War.

Author: Kalyna Bezchlibnyk Butler (Solonyinka)

# DESCENDANTS' NOTES

## **#49061... Our Mother Olha Froliak Eliashevskia**

A beautiful young Ukrainian university student toiling long hours in brutal conditions at the Siemens factory at the edge of Ravensbrück concentration camp. Day in and day out, longing for freedom...

She survived – albeit with painful physical and mental scars - to tell us and the entire world her story.

In the last few years, Ravensbrück has begun to receive long overdue attention and interest. As this new interest shows, the stories of Ravensbrück are considered history, their lessons remain as urgent and important as ever.

The personal life stories in this timely and important book eloquently and profoundly document the traumatic experiences of Ukrainian women at Ravensbrück concentration camp and demonstrate their resourcefulness and tenacity in the Hell of Ravensbrück.

Out of the many personal quotations in this book, what stands out is the strength and resilience of these women in the face of everyday camp horror. Mothers. Daughters. Sisters. Wives. Girlfriends. Aunts. Nieces. Friends. Neighbours. Grandmothers. These are the women in your life. They Matter!

As we write these Descendant Notes in 2022, it is impossible not to consider the genocidal war unfolding at this moment in Ukraine, in the heart of Europe. Russia has unleashed death, devastation and destruction on a scale not seen since World War II, with the intent of completely destroying the Ukrainian state and society, its institutions, infrastructure and the Ukrainian identity and way of life. In essence – the very existence of Ukraine.

Never Again? The phrase indeed sounds empty and meaningless...

*Christine Eliashevsky Chraibi and Lydia Eliashevsky Replansky, July 2022*

## **#19206 ...Our Mother Lidia Ukarma Marciuk**

Many former prisoners of Nazi-concentration camps did not speak at all about their experiences there, others limited themselves to just the bare minimum. Only a handful shared the history of their arrest and lives in the concentration camps with their family members as our mother Lidia Ukarma Marciuk did.

In my childhood I discovered a very small box containing tiny objects. What beautiful toys for a 6-year-old girl! These - my mother said - were very valuable to her. This was the start of our conversation on her history of imprisonment in Ravensbrück.

These five objects of the size of a thumb nail were made by her camp mate Olena Wityk from handles of toothbrushes and the most precious material - chewed bread.

Over the years, more and more details emerged about her imprisonment until my mother was able to visit for the first time after her liberation the Ravensbrück Camp in the reunified Germany in 1992 accompanied by my sister and me. Subsequently, she attended the celebration of Ravensbrück's liberation almost every year together at least with one of us daughters.

For many years my mother tried to have a separate memorial for the many Ukrainian prisoners at Ravensbrück established. Finally, in 2011, the Ukrainian commemorative plaque was revealed. This event turned out to be her last visit to the place of tortures before her death in 2014.

She spoke often and freely about her time in Ravensbrück and left a 4-hour-interview with the Memorial Archive Ravensbrück along with other oral documents.

*Oksana Marciuk and Orys'a Iryna Marciuk, July 2022*

# UKRAINIAN WOMEN OF RAVENSBRÜCK CONCENTRATION CAMP

## Voices of Prisoners



*Art by Olena Wityk Wojtowycz (Prisoner #19207)*



## Historical Perspective

Amid the upheaval of World War I and the Russian Revolution, the Ukrainian National Republic (UNR) – the predecessor to modern Ukraine – was declared on November 20, 1917 and proclaimed its independence from Russia on January 22, 1918. On January 22, 1919, the Ukrainian National Republic (UNR) formally united with the Western Ukrainian National Republic (ZUNR), which had similarly emerged from the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. However, by 1921, Ukraine was once again partitioned between Poland and Soviet Russia. With the outbreak of World War II, Poland itself was divided between Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, and western Ukraine was incorporated into the rest of Soviet Ukraine. Though a Ukrainian state did not exist at this time, most of its citizens continued to call their lands Ukraine and themselves Ukrainians.

Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, initiating four years of warfare fought across the extent of Ukraine. The Germans established the Reichskommissariat or civil occupation districts in primarily western Ukraine; eastern territories were under military governance (General-gouvernement für die besetzten polnischen Gebiete) until 1943-44. They immediately implemented brutal and repressive policies against the local population and genocidal policies against Jews. Millions of people were deported as slave labour (Ostarbeiter) or arrested and transported to concentration camps in Germany, Austria and Poland. A depopulation program was initiated to prepare for German colonization. Thousands of men and women, living in the territories of Ukraine, were incarcerated in these concentration camps. Ravensbrück was but one of these camps.

For the purposes of this publication, women born on the territories of Ukraine, are called Ukrainians, no matter what language they spoke, nor whether they were identified in documents as Russian, Polish, Jewish, Sinti and Roma (Gypsies).

## About Ravensbrück



Ravensbrück concentration camp is located in Germany, 90 kilometres north of Berlin, by Lake Schwedt. It is near the town of Fürstenberg, where a rail station is located, with direct service to Berlin.

Ravensbrück was the only camp specifically built by the Nazi regime to incarcerate women. Heinrich Himmler chose the site not only for its favourable distance and transport connections, but also because he “believed that the cleansing of German blood should begin close to nature” <sup>(1)</sup>.

Ravensbrück camp was built by male prisoners sent from Sachsenhausen concentration camp and was opened in May 1939. It was under the SS command of Obersturmbannführer Max Koegel (from January 1940 to August 1942) and Sturmbannführer Fritz Suhren (from August 1942 to April 1945). Johanna Langefeld was the chief woman guard from May 1939 to March 1943. All guards were women, members of the ‘female civilian employees of the SS’ or the “weibliche SS-Gefolges”.

Ravensbrück was initially established for female enemies of Hitler’s regime, as Germans needed a place for ‘special’ female prisoners such as spies, political prisoners, French resistance fighters, Polish aristocrats, Scandinavian nationals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Sinti and Roma (Gypsies), and so-called asocials, i.e.,



persons who were not willing or able to fit into the Nazi society. Women from different national, ethnic, and religious groups, and social strata, were forced to live together under the most dire inhumane conditions. The camp was designed to hold 6,000 prisoners, but at times housed more than 36,000 women together.

*«Indeed, Ravensbrück performed some functions that were - at least for a specific period - unique: «it served as a center for the economic exploitation of female prisoners, a site where large pseudo-medical experiments were conducted on female bodies, a training camp for female SS guards, a location where female prisoners were selected for camp ‘brothels’, and a prototype for a female concentration camp when the women’s section of Auschwitz was erected. Ravensbrück integrated all these functions in one complex and in so doing, systematized the persecution of women in the Third Reich. From this point of view, it represents a milestone in the history of the Nazi camp system.»<sup>(2)</sup>*

*«Some 3,500 women worked as Nazi concentration camp guards, and all of them started out at Ravensbrück. Many later worked in death camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau or Bergen-Belsen.»<sup>(3)</sup>*

Between 123,000 and 130,000 female prisoners, from 30 different nationalities, passed through the gates of Ravensbrück. **It is estimated that between 6,000 and 10,000 of these women came from Ukrainian territories.**

The UCRDC (Ukrainian Canadian Research and Documentation Centre in Toronto, Canada) database has already documented the names of more than **5,000 women** who were either born within the territories of Ukraine, or who identified themselves as Ukrainians in German documents.<sup>(4)</sup>

## Timeline of Ravensbrück

The first 310 women were transferred from the Lichtenburg concentration camp, and by **May 21, 1939** there were 974 registered women prisoners in the camp.<sup>(5)</sup>

**In April 1940** there began mass transports of Polish women from territories annexed by the German Reich (Poland was partitioned between Germany and the Soviet Union); women from some western Ukrainian territories were included.

**In 1942**, Germany announced a forced labour decree to round up ‘recruits’ and deport them to Germany to work in different establishments (due to a shortage of labour in Germany); Ravensbrück changed from a protective

custody camp to a slave labour camp. Its population doubled from 7,000 to 16,000 - many were foreign resistance prisoners from lands occupied by Germany.

**By March 1942**, there was an increased incarceration of women from the Soviet Union. Many of them were captured and taken from villages and towns in eastern Ukraine for forced labour<sup>(6)</sup> - they were called Ostarbeiters. Women who resisted arrest or attempted to flee were sent to concentration camps.

In the **fall of 1942** began the first wave of arrests of Ukrainians living or studying in the Third Reich.

**By 1943**, Ravensbrück had become a major administrative and working enterprise for over 40 sub-camps located near armament factories.

**In February 1943**, a group of 536 female Soviet prisoners of war, including Ukrainian women, arrived at the concentration camp.

**In December 1943**, the Gestapo conducted mass arrests of Ukrainian citizens throughout Ukraine. As well, they carried out extensive arrests and detention of Ukrainian students in Germany and Austria, as detailed by eyewitnesses in the pages of this monograph.

**On October 4, 1944**, twenty (20) Ukrainian political prisoners were transferred from Ravensbrück to a housing complex in Lüben bei Liegnitz (now Lubin, Poland), under an agreement between the Sicherheitsdienst (SD - the Nazi security and intelligence agency) and Stepan Bandera, leader of the OUN-B faction of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), who in exchange for their release agreed to provide a squad of Ukrainian soldiers to fight against the Soviet armed forces.

**In November 1944**, as the Germans retreated from the eastern territories, a large number of Jewish women were moved to Ravensbrück from other camps (such as Auschwitz). Despite the lack of facilities, Ravensbrück continued to receive prisoners from eastern camps. Due to overcrowding in the barracks, they were assigned to tents (with no toilets or heating) and many died due to extreme cold temperatures.

