

Ravensbruck

During World War II, Adolph Hitler took control of Germany and set up concentration camps for the exterminations and punishment of Jews, political opponents, and other groups of innocent people he didn't approve of. Ravensbruck was one of many camps set up to punish prisoners, but it was later converted into a death camp where approximately 117,000 people were murdered (Who Were They, p. 1-3).

Ravensbruck was a German concentration camp located about 50 miles north of Berlin. It was founded by SS leader Heinrich Himmler in 1938 and was the only concentration camp set up primarily for women. Children were also brought to the camp with their mothers or sisters. The women of Ravensbruck were organized into categories according to their crimes. Political prisoners were forced to wear clothes with a red triangle; most of these women were Polish. By 1942, Polish women had become the largest national component of the camp, with an estimated 48,500 Poles residing there. Jewish women made up 20% of the total population of Ravensbruck and were required to wear yellow triangles for "race defilement." Common criminals wore green triangles, while Soviet prisoners of war and German and Austrian Communists wore red triangles. Lastly, black triangles were assigned to women who were prostitutes or gypsies. Ravensbruck was a training camp for more than 4,000 Aufseherins, female Nazi guards. Most of these women went on to be chief wardresses in other concentration or death camps (Ravensbruck Concentration Camp, p. 1-2)

Some of the most important events of Ravensbruck were the "medical experiments" performed on the prisoners of the concentration camp. These experiments, using sulphonamide drugs, were conducted by doctors Fritz Fischer, Karl Gebhardt, Stumpfegger, and Herta Oberheuser, the camp doctor. Eighty-six women were put through these tests, and seventy-four of those were Polish inmates. Two types of experiments were conducted. Criminal experiments

involved the deliberate extraction and infection of bones and muscles of the legs with virulent bacteria, the removal of nerves, the introduction into the tissues of infectious substances such as pieces of glass, and the infliction of artificial bone fractures (Ravensbruck Concentration Camp, p.6). The second type of experiment involved transplanting bones from one person to another and studying the regeneration process of these bones as they attached to existing muscles and nerves. Five of the Polish women died as a result of these experiments; six of them were executed, and others only survived because of the care of other prisoners of Ravensbruck (Ravensbruck Concentration Camp, P. 6).

Ravensbruck prisoners were required to do many types of slave labor. By 1944 the camp was in charge of 70 sub-camps used specifically for slave labor. These camps “employed” thousands of the prisoners at Ravensbruck and used them to help build products including aircraft components, weapons, military supplies, and explosives (Satellite Camps, p. 1). The women also helped build V-1 and V2 rocket parts for the Siemens Electric Company, the second largest electric company in the world today. Ravensbruck was also a main depository for confiscated clothing and furs. The camp had its own SS owned factory for remodeling leather and textiles. There was a tailor shop where women made prisoner’s uniforms, fur coats and uniforms for the SS (Slave Labor, p. 1-2). Strong women did outside work like constructing buildings and pulling rollers to pave the streets. Women unable to do hard labor worked in camp administration, knitted for the army, or cleaned barracks and bathrooms. Women usually worked 12 hours a day and many times died from hard labor (Slave Labor, p. 3).

The inmates of Ravensbruck suffered and were tortured extensively. “Thousands of them were shot, strangled, gassed, buried alive, or worked to death” (Ravensbruck Concentration Camp, p.6). Besides the medical experiments many suffered through, women were murdered in Ravensbruck’s own crematorium. There was a “youth camp” called Uckermark less than a mile from Ravensbruck. Many women were sent there and were gassed (poisoned). A special corridor called the bunker was used for severe beatings and whippings. Sometimes women were given

poisonous white powder to kill them. Many died from slave labor, over crowding, or starvation. Other routine torture methods included attacks by SS dogs (The Bunker, p. 1-2). The number of women murdered in the camp gas chamber is estimated to be 5,000 to 6,000 (Murder, p. 2).

Ravensbruck was one of the worst Nazi camps of all. Only 2,000 malnourished and sick women and only 300 men were left alive in the camp when it was liberated by the Red Army on April 30th, 1945. By the time the Russians rescued the remaining prisoners, the death count was estimated to be between 30,000 and 40,000 women and children (Liberation and Rescue, p. 2). The women were rescued in Red Cross busses, trucks, or trains. Once liberated, they were sent to Sweden where they received medical treatment and food. The surviving women then returned to their homes (Ravensbruck Concentration Camp, p. 9).

Many courageous women survived these tragedies at Ravensbruck; they never forgot the other thousands of women who died. Today there are memorials set up at the camp for the known women who were murdered at Ravensbruck. These memorials remind individuals of the horrors of Ravensbruck and Germany during World War II.

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