**By December 1944**, due to overcrowding at the camp, the Nazi authorities began large-scale extermination of prisoners. Some prisoners were transferred to other sub-camps where they had to work in factories (e.g., munitions). Many others were sent to the on-site gas chamber – **between January and April of 1945** the SS set up a provisional gas chamber at Ravensbrück in a hut next to the crematorium, where between 5,000 and 6,000 prisoners were gassed<sup>(7)</sup>;

their corpses were piled and burned. 5,600 prisoners were sent to gas chambers in CC Mauthausen and CC Bergen-Belsen. Many others were marched out of camp, into the woods, and shot.<sup>(8)</sup>

**On April 4, 1945**, as the war was coming to an end, the Swiss and Canadian Red Cross arrived and liberated 300 French and Polish nationals. On April 7, Danes and Norwegians were liberated by the Danish and Swedish Red Cross. German prisoners were set free.

**Between April 22-29**, 8,000 women were evacuated by Western relief agencies; however, Russians, Eastern Europeans, including Ukrainians, some Germans, Austrians, and Jews remained in the camp.<sup>(1)</sup>

**On April 27-28**, since the Red Army was close to Ravensbrück, all prisoners, who were well enough to walk, were led out of the camp on a forced death march ("Todesmarsch" to the Baltic Sea to drown) - many were weak and died along the way, though some managed to escape.

**On April 30**, the Red Army (49th Army of the Belorussian Front) arrived. 3,500 remaining sick women were 'liberated' (rape was common <sup>(1)</sup>). The women from Ukraine, Belorussia and Russia were repatriated to the USSR; many were considered 'traitors' and some were sent to the Gulag in Siberia.

**By May**, the Soviets had cleaned up Ravensbrück and established a Soviet military post (part of the Cold War anti-missile program).

**In 1959**, the German Democratic Republic established a memorial site - mainly to commemorate the anti-fascist and political prisoners at this concentration camp. The area of the former camp, used by the Soviet army **from 1945 to 1993**, was not accessible to the public

**In 1994**, Ravensbrück was opened to the public as a historic memorial site.

## Nationalities

References suggest that 123,000 to 130,000 women, from 30 different nationalities, were incarcerated in Ravensbrück.

The death toll is estimated to be between 30,000 and 90,000,<sup>(1,9)</sup> though the exact figure will never be known as the SS destroyed many documents. Women prisoners died from disease, medical experimentation, from prolonged exposure to very cold temperatures (hypothermia), starvation, beatings, executions (in a special shooting gallery), lethal injections, and in the crematorium (as per camp records); 2,500 men also died there.

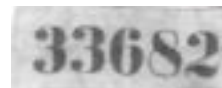
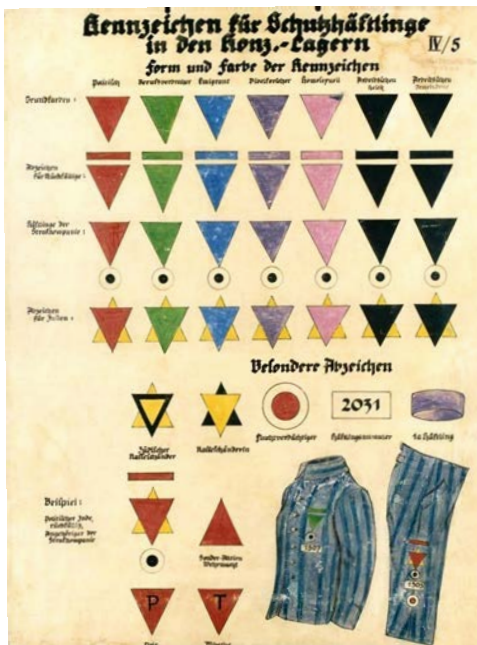


Some historians estimate that there may have been **between 6,000 and 10,000** women from Ukraine. <sup>(13)</sup>

There were 328 transports to Ravensbrück that included Ukrainians; of these, 45 transports specifically identified 259 Ukrainians (it is unknown how many Ukrainians were in the remaining 283 transports). <sup>(14)</sup>

## Ukrainian Prisoners - Who Were They?

All prisoners from Ukraine, Poland and Russia were considered to be political, regardless of their political affiliations. All were marked with a red triangle with the letter of their nationality ('U', 'P' or 'R') on their uniform sleeve. The letter 'U' was rarely provided. Captured medics and soldiers from the army of the Soviet Union were given the letter 'SU' (there were some Ukrainians in this group).



*Liubov Wynnzykyj Szewczuk's  
Prisoner number: 3 inches (8  
cms) x 1-1/8 inches (3 cms)  
(Saved from her outfit) Private  
collection of niece Irene  
Buschtedt*

Nazi concentration camp badges ([en-academic.com](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nazi_concentration_camp_badge)) - Wikipedia  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nazi\\_concentration\\_camp\\_badge](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nazi_concentration_camp_badge)

The majority of Ukrainian women were slave labourers “Ostarbeiters”, who had been forcibly taken from their homes, schools or places of work and sent to toil in factories, houses, fields, and other establishments in Germany or



Austria – due to labour shortages in these countries. Some were sent to Ravensbrück as the administrative centre for their work detail; others were sent there following some 'offence' at their place of work/forced labour. Most were young women, aged 15 to 25, but there were also older women who still had children at home.



*«Even in the countryside, children and young people were not safe from attacks by the Germans. At the beginning of October 1942, at the age of 15, I was arrested on the street, driven into one of many railway cars and deported to Germany. Near Stuttgart, I worked as a forced laborer for Bosch, I had to punch and drill twelve hours a day at the workbench.» <sup>(16)</sup>*  
*(Shura Terletska (Prisoner #17999) interview)*

Amongst the imprisoned Ukrainian women, there were many students, who were studying in institutions of higher learning in Germany, Austria, Poland, and Ukraine. Most were sent to work in different enterprises at Ravensbrück sub-camps.



*«Lida had no inkling that one day the Gestapo would be waiting for her at her apartment. She was getting ready for a trip to Vienna. She had just purchased a new hat and as she hurriedly entered her home to pick up her suitcases, she fell directly into the hands of the Gestapo. She was arrested and taken to the prison on Alexanderplatz. Student Lida was imprisoned for six months. There were seven other Ukrainian women with her. Among them: Olena Wityk, who was studying art in Berlin at the time. Also, Romana Lebedovych from Vienna, Darka Sydir, Olha Froliak, and Hanna Hankevych. They were taken for interrogation by the Gestapo.» «'We were harshly brutalized and interrogated by the Gestapo.' stated former student-prisoner Lida Ukarma in a stunned voice. And they were beaten fiercely for spreading nationalist ideas about Ukraine in Berlin.» «These women were held in prison until February 1943. In the frosty winter months, they and hundreds of others were transported to the Ravensbrück women's camp near Berlin.» <sup>(17)</sup>*  
*(Lida Ukarma Marciuk (Prisoner #19206) interview)*



*«In Lviv, on September 15 (1943), there were mass arrests and I too was arrested quite by chance... I was arrested and taken to the Prison on Lontskoho where I remained for five weeks in a shared cell. Hundreds of our people, our students were there. Some of our male students and our men remained standing in the corridors as there was no space left in the cells. I was in a small cell, with twelve other women of different ages and different nationalities. So, I wasn't only among Ukrainians.»<sup>(18)</sup>  
(**Ivanna Hryhortsiv Holovata** interview)*

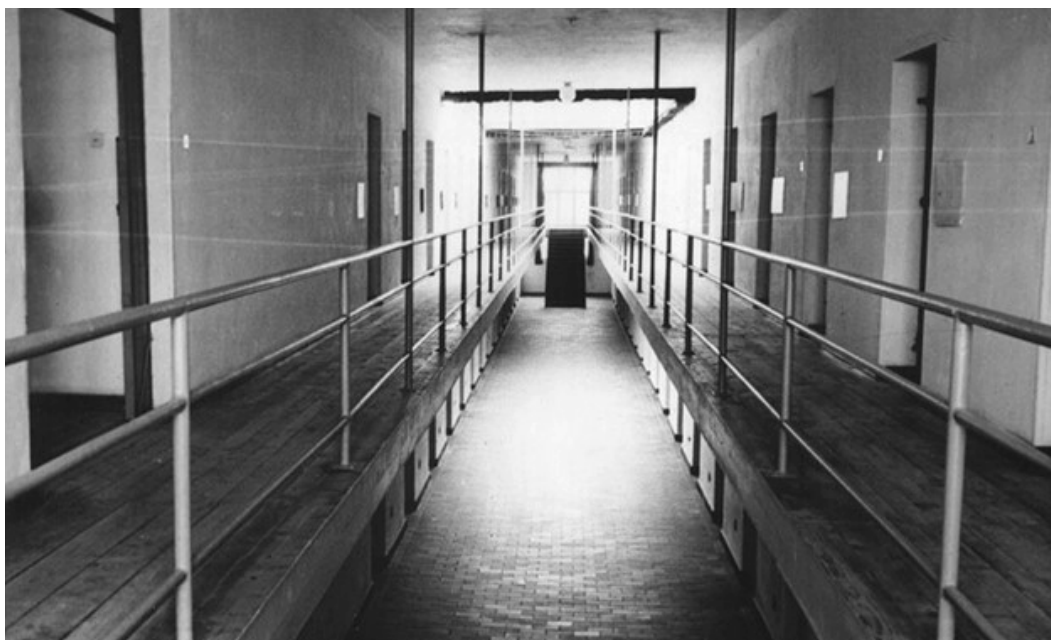
Ukrainian women who actively opposed the Nazi regime were also incarcerated at Ravensbrück. This included many Ukrainian women who had joined the underground resistance movement as members of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) and had carried out crucial liaison and intelligence-gathering tasks. They were arrested, interrogated and brutally tortured by the Gestapo in different prisons (e.g., the Prison on Lontskoho in Lviv, or in Linz or Berlin) and then transported to Ravensbrück.

Most were housed in barracks at the camp, but some were locked up in the camp Zellenbau (The Bunker or Cell-Building) which resembled a prison and contained 78 cells for isolation. Daria Hnatkivska Lebed, a high-ranking member of the Ukrainian resistance movement, and her infant daughter Zoya were kept there in solitary confinement.

*(The UCRDC database contains the names of about 60 Ukrainian women who were imprisoned because of their anti-Nazi political activities.<sup>(4)</sup>)*



*«We travelled by train all night. In the morning, we found ourselves in Berlin and there we were handed over to a high-ranking Gestapo officer named Müller. The car took us to Ravensbrück concentration camp. Poor little Zoya was inconsolable due to a painful rash from the wet unchanged diaper. Zoya and I were placed in a small cell; Vaya was separated from us. We were in a bunker where prisoners of different nationalities were held... I learned, from women who brought linen to the bunker, that my mother and my aunt were in the main camp, as well as several other Ukrainian women who had been arrested in Berlin and Lviv. These included Lida Ukarma, Olenka Wityk, Olha Froliak, Dozha Hayvas with her husband Yaroslav's mother, and others....»<sup>(19)</sup>  
(**Daria Hnatkivska Lebed** relates)*



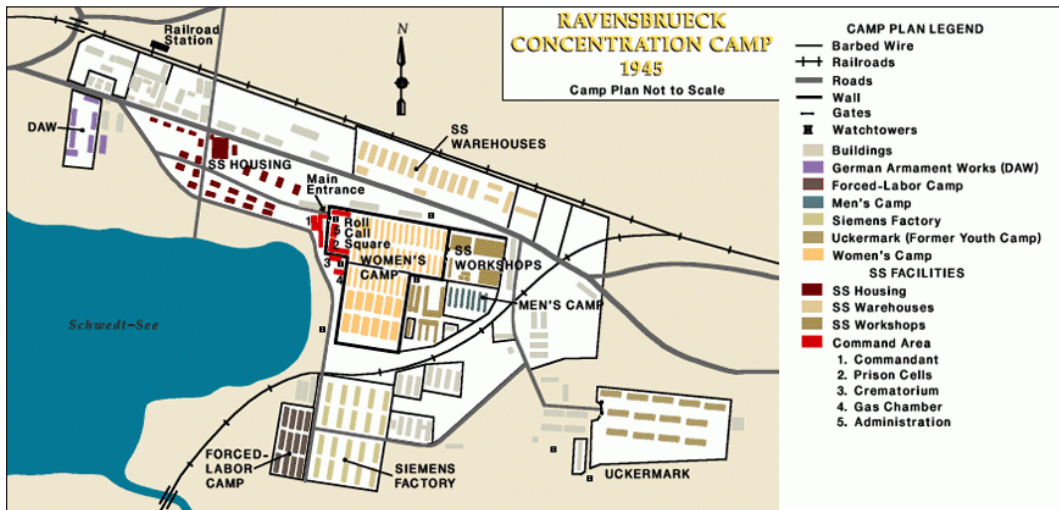
*Bunker; Cell block, the camp prison, shower-room, circa 1941 (Photo from the SS photo album, 1940 to 1941/42; Photographer unknown, memorial Ravensbrück, Ph -Nr. 1651).  
[1939 - 1945 Ravensbrück concentration camp](http://1939-1945.Ravensbrueck.concentration.camp) | [Mahn- und Gedenkstätte Ravensbrück](http://Mahn-und.Gedenkstaette.Ravensbrueck.de)  
 (ravensbrueck-sbg.de)*

Jewish women were incarcerated in Ravensbrück only because they were of Jewish origin. Some were transferred from other camps to perform work in different camp factories and enterprises. A large number were evacuated to Ravensbrück when eastern concentration camps were being dismantled in late 1944-45 (e.g., Auschwitz). *The UCRDC database has identified around 170 Jewish women who were born in Ukraine.* <sup>(4)</sup>

Captured members of the Soviet army were imprisoned in a special barrack (Red Army block barrack #32) with barbed wire around it (taken down in April 1943). About 800 female Red Army soldiers and medics were incarcerated in Ravensbrück (*the names of 100 Ukrainians are included in our database*). They were a very disciplined group of prisoners, organized by Yevheniia Lazarovna Klemm. Some performed the work of medics in the Revier (medical facility). Many refused to work, as they considered themselves prisoners of war, and often sabotaged work details.



## The Layout of the Camp



Ravensbrueck concentration camp, 1945; *The Holocaust Encyclopedia*  
<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/map/ravensbrueck-concentration-camp-1945>

### Prisoner Barracks

Initially Ravensbrück contained 18 barracks which included two sick bays (called the Revier), two warehouses, one penal block, one prison and twelve prisoner barracks. Each prisoner barrack had two wings (A & B), with three-tiered bunk beds built to house 100 prisoners each. The centre of each barrack contained three toilets and sinks. After 1940, larger barracks were added to accommodate the increased influx of prisoners brought to Ravensbrück.<sup>(7)</sup> As prisoner numbers increased, two to three women slept in one bed and others slept on the floor. Fleas were common on the beds, so lice and scabies were a major problem. Rats were also common.<sup>(11)</sup> There were not enough toilet facilities to handle the constant gastric problems (e.g., diarrhea) suffered by the prisoners.

Barrack windows and doors remained open day and night, throughout summer and winter months.



Кілька годин важкого, неспокійного сну серед бруду й вошей були відпочинком.



Art by Olena  
Wityk Wojtowycz  
(Prisoner #19207)  
[RavensbrückArt.pdf](#)  
([dpcamps.org](#))

(Rest — a few hours of difficult, interrupted sleep  
on the dirty lice-ridden bunks of the barracks.)



*«The bunk was so narrow that my bed companion and I had to turn over at the same time, while the tiny insects that nested in our mattress and blanket gave us not a moment of reprieve. No matter how often we searched and destroyed them, we were not able to rid our cot of their presence. A strong, foul stench emanating from the human mass pervaded the air under the rooftop. There were 150 to 180 prisoners in our barrack.»* <sup>(20)</sup>  
**(Olha Froliak Eliashevsk (Prisoner #49061) memoir)**

As the number of prisoners in the camp increased, more barracks were added, and the type of prisoner housed in different blocks changed over time.

Block 1 housed German prisoners

Blocks 5-11 were for ill prisoners; in 1943, block 5 housed political prisoners

Block 9 or 11 was called Judenblock where most Jewish prisoners were placed in 1940-41; in 1943, they were also sent to block 27

Blocks 15, 22 and 26 housed French prisoners

Blocks 27-32 were called 'Slum Blocks' - originally, they held so-called asocials, Sinti and Roma (Gypsies). In 1944, due to mass arrests, they housed Russians, Ukrainians, Jews, and French. Conditions were dirty and overcrowded.

Block 32 housed Red Army prisoners (POWs). Later it was called the “NN block”. “NN” stands for Nacht and Nebel (Night and Fog). The NN prisoners were politicals who were singled out for harsher treatment than other prisoners. The intent was to have them disappear without a trace into ‘the night and fog’.

Tents were set up in late 1944 due to the large influx of prisoners from other camps; there were no bunks, blankets, toilets or heat and many women perished.



*'Distress in the Tent'*  
(wall painting in the  
first Ravensbrück camp  
museum 1959  
until 1984, V871 E2).  
[1939 - 1945](#)  
[Ravensbrück](#)  
[concentration camp |](#)  
[Mahn-und](#)  
[Gedenkstätte](#)  
[Ravensbrück](#)  
([ravensbrueck-sbg.de](#))

## Children and Youth

### Jugendschutzlager Uckermark (Youth Care Camp)

Pregnant women, babies and children were also incarcerated at Ravensbrück. Children arrived with their mothers who were imprisoned at the camp; pregnant women gave birth to babies in the camp. Young children of both sexes were housed with their mothers. The children had to line up for the roll calls together with the women, which often required them to stand for hours. During the day, they had to stay indoors. <sup>(7)</sup> Girls older than 12 had to work with the women in the workshops and help them with the heaviest labour. Boys older than 12 were moved to the men's camp. <sup>(7)</sup> Only a few of these children survived the war. Older girls were sent to Uckermark while older boys were sent to other camps.

**Zoya Lebed, daughter of Daria (Oda) Hnatkivska Lebed**, was only 18 months old when imprisoned in the Zellenbau with her mother between February and November 1944.



*«Every night, as the door to some cell opened, someone was taken to their death. We also waited for our turn. Then I thought, if that time comes, how am I to save Zoya? Should I hold her so the bullet hits her first or can I somehow protect her from death? Such stupid, crazy thoughts, but that was my daily reality. They took Zoya away several times and didn't return her all day. Each time I thought I would never see her again. Later, the guard told me that Zoya had been taken for anthropological assessment. Blond with blue eyes, she was a good candidate for an Aryan child. Had the shape of her face been different, they would have taken her away from me.»<sup>(19)</sup>*

*(Daria Hnatkivska Lebed relates)*

The youth camp Uckermark opened in June 1942 and was located one kilometre from the main camp – it was intended for the ‘so-called’ re-education and rehabilitation of ‘delinquents’. It housed 1,000 young girls aged 14 to 18. Forced sterilization of Sinti and Roma (Gypsy) girls, including those who were eight years old <sup>(5)</sup> was practiced here. In early 1944, Uckermark was closed to youth and became an extermination camp for sick or weakened prisoners – though it was still called a ‘convalescent camp’ it became a selection area of prisoners destined for the gas chamber. <sup>(7,11)</sup>

In 1944, thousands of children were brought to Germany, as forced labour, from areas of eastern Europe occupied by the Germans. They could be sent to a concentration camp simply for stealing a potato. There are rare reports and few documents that specifically mention Ukrainian girls who were imprisoned in Ravensbrück.

In the winter of 1943, in a convoy of girls aged 8-14 from Kharkiv, there were 20 girls identified as Ukrainian - all were sent to the gas chamber. <sup>(21)</sup>

It is documented that 17 Ukrainian girls were accused of sabotage at the Mecklenburg factory and were shot to death. <sup>(21)</sup>



## The Men's Camp at Ravensbrück

Men were brought to Ravensbrück on temporary assignments for heavy labour projects, and were housed in separate barracks. In 1941, they had three barracks with their own infirmary and kitchen which were surrounded by a high wall on the eastern periphery of the women's camp. By the end of 1943 there were 8,000-20,000 male prisoners (over 80% were politicals - mainly Polish, German, Russian and French; 16% were Jewish).

Men had work assignments both inside and outside the camp: some operated the gas chamber and others worked in the women's camp but were forbidden to fraternize. About half of the male prisoners died at Ravensbrück.

Towards the end of the war the remaining men were recruited for the anti-communist army destined for the Eastern Front. The men's barracks were closed on March 13, 1945, and any remaining men were sent to CC Sachsenhausen.

### Arrival at the Camp



*«I cannot remember how I ended up at Ravensbrück. The camp lies in front of me, a series of barracks enclosed by barbed wire. Right away, you can see that the camp is strictly guarded. On the sides stand towers with guards armed with machine guns. All the inmates of the camp wear "pasiaky", blue-and-white-striped outfits with large black numbers on the back and on the left side of the chest. During medical examinations, they shaved our heads. Ada Kotko was embarrassed when she came out with her head shaven. She looked pretty bizarre without her hair. I laughed lightly. The*

*guard saw this and hit me hard in the face... The large rooms had densely arranged three-storey bunks for sleeping. Each bunk was designed for two persons. My partner was Ania Khorkava... In August 1944, we were transported to a concentration camp in Neubrandenburg. It wasn't any different here. Three-storey bunks, clouds of fleas, roll-calls, bullying, the same hell as in Ravensbrück. My cohabitant here was Olenka Wityk... We were assigned to work in the aircraft factory. I worked in the chemistry laboratory with Liuba Shevchuk... In our room, there was an elderly peasant woman whom we affectionately called Granny. Her husband had been executed because of his involvement in the UPA, while she and her family were incarcerated in concentration camps. Granny had a golden heart, was kind, noble, and intelligent. She called us her children, comforted us, and prayed for us. I was always a pessimist and believed the Germans would kill us all... However, all the prisoners incarcerated in Neubrandenburg, including Granny, were set free.»<sup>(22)</sup>*

**(Maria Orenchuk Marushchak explains)**

Women prisoners arrived by train at the town of Fürstenberg and were either marched the three kilometres or were transported to the Ravensbrück camp.

On arrival, the prisoners had to turn in all luggage, jewellery, and money. They were stripped naked and sent to the showers; the head was inspected for lice and shaved (when hair grew in, it was covered with a bandana).

The prisoners were then paraded naked in front of doctors, dentists, and SS soldiers; they were given dental and humiliating medical examinations to search for hidden valuables. X-rays were taken. <sup>(11,23)</sup>

Outfits provided were a uniform consisting of a coarse grey shirt, a blue-grey striped dress, half apron, bandana, and wooden shoes (they had winter and summer outfits until 1943); after 1943, prisoners used their own clothes, but a black X was painted on the back.

A prisoner identification number and a triangle were added on the sleeve - depending on nationality or designation. As mentioned earlier (under Ukrainian Prisoners – Who were they?), Ukrainian prisoners were considered to be political and given a red triangle with the letter 'P', 'R', 'U' or 'SU'. Each prisoner was required to shout out her identification number at the two required roll calls per day.

*«Our shoes were made of wood and in part canvas. They were extremely stiff and hard, cutting into our feet as we walked. Also, our dresses were made from cellulose fibers, which absorbed a lot of moisture, becoming tight and rigid. With each step we took, searing pain would shoot up our legs. We couldn't treat our wounds as we had no bandages, no medication. We had absolutely nothing.»*

*«Winter was wet and cold; everything was frozen... In rain, snow and strong winds, we still had to push those wheelbarrows. It was terrible... True, April arrived, but my legs were so scarred by frostbite. They didn't provide us with stockings, saying summer was approaching and stockings were not needed.» <sup>(24)</sup>*

*(Lida Ukarma Marciuk (Prisoner #19206) interview)*

Each prisoner was issued a blanket, bowl, and wooden spoon; after 1943, due to shortages, they had to barter or steal these supplies.

A prisoner kept any small possessions in a small bag on herself, so that it was not stolen.

**The treatment of the women, starting with their arrival, served to dehumanize them and to rob them of their identity.**



*Pictures Inside Ravensbrück, German Concentration Camp Exclusively for Women During World War II ~ Vintage Everyday January 21, 2015*

## Living Conditions and Labour at the Camp

### A Prisoner's Daily Life



*«From that time on, I was no longer a person but a number. Every morning, at 6 a.m. - morning roll call, and then work at the Siemens underground factory. For breakfast, they gave us 100 g of bread and coffee substitute. Swedish and Belgian women who worked at the factory gave us pieces of bread, stopped the machines for 10-15 minutes so that we could rest, and related some world news to us.»<sup>(25)</sup>*

*(Vira Franko (Prisoner #34297) explains)*

At **3-4 a.m.** sirens wailed and room supervisors and block supervisors woke prisoners. Prisoners washed up, toileted and made up their beds. Table supervisors and helpers got ersatz coffee and bread rations and distributed them.

At **5 a.m.** there was a roll call (Appellplatz) by the blokova (block supervisor). Prisoners lined up in rows of ten; each block had its own place. Roll call could last 20 minutes to several hours. Prisoners who died overnight in the barracks had to be brought out for the count. The block supervisor reported to the overseer. Once all prisoners were accounted for, the dismissal siren sounded, and prisoners reported for work.

Prisoners were assigned work at Ravensbrück camp (e.g. Siemens factory, SS Textiles, forestry, or construction crews, etc.) or were sent to one of the sub-camp factories (e.g., airplane or munitions factories). Workshops were supervised by SS men and women and each prisoner had quotas.



Опісля години ранішнього апелю, стійки на лагровій площі — байдуже, чи літом, чи в холодній осінній мжичці, або серед зимового морозу.

*(Morning roll call followed, prisoners standing in the camp square, whether in the summer heat, the damp chill of autumn, or the frost of winter.)*

Art by Olena  
Wityk Wojtowycz  
(Prisoner #19207)  
[RavensbrückArt.pdf](#)  
([dpcamps.org](#))

*«Every morning, after roll call in the camp yard, we formed an ArbeitsKommando (work team) for a long day of grueling work at the Siemens Werke factory secluded in the woods near Ravensbrück concentration camp. It was located on a wide plateau, surrounded by trees and a barbed electric fence. The woods surrounding the factory rose like an impenetrable black wall.*

*The long column of women stumbled toward the forest. Shouting incessantly, the kapos advanced with us; the dogs barked furiously. I heard a few words, some short, effervescent phrases... It was Hanna, who was tottering behind me.*

*In the morning gloom, the inmates entered through the factory gate, and took their place for a twelve-hour day of grueling labour. Hanna worked beside me on the conveyor, hurriedly sorting various disks, wires, bolts, mirrors. Everything around us became blurred. The machines hummed loudly, echoing across the large room. The conveyors rolled on and on, slithering like snakes before our eyes... and the Gestapo overseers watched us intently, almost as if waiting for us to make a wrong move.» <sup>(26)</sup>*

*(Olha Froliak Eliashevskia (Prisoner #49061) memoir)*





*Pictures Inside Ravensbrück, German Concentration Camp Exclusively for Women During World War II ~ Vintage Everyday*

At **noon** there was a lunch break for 30-40 min.

**5 p.m.** signalled the end of the workday; after 1941 work was extended to 7 p.m.<sup>(11)</sup>

At **7 p.m.** a dinner of soup (usually turnip and cabbage with few vegetables and rarely meat) was handed out in the barracks by the room supervisor - prisoners ate their meal mostly standing up.<sup>(23)</sup>

The evening roll call followed; it was often longer than the morning one and prisoners were forbidden to talk.

At **9 p.m.** lights were turned off and the night watch would do spot checks  
On weekends there was a **5 a.m.** roll call followed by a mail call.

Prisoners worked half a day on Saturdays until 1944; thereafter they worked a full day.

## Prisoner Work Details



**Forced Labour at Ravensbrück KZ.**

*Photo: Bundesarchiv of Germany; File: [Bundesarchiv Bild 183-1985-0417-15, Ravensbrück, Konzentrationslager.jpg](#) - Wikimedia Commons*

### Forced Labour

In the first two years of the camp's existence, prisoners worked to build and enlarge the camp and maintain its daily operation. Women were detailed to build roads, grade land, set up huts and haul heavy loads. Others had to toil in the workshops sewing, weaving, and knitting to meet the requirements of the camp – there were numerous 'work assignment lists'. In 1942, huge production workshops were added, for sewing, weaving, shredding, and fur-making to clothe inmates as well as the German armed forces.

Siemens & Halske AG had a production facility, built on-site, which consisted of 20 buildings, including six residential buildings. It started production in August 1942. The workers were female prisoners selected for their dexterity because they had to assemble different types of electrical components and coils for the war effort. The Siemens site was surrounded with a barbed wire fence attached to concrete poles and four watchtowers. <sup>(7)</sup>

*«We finally arrived at the Siemens factory. In the beginning, we didn't know what it was or why we were there. We produced parts for bombs. Of course, I wasn't happy about working in arms production, but it happened. Workplace sabotage would've been possible if we'd been able to work in groups. But here, each woman was responsible for her own, individual task. If she deliberately damaged a part, she would be punished severely... »<sup>(24)</sup>*

*(Lida Ukarma Marciuk (Prisoner #19206) interview)*

*«Infinitely tired: The work I was supposed to do was to regulate metal contacts on a tiny part. I sat all day without getting up from the workbench. The hands became numb because I had to hold them up all the time. The eyes burned. My back became stiff. Nevertheless, it was better than being outside in the frost. But, every day I became infinitely tired.»<sup>(27)</sup>*

*(Olga Titarenko née Sosnovskaja (Prisoner #14603) plaque)*

## Sub-Camps

In 1943, Ravensbrück became a major administrative and working enterprise for **over 40 sub-camps** located near armament factories in Germany; prisoners were sent to work there due to shortage of labourers in Germany. Many Ukrainian prisoners were sent to HASAG-Leipzig, HASAG-Altenburg, HASAG-Meuselwitz, Polte Magdeburg, Wolfen and Dortmund labour camps, and Abteroda (Eisenach) – most camps were under the supervision of CC Buchenwald.

Ravensbrück had a close working relationship with CC Buchenwald and some women were transported back and forth between the camps.



*«Life was better at the camp near Flossenburg. They sent us to work at a factory that repaired spare parts for aircraft. I checked instruments at a table. A Ukrainian, Andriyka Hurna, worked in the kitchen. From time to time, she brought us a few potatoes or chunks of bread. There were four barracks at the camp and the Ukrainian women had their own. We sewed the letter “U” on our outfits by ourselves, because we’d been assigned the letter “P”. The Germans believed that Halychyna [Galicia] was in Poland.»<sup>(28)</sup>*

*(Iryna Byenko Shul (Prisoner #33344) interview)*

## Social Life and Friendships

Prisoners were allowed free time on Sunday until early Monday morning. They could wash laundry and write letters.

During this free time, propaganda music was played constantly and loudly over the camp loudspeaker.

Many socialized and promenaded on camp roads with friends (there were strict rules regarding fraternization). Many women developed 'social groups' within their barracks - often based on culture or nationality - and older women took care of younger girls.

Social activities were organized by inmates including music groups, poetry readings, performances, lectures, classes, and prayer meetings; through these activities, women helped each other survive. <sup>(11)</sup>

Mail delivery occurred on Sundays and letters had to be written in German as they were all examined by the SS. Ukrainian prisoners from the Soviet Union were deprived of the right to correspond. Receipt of parcels was allowed after 1942 and had to be opened in front of overseers who at times took goods for themselves rather than give them to the intended prisoner. Prisoners traded and bartered items when possible; stealing was not uncommon.



*«**June 1944** "I am well. Why aren't you writing to me as often as you did when I was in prison? Could you please send me a jumper with long sleeves, one set of underwear, a dark coloured apron, stockings, woollen socks, soap, laundry powder, wooden clogs, hand trowel, salt and food ... some raw vegetables and fruit."*

***August 1944** "I am healthy, and all is well with me. You don't need to worry especially you dear Mummy.... If it's possible, could you please send more bread and sugar. The clothes package caused me trouble – all the clothes and blouses you sent were taken*

*away...Please do not send any money or clothes. Please send me some talcum powder, a brush for laundry washing and hand cream."*

***November 1944** "Please don't send any leather goods as they are not allowed and besides, I don't have any boots. Could you send me a cap (a hooded cap?) Could you please send me some sewing needles (one large one for wool), handkerchiefs, salt, shoe polish and cream. As far as food is concerned, I will be very grateful for whatever you can send as it helps me out. I don't know how I will ever be able to repay you."» <sup>(29)</sup>*

*(Liubow Wynnyzkyi Szewczuk (Prisoner #33682) letters)*

Books, diaries, journals, drawings and notebooks were forbidden, and kept hidden by the prisoners.<sup>(11)</sup> If found, they were confiscated by guards and the woman was severely punished.



**Liubow Wynnzyki Szewczuk (Prisoner #33682)** compiled and secreted this little address book (1.5 inches (4cms) x 1-1/8 inches (3cms) in the hem of her dress; she listed names of friends, in the concentration camp, that she hoped to keep in touch with once they were freed.



Front (tryzub) and back side (St. George) of a memento (28 mm, w 25 mm) made out of saved pieces of bread by **Olena Wityk Wojtowycz (Prisoner #19207)**. She dedicated it to fellow prisoner, Lidochka (Lida Ukarma Marciuk) and it symbolized the close relationship between prisoners.



flower, 19 mm, w 12 mm  
(probably made out of glass)



cross, 12 mm, w 10 mm  
(made from a toothbrush)



chain with broken cross  
120 mm, w 19 mm (made out of bread)

(Source: private collection of Oksana Marciuk)



## Punishments

Surprise 'shakedowns' by the SS guards were common; inmates were taken outside and forced to undress in front of overseers, camp leaders and soldiers - clothes were scrutinized and rooms were searched for hidden items, which were immediately confiscated (e.g., books, diaries, journals, drawings, notebooks).<sup>(11)</sup>

The simplest and common punishment was to have the prisoner stand for a long time (often barefoot, in the cold or snow). Sometimes food was withheld; the prisoner was locked inside a barrack and kept in darkness with no heat or food.

*«We knew what to expect if we tried to escape - we were ordered out of the barracks barefoot into the snow, and remained standing there until the escapees were apprehended. We huddled close together so that no one would fall down, as we knew there would be dire consequences. Once, we were kept standing for three days... Healthy girls were vaccinated with some kind of bacteria. They performed some sort of experiments on them. I have wounds and scars on my body that will stay with me for the rest of my life.»<sup>(30)</sup>*

***(Vira Franko (Prisoner #34297) remembers)***

Prisoners were savagely punched, kicked, or beaten if they rebelled or defied authority. A Punishment Block (Zellenbau) was segregated by a barbed wire fence and prisoners were sent there for major violations such as stealing, talking back, etc.

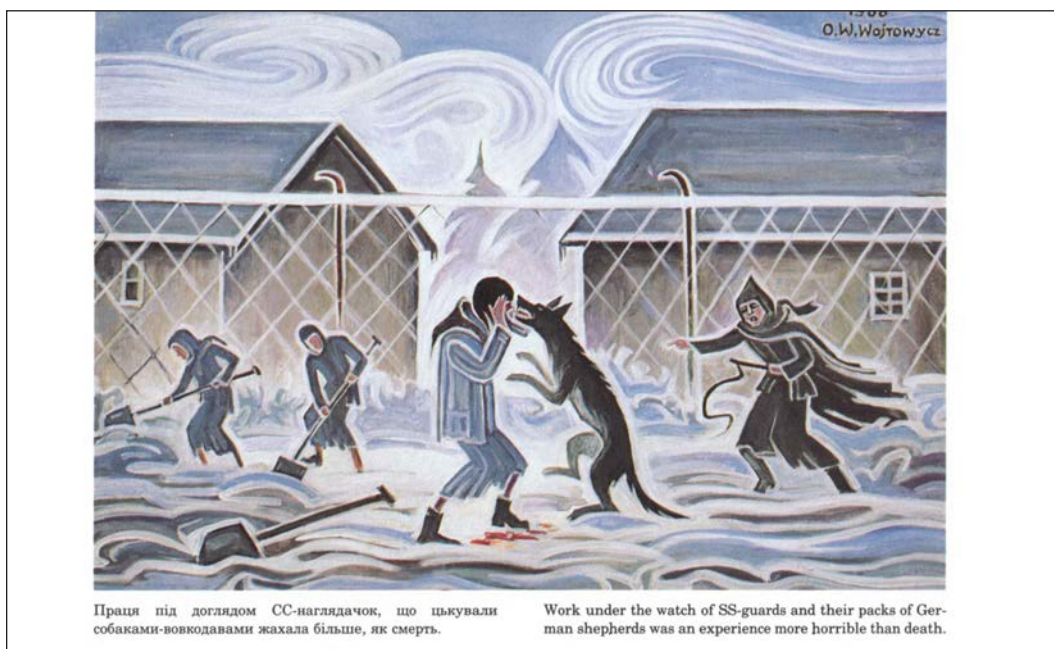
There was a punishment block at the camp (Prügelstrafe) – a prisoner was strapped onto a wooden horse and was given twenty-five lashes on the buttocks and the thighs, using an ox-whip, and up to 75 strokes in two to three sessions.<sup>(23)</sup>

Other prisoners were sprayed with cold water or attacked by ferocious dogs.

Some were punished by other prisoners who were given cigarettes or extra rations as a reward.



*The Punishment Block*  
*(Dachau KZ: KZ RAVENSBRÜCK-WOMEN*  
*INCARCERATED PART 4)*



*(Slave Camps in Germany, R-S (dpcamps.org)\_Ravensbruc3.jpg (3084×2214)*  
*(dpcamps.org)*

**Art and text by Olena Wityk Wojtowycz (Prisoner #19207)**

*«In our barracks we could often hear gunfire from the surrounding woods. The shots were supposedly from fox- or rabbit- hunts, but we knew better. Women summoned to the Lagerführer rarely returned to the barracks. I often imagined my last minutes in those woods, but it is a wonder that God grants people in such situations a strange apathy that perhaps protects them from complete psychological breakdown. I had no fear of death. But there was the painful thought that my parents would never know when and where their daughter died.»<sup>(31)</sup>*

## Executions

Prisoners were executed for sabotage, attempted escape, conspiracy, or espionage.

Women were shot by an execution squad away from the main camp, in the 'shooting gallery' near the crematorium, and their bodies were thrown into the crematorium. Others received lethal injections or were sent to the gallows. A gas chamber was built on-site in June 1944.

In the spring of 1944, 17 Ukrainian girls were accused of sabotage at the Mecklenburg factory and were shot to death. <sup>(21)</sup>

## Camp Infirmary

The infirmary or hospital of the main camp was called the Revier. It contained an office, a clinic, an operating theatre, and the following blocks for prisoners with specific medical conditions: #11 (internal disease patients), #10 (tuberculosis and mentally ill patients), #9 (surgery), #8 for erysipelas (bacterial infections) and diarrhea patients (called the isolation or cholera block), #7 for internal disease patients who did not work outside the camp, and #6 was the 'death block' for prisoners with typhoid fever (which accounted for 50% of deaths). <sup>(10)</sup>

*«Night is falling... the infirmary hums with noise and painful cries. All the beds are occupied by ageless human skeletons. Some inmates lift their heads, fragile skulls with abnormally sunken eyes. Yellowish, sagging skin, often covered with abscesses. Others cry out and talk loudly of their hunger, of death... trying vainly to liberate themselves from this nightmare; yet others lie silent, trapped within themselves.»*

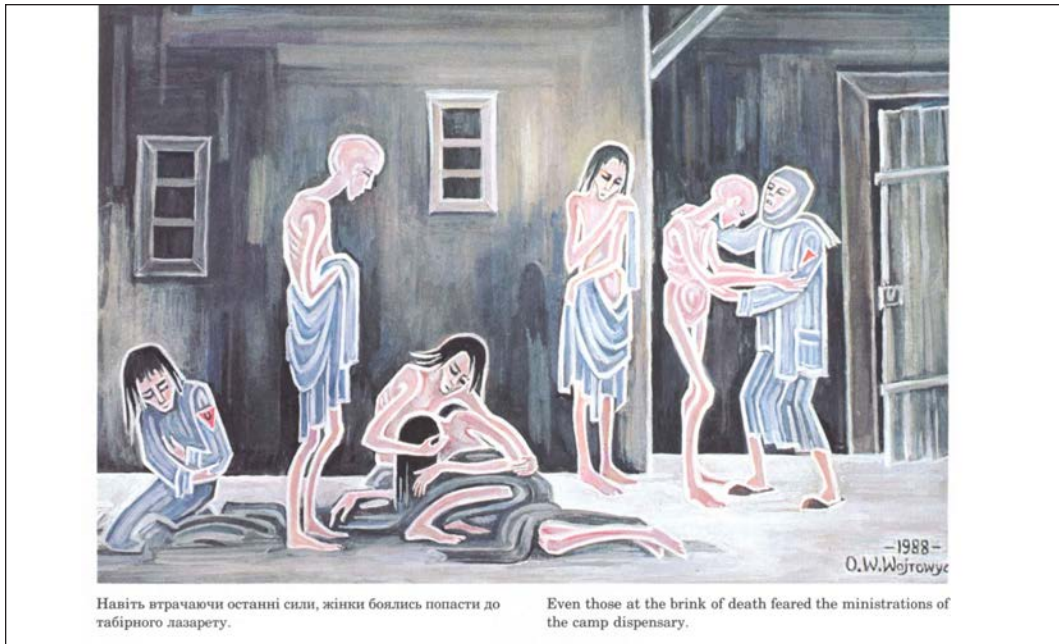
*«One straw mattress... for three sick women! The living often find themselves lying beside a dead sister, but they are too weak to get up and inform the "nurses". The stronger ones push the dead body away, thus claiming more space on the mattress. The body lands on the floor with a loud thud, catching the "nurse's" attention. The "nurse" curses angrily, and sets upon the "perpetrator", beating her mercilessly across the face. For this "misdemeanor", the woman is deprived of food and water for the entire day.»<sup>(32)</sup>*  
*(Olha Froliak Eliashevskya (Prisoner #49061) memoir)*

The job of staff at the Revier was to determine if the prisoner was capable of working. Pink slips were given to those not able to work; prisoners were put to death (by phenol injection, poison, or overdose) if they were weak, old,



mentally ill, or sick with tuberculosis, typhus, pneumonia, etc. By the summer of 1941 prisoners were terrified of being ill and going to the Revier as some never came out.

It was common to lay two-three persons in one bed, especially in the typhus and tuberculosis blocks, as these patients were not expected to survive.



*Art by Olena Wityk Wojtowycz (Prisoner #19207)  
Slave Camps in Germany, R-S ([dpcamps.org](http://dpcamps.org))*

Prisoners with medical training were responsible for prisoner medical care. Red Army nurses banded together to improve conditions at the Revier. Some kept secret records of arrivals, punishments, and death; they helped some prisoners survive by altering records.

In January 1942 a euthanasia program was initiated - it was called the 'Healing and Nursing Care Facility'. A systematic extermination began of the weak and old, the mentally ill, and patients with tuberculosis.

Patients with psychiatric problems were kept naked in a small 'Idiotenstube' room (mad chamber) with half rations of food and water and no toilet.<sup>(23)</sup> Once a mental disorder was determined, the person concerned would receive an intravenous injection of phenol (administered by the SS nurses), which resulted in death after a few minutes. Tuberculosis patients (in block #10) were dealt with in the same way.

Prisoners considered 'asocials' were sterilized by X-rays and injections (Himmler instituted a mass murder campaign of concentration camp inmates, under the code name 'Sonderbehandlung' i.e., special treatment).

From February 1945, patients were no longer put to death using phenol injections; instead, once a week they were put on a truck and driven to the gas chamber.<sup>(10)</sup>

*«In Ravensbrück, the looming end of war brought no end to the killings. Adolf Winkelmann, a camp doctor, was ceaseless in his culling. He picked out women with swollen legs. He picked out women with white hair. He picked out women with faces he didn't like. He had them drawn up in ranks of five. He watched their legs as they marched past. "From time to time, he would raise his hand," Dufournier (Denise Dufournier, a lawyer and resistance fighter), wrote. At his mark, a nurse would pull the selected woman from the line and lead her to her death.»*<sup>(33)</sup>

*(Warnica, Richard. The untold story of the convoy to hell: how Canadians helped liberate the women of Ravensbrück. National Post January 27, 2020)*

## Pregnancies, Abortion and Childbirth

Forced abortions of pregnant prisoners were common.

Until 1942, newborn babies were immediately separated from their mothers, and many were drowned or thrown into a sealed room where they died, as mothers had to return to work immediately and the newborn had no nourishment.<sup>(34)</sup>

Later, newborn children were sometimes allowed to survive, but due to the lack of food and the unsanitary conditions, many of these babies died very soon.

Records suggest 850 infants died or were killed at Ravensbrück. Between September 1944 and April 1945, **522** babies were born in Ravensbrück<sup>(7)</sup> – **only 40** survived.

Between February and March 1945 all remaining children, from infants to early teenagers, were transported to CC Bergen-Belsen; many died from freezing temperatures on the train trip and others from starvation.

## Medical Experiments

Unethical medical experiments were done, including bone and nerve transplants, as well as purposeful infections and sulfonamide experiments. Artificial insemination, and injections of syphilis bacteria and cancer cells were performed.

From August 1942 to August 1943, Dr. Karl Franz Gebhardt coordinated experimental surgeries, without the use of anesthesia, on 86 young (mainly Polish women and one Ukrainian woman named Hania <sup>(1)</sup> involved in resistance groups, as well as one German woman and ten mentally ill patients) - they were called "Die Kaninchen" ("The Rabbits"). He cut their legs from ankle to thigh and infected the wounds with bacteria, dirt, and glass to assess gas gangrene. Some women were operated on several times; seven died.

Dr. Ludwig Stumpfegger severed muscles and broke bones of 20 women, to observe the process of bone, muscle, and nerve regeneration. Surviving victims were permanently disabled, both physically and mentally.

Ten women were taken to Hohenlychen Sanitorium (12 kilometres away and run by Himmler's personal physician, Karl Franz Gebhardt) where they underwent brutal surgical experiments; their limbs were amputated, and their bones were transplanted; a Ukrainian woman had her collar bone removed. <sup>(1)</sup>

In March 1945 three German physicians continued to perform medical experiments, without anesthesia, and removed the leg veins of several prisoners, including Ukrainian prisoner Maria Sanjko, who died; her friend, Anna Levandowska survived the same procedure. <sup>(21)</sup>



*«Several weeks after our operations we were taken on the stretchers to another ward. We were put where there was room, on the beds (two in one bed), on tables and on the floor. They took off our dressing and I saw my leg for the first time. The wound was from my ankle to my knee and as wide as a large hand and full of greenish-grey, stinking pus, in which I could see what looked like long white strings and swarms of small, fat little white worms with black heads. The sight of this and probably because the odour struck me straight in the face, made me vomit. I looked around the room. All the legs looked the same.» <sup>(35,36)</sup>*  
*(Stefania Lotocka (Prisoner #7707) relates)*

## Extermination of Prisoners

Dead prisoners were taken to the Morgue where bodies were checked for hidden items; gold teeth were removed, then the bodies were heaped on piles to be cremated.

Initially, bodies were burned in the Fürstenberg crematorium, but as of April 1943, two ovens were built at Ravensbrück. These two ovens were in constant

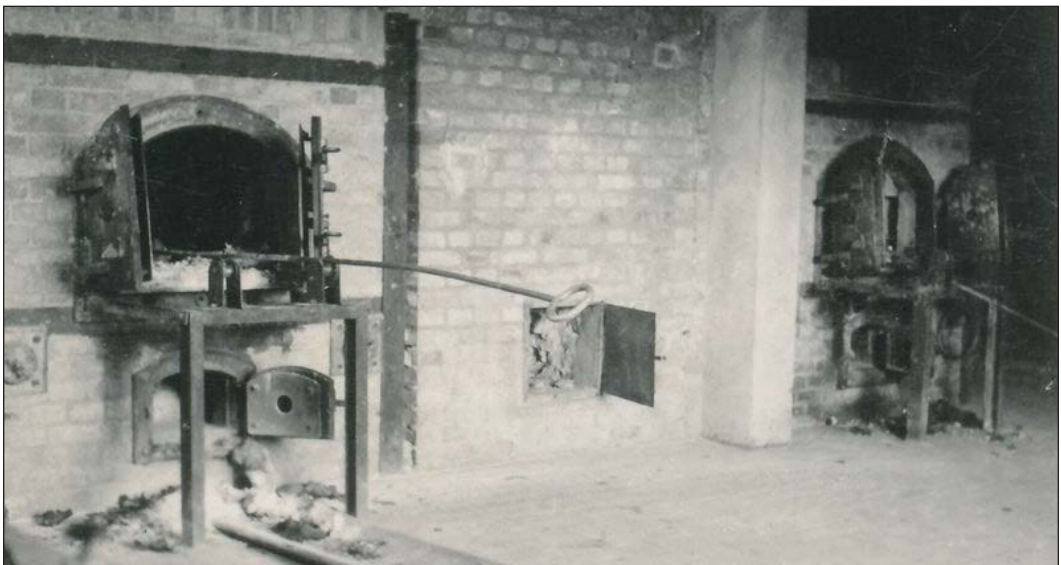
operation as of August 1944 (150-170 prisoners died per day in 1944) <sup>(5)</sup> – and the crematorium could not keep up with the backlog of corpses.

In April 1945, the SS command burnt documents in the crematorium so as to obliterate all evidence of their atrocities. They also executed, by poisoning, male prisoners who had worked at the crematorium. <sup>(5)</sup>



*«Piles of corpses lie in the Ravensbrück crematorium – starved emaciated women, some who are still alive but can no longer move. They are like skeletons – skin and bones, shaved heads, swollen knees, and thin stick-like legs. They are still alive. They beckon with their deeply sunken eyes. The guards load them like firewood onto trucks and take them to the crematorium for incineration.» <sup>(37)</sup>*

***(Anna (Nusia) Duma Shewczuk (Prisoner #28954) interview)***



*The crematorium – interior view; two brick incinerators with remains of ashes, May 1945 (Photographer unknown, memorial Ravensbrück, Ph -Nr. 1061)*

[\*1939 - 1945 Ravensbrück concentration camp | Mahn- und Gedenkstätte Ravensbrück \(ravensbrueck-sbg.de\)\*](http://1939-1945.Ravensbrueck.concentration.camp|Mahn-undGedenkstaetteRavensbrueck(ravensbrueck-sbg.de))

Between 1942 and 1944, the Nazis transported prisoners from Ravensbrück to other camps for extermination in gas chambers (e.g., CC Bernburg, CC Hartheim, CC Auschwitz, CC Majdanek).

On June 22, 1944, the Nazis built a small gas chamber (SS code name: Mittwerda) at Ravensbrück. Female inmates selected to be gassed were told that they were going to “Mittwerda”, a fictional place. This deception was employed by the Nazis to maintain prisoner compliance and to avoid the possibility of prisoner resistance. Zyklon B crystalline hydrogen gas was used.

After December 1944, the Nazis were gassing about 170 prisoners daily, and by April 1945 between 2,200 and 2,300 prisoners had been killed in the gas chamber. <sup>(5)</sup> *(Other references state 5,000-6,000 died in the gas chamber. <sup>(1)</sup>)*

On April 2, 1945, the Nazis destroyed the gas chamber complex at Ravensbrück.

## April 1945 - the War ends/Liberation of Ravensbrück

On April 27-28, as the Red Army approached Ravensbrück, all remaining prisoners, well enough to walk, were led out of the camp on a forced march (death march - ‘Todesmarsch’) to the Baltic Sea to drown, as Commandant Fritz Suhren wanted to erase evidence of extermination practices at the camp. Many prisoners were weak and died along the way. Some managed to escape while others were liberated by western forces.



*«On April 27, 1945, as the eastern front approached the camp, the guards decided to evacuate the concentration camp. Fifteen thousand (15,000) prisoners were forced on a “death march” - a march to the west; that’s when Zoya escaped and miraculously remained alive.» <sup>(38)</sup>*

*(Zoya Oleksandrivna Samojlenko Odajnyk memoir)*

*«They were marched through the gates in ranks of five. Three hundred women, all of them starving, beaten, barely alive. They were spies and resistance fighters. Doctors, nurses. An art historian. One old woman, clinging to life, who’s last and only wish was to die in France.*

*They wore a strange pastiche of civilian clothes – prisoners pushed out of a death camp in mouldering frocks and at least one gown.*

*For days they’d been culled. Culled for swollen legs. Culled for noble names. Culled if their heads had been too recently shaved. They had been lined up and winnowed. Stripped, showered, left waiting for two days and nights in the cold. Then winnowed again. Lined up again. Stripped again. Showered. And now here they were, outside the gates.*

*Behind them they left only death. By starvation. By cold. By beating, neglect and medical torture. In the last months, there had been death by gas, too – in the chamber and in the van. And death by marching – to other camps in a collapsing Reich, pitted by madness and craters, and to nowhere at all.*

*Out they marched, away from 30,000 of their fellow prisoners and the ashes of countless more, layered on the flowerbeds to help them grow. They staggered down the road toward the ragged woods. Round the bend they went and suddenly, there they were.»<sup>(33)</sup>*  
*(Warnica, Richard. The untold story of the convoy to hell: how Canadians helped liberate the women of Ravensbrück. National Post January 27, 2020)*

On April 30, the Red Army entered Ravensbrück and found 3,500 malnourished and sick women. Ever since the advancing Red Army had crossed the German border, its soldiers had engaged in sexual rampage and now they even raped these starved concentration camp women.<sup>(39)</sup> The remaining women from Ukraine, Belorussia and Russia were released, but never free. They were considered 'traitors' by Stalin, and were forced to undergo screening by Soviet security services and then sent to the East to prison-concentration camps in the Soviet Gulag. These women paid highly for their 'treason' with their freedom and often with their lives.

*Iryna Byenko Shul (Prisoner #33344) reminisces that after the war, she managed to avoid deportation to Siberia because she returned to Peremyshl [present day Przemyśl] following her release from Ravensbrück. And then, the Polish government immediately initiated a program of forced deportation of all Ukrainians from Poland. In Ukraine, she was able to keep secret her incarceration in a Nazi concentration camp.<sup>(40)</sup>*

*«I was able to survive the concentration camp because, as a child, I lived through the Holodomor genocide and Soviet collectivization. From age four, I was exposed to cold, starvation and trauma. These life experiences hardened me and gave me the strength to survive in Ravensbrück and Buchenwald, where people died like flies. My most frightening memory is the feeling of humiliation. It was more acute than cold, hunger, beatings, and impending death. The nearness of death inexorably raises questions about the meaning of life.»<sup>(41)</sup>*

*(Hanna Semenivna Krytska explains)*



## EPILOGUE

Few Ukrainian women, who survived the atrocities of Ravensbrück, have communicated or documented their experiences at this concentration camp. Those who returned to the USSR were often afraid and hid their histories. Women, who were fortunate enough to emigrate to western countries, wanted to forget the horrors of their past at the camp and rarely spoke about this nightmarish period of their lives (other than with fellow survivors). Many of their own children never heard or knew what they had lived through during the war.

The fate of many women (Ukrainians, Belorussians, Russians) repatriated to the USSR was devastatingly harsh and severe.

According to historian Tetiana Pastushenko, the Stalinist regime regarded these women as deserters and 'traitors to the Motherland'. Before being released and allowed to return to their homeland, they were thoroughly screened for political integrity by security officers of the NKVD and NKGB, and by counterintelligence officers from SMERSH (Russian: Death to Spies). For Soviet citizens, this meant new repressions and most often, several months' detention in repatriation and so-called filtration camps. Women who were not sentenced to the Gulag, forced labour camps, also experienced numerous difficulties after the war. Many of them could not return to their pre-war professions and struggled to build and maintain positive life relationships. Most importantly, they had to remain silent about their incarceration in the Nazi concentration camps. Silence and fear were the cruellest punishment.

And yet... memories surface, and we hear their powerful voices reminding us to remember and to honour them!      May Their Memory Be Eternal!

*«Hanna's frozen body lies beyond the fir forest. Her frail figure remains before my eyes; it refuses to disappear in the surrounding haze... Although the trees around her may seem drowsy... at her feet, life is raging...living creatures awaken, creating unique noises of freedom. The fallen heroes have become part of the forest and lake - a refuge, a temple and a bastion of freedom.» <sup>(26)</sup>*  
*(Olha Froliak Eliashevskya (Prisoner #49061) memoir)*



Ravensbrück Memorial by Emile Morlaix,  
(April 23, 1955);  
Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris, France .  
Ukrainian Echo 62, 40 (3380), October  
26, 2010, pg. 47

<http://diasporiana.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/books/8594/file.pdf>

Plaque erected in 2011, in memory  
of Ukrainian prisoners, by the  
Government of Ukraine, on the  
original camp wall,  
at Mahn- und Gedenkstätte /  
Memorial Site, Ravensbrück  
(photo Oksana Marciuk)





# GLOSSARY

**Asocials** - individuals considered to be socially unacceptable as they do not conform to the rules, behaviours, or standards of a specific society (e.g., Nazi Germany). At Ravensbrück, asocials included lesbians, prostitutes, homosexuals, drug addicts, Roma and Sinti (Gypsies). They were marked with a black triangle.

**Bandera, Stepan** - (January 1, 1909 – October 15, 1959) leader of OUN(b), the more militant faction of OUN (Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists). He was one of the initiators of the Proclamation of the Restoration of Ukrainian Statehood in Lviv on June 30, 1941, immediately after the German occupation of the city. The Germans rejected this proclamation and arrested Bandera on July 5, 1941. He was transferred to Sachsenhausen concentration camp and kept under surveillance until September 1944. Stepan Bandera was assassinated by KGB agent Bogdan Stashinskiy in Munich, Germany.

**Communism** - a political theory derived from Karl Marx, advocating a classless society in which all property and resources are state-owned, and each person works and is paid according to their abilities and needs.

**Concentration Camp** - camp in which people are detained or confined, usually under harsh conditions and without regard to legal norms of arrest and imprisonment.

**Crematorium** - a building in a concentration camp that housed the ovens that burned the bodies of dead inmates.

**Death March** - as Allied forces approached Nazi camps, the SS organized marches of concentration camp inmates, over long distances and under heavy guard and brutal conditions, to the Baltic Sea to be driven into the water and drowned or shot. This was done to keep large numbers of concentration camp prisoners from falling into Allied hands. Many prisoners escaped along the way; some SS guards fled along the route and prisoners became free.

**Gestapo (Geheime Staatspolizei)** - official secret police of Nazi Germany.

**Gulag (Glavnoye Upravleniye Lagerey)** - penal system of forced labour camps and accompanying prison or detention camps, especially for political prisoners in the Soviet Union.

**Himmler, Heinrich** - (1900 – May 23, 1945) Reichsführer (Reich Leader) of the Schutzstaffel (SS) and second most powerful man in the Third Reich. Architect of Hitler's extermination program of Jews.

**Hitler, Adolf** - (April 20, 1889 – April 30, 1945) leader (Führer) of Germany during

the Third Reich (1933–1945). He wrote *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle), a book outlining his theories on race, Germany, and Jews. He was the primary instigator of both the Second World War in Europe and the mass execution of millions of people deemed to be 'enemies', or inferior to the Aryan ideal.

**Holocaust** - genocide of European Jews by the Nazi regime in Germany between 1933 – 1945. There were also millions of non-Jewish victims of Nazi persecution and murder, including Roma and Sinti, Poles and Slavic people, political opponents and resistance fighters, people with physical and mental disabilities, Soviet prisoners of war (POWs) and LGBTQ people. Jews were the only group targeted for complete destruction. While it is impossible to ascertain the exact number of victims, the recognized figure is 6 million Jews, 5 million non-Jews.

**Jehovah's Witnesses** - members of a Christian sect founded in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century who believe that the Kingdom of God is supreme and will replace human governments on earth. The Bible is considered God's inspired message to humans and the teachings and examples of Jesus should be followed. They were arrested because they refused allegiance to Hitler's National Socialist Party. At Ravensbrück Jehovah's Witnesses were marked with purple triangles.

**Jews** - persons identifying with the Jewish cultural community or as followers of the Jewish religion (Judaism), tracing their origins through the ancient Hebrew people of Israel to Abraham.

**Mittwerda** - the Nazi code name for the gas chamber.

**Nazi** - an adherent or advocate of policies characteristic of Nazism; a fascist.

**Nazism** - political and economic doctrine whose ideology is associated with Adolf Hitler. It is a form of socialism featuring racism (racial purity and Aryan supremacy), national expansion, with state control of the economy and obedience to a strong national leader.

**Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN)** - a nationalist political organization established in 1929 in Vienna, whose goal was to infiltrate legal political parties, universities and other political structures and institutions to achieve independence for Ukraine

**Ostarbeiter** - forced slave labourers from Central and Eastern Europe in Germany during World War II.

**Politicals** - persons imprisoned for their political beliefs or actions which do not conform to that of the current occupier. They were the largest group at Ravensbrück and included resistance fighters, dissidents, communists. All prisoners from Ukrainian territories were labelled political, whether or not they had any political leanings. At Ravensbrück, they were marked with red triangles.

**Rabbits (Kaninchen)** - female prisoners in Ravensbrück concentration camp on whom Nazi physicians performed inhumane medical experiments; they were treated like laboratory animals. Most were young students that had been part of the Polish underground resistance; among them were at least two Ukrainians.

**Red Army** - Soviet army created by the communist government (Leon Trotsky) after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.

**Red Cross** - an international humanitarian organization that provides relief to victims of war or natural disaster. The Red Cross was set up in 1864 at the instigation of the Swiss philanthropist Henri Dunant, according to the Geneva Convention, and its headquarters are in Geneva.

**Revier (abbreviated from German word Krankenrevier)** - medical facility for inmates in a concentration camp. Once admitted into this facility a prisoner was rarely released.

**Siemens Corporation** - German electrical manufacturer, which had factories throughout Germany and relied on forced labour to maintain production levels between 1940 and 1945. A factory was located just at the edge of Ravensbrück, from 1942 onwards.

**Slavs** - members of a group of peoples in central and eastern Europe speaking Slavic languages. Present-day Slavs are classified into East Slavs (chiefly Belarusians, Russians, Rusyns, and Ukrainians), West Slavs (chiefly Czechs, Kashubs, Poles, Slovaks, and Sorbs) and South Slavs (chiefly Bosniaks, Bulgarians, Croats, Macedonians, Montenegrins, Serbs and Slovenes).

**Stalin, Josef** - (December 18, 1878 – March 5, 1953) leader of the Soviet Union from 1922 until his death. He replaced Vladimir Lenin. His regime has been described as totalitarian, and has been widely condemned for overseeing mass repression, ethnic cleansing, wide-scale deportation, hundreds of thousands of executions, and famines that killed millions.

**SS (Schutzstaffel) (Protection Squads)** - originally established as Adolf Hitler's personal bodyguard unit. It would later become both the elite guard of the Third Reich and Hitler's executive force prepared to carry out all security-related duties, without regard for legal restraint.

**The Bunker (Zellenbau)** - a building within the concentration camp containing 78 cells for solitary confinement. It was used to detain special prisoners: e.g., people who belonged to various resistance organizations, as well as for punishment of non-political prisoners. Inmates were subjected to severe punishment, torture and confinement in small, dark cells.

**Third Reich** - official Nazi designation for the regime in Germany from January 1933 to May 1945. The designation 'Third Reich' was coined in 1922 by writer Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, in his publication *Das Dritte Reich* (The Third Reich). Moeller's 'Third Reich' referred to two previous Germanic Empires: Charlemagne's medieval Frankish Empire and the German Empire under the Prussian Hohenzollern dynasty (1871-1918).

**Uckermark** – the only youth concentration camp in the German Reich that was built specifically for girls and young women. It was built at Ravensbrück in the spring of 1942 and was used to intern girls and young women classified as criminal, 'hostile to the state', or anti-social. The inmates were used to perform forced labour. From January 1945, the camp was used as a death and selection camp for women of the Ravensbrück concentration camp.

**Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA)** - underground partisan army which fought from 1942 to 1949 against the German and Soviet occupation regimes. The UPA reflected the make-up of the entire nation, welcoming everyone and uniting members of different political movements. All members focused on creating an independent Ukraine. The UPA was divided into four groups: UPA North (Volyn, Polissia); UPA West (Galicia (Halychyna), Bukovyna, Zakarpattia, Lviv region); UPA South (Zhytomyr, Vinnytsia, Kamianets-Podilsk, Kyiv region) and UPA East (Zhytomyr, Kyiv, Chernihiv). The Ukrainian insurgency resisted occupation regimes for about 14 years, but it was ultimately defeated by Soviet authorities in the mid 1950's.

**Ukrainian National Republic (UNR)** – After Lenin and the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia in October 1917, the Central Rada (Council) of Ukraine announced it was assuming the highest authority on Ukrainian lands and on November 20, 1917, proclaimed the establishment of the Ukrainian National Republic (UNR). On January 25, 1918 (backdated to January 22, 1918), the Central Rada issued its fourth and final Universal, proclaiming "From now on, the UNR becomes the independent free sovereign state of the Ukrainian people."

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