

Release from the Snare: Female Solidarity and Resistance in the Case of the Ravensbrück Rabbits

By Madeline Lemmon

Upon reflection on her time in Ravensbrück concentration camp, a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust, Sientje Backer, recalled seeing a young girl walking around on crutches with only one leg. On inquiry, Backer learned the horrifying truth of the largest concentration camp for women in the German Reich.¹ The experimental block at Ravensbrück camp was a site of various inhumane practices where doctors violated all medical ethics in the name of the Reich. Most notable, however, is the case of the Ravensbrück “Rabbits:” a group of women who endured medical torture that left those who survived with life-long disabilities. However, the experiment victims and the other women in the camp refused to accept the atrocious crimes as their reality. The medical experimentations on women in Ravensbrück concentration camp may have been part of a more extensive Nazi operation of human experimentation for the ‘betterment’ of the Third Reich, but the unique circumstances of the unethical medical atrocities of Ravensbrück fostered an environment of solidarity and resistance among the prisoners and shaped the outcome of the Holocaust doctors’ trials following the end of the Second World War.

The Ravensbrück concentration camp was constructed just outside Fürstenberg, Germany, about 45 miles from the city of Berlin.² Second only to the women’s section of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Ravensbrück was one of the largest camps for women in the Nazi camp system and the largest in Germany. The camp held a diverse population of female prisoners from

¹ Sientje Backer, Sientje Backer Testimony, interview by Fuzzy Teitelbaum, August 7, 1997, <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/32515>.

² Susan Benedict, “The Nadir of Nursing: Nurse-Perpetrators of the Ravensbrück Concentration Camp,” *Nursing History Review : Official Journal of the American Association for the History of Nursing* 11 (February 1, 2003): 129–46, <https://doi.org/10.1891/1062-8061.11.1.129>.

over thirty countries incriminated as “asocial,” Jewish, Jehovah’s Witnesses, “criminals,” political prisoners, “work-shy,” and “race defilers.”³ Ravensbrück was built with a capacity of 6,000-8,000 prisoners.⁴ However, by 1945, the camp had a population of around 50,000,⁵ most of whom were women, although a small section was dedicated to male and youth prisoners.⁶ While the administration staff of Ravensbrück were men, the camp staff, including the guards, was composed entirely of women. The women’s camp was not an extermination camp as it was initially constructed for political prisoners, however, death and execution were commonplace, and the women were often supplied as prostitutes to other camps like Dachau, Mauthausen, Buchenwald, and Neuengamme. The camp was made up of eighteen barracks which were extremely overcrowded by 1945 due to the overpopulation of the camp. The sanitary conditions in the barracks were appalling, which caused the outbreak of diseases like typhus among the prisoners.⁷ Blanka Rothschild, a former Jewish prisoner of Ravensbrück, recalls in her survivor testimony the overcrowdedness and unsanitary conditions of the camp, but above all, its dehumanizing nature saying, “the human spirit suffered more than the physical spirit.”⁸ The conditions of the *Revier*, or the sick bay, were not much better, as Neeltje Ejpker, a Dutch prisoner-nurse, described:

There were boards instead of beds. There were about 200 prisoners in my room, and it was so tight that no one could sit down. The beds were set up threefold on top of each other. The hygienic conditions were terrible. We often had no water, there were no toilets, only latrines: one large bucket with two long handles on each side. All of us had diarrhea and nobody could help us to the latrine. One time I saw a huge pile of corpses which was then picked up by a large car.⁹

³ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Ravensbrück,” Holocaust Encyclopedia, accessed February 6, 2023, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/ravensbrueck>.

⁴ Benedict, “The Nadir of Nursing,” 130.

⁵ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Ravensbrück.”

⁶ Benedict, “The Nadir of Nursing,” 130.

⁷ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Ravensbrück.”

⁸ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Ravensbrück - ID Cards/Oral Histories,” Holocaust Encyclopedia, accessed February 12, 2023, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/gallery/ravensbrueck-stories>.

⁹ Benedict, “The Nadir of Nursing,” 130.

The *Revier* was also a site of various medical experimental trials. The doctors and researchers in Ravensbrück exploited and tortured prisoners by conducting experiments on hypothermia, sterilization, “lunacy,” and war wounds, including breaks and infections.¹⁰

In 1942, Heinrich Himmler, the principal architect of the Holocaust, ordered prominent Nazi doctor Karl Gebhardt to begin a series of experiments to test the effectiveness of surgical methods versus Sulphonamide-based antibiotics to treat war wounds.¹¹ Gebhardt took on the role after failing to save Reinhard Heydrich from dying of sepsis using surgical treatment methods.¹² Under the authorization of Himmler, Gebhardt and a team of surgeons began parallel experiments on prisoners in Ravensbrück, Dachau, and Sachsenhausen concentration camps. Generally, the experiments consisted of cutting open the prisoners’ legs under the knee, injecting it with bacteria or inserting dirt, wood, or glass, and testing the effectiveness of surgery or sulphonamides on the reproduced war wound.¹³ Though, the trials varied among camps and over time. The first set of experiments occurred at Dachau. In total, ninety Dachau prisoners were experimented on between 1942-1945, twenty-nine of whom died as a result. The second stage of experiments was at Ravensbrück, under the authority of Gebhardt’s assistant, Fritz Fischer and a team of doctors, including Wilhelm Beigleboeck and Herta Oberhauser. Fischer began experimentation at Ravensbrück on a group of men¹⁴ either from Ückermark, the small section of the camp for men and youth,¹⁵ or who had been transferred from Sachsenhausen. The most

¹⁰ Sarah Helm, *If This Is a Woman: Inside Ravensbrück: Hitler’s Concentration Camp for Women* (London: Little, Brown, 2015), 221-235.

¹¹ Paul Weindling, *Victims and Survivors of Nazi Human Experiments: Science and Suffering in the Holocaust* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 86-87.

¹² Daan de Leeuw, “‘In the Name of Humanity’: Nazi Doctors and Human Experiments in German Concentration Camps,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 34, no. 2 (November 19, 2020): 225–52, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hgs/dcaa025>.

¹³ Helm, *If This Is a Woman: Inside Ravensbrück: Hitler’s Concentration Camp for Women*; Weindling, *Victims and Survivors of Nazi Human Experiments: Science and Suffering in the Holocaust*, 217.

¹⁴ Weindling, *Victims and Survivors of Nazi Human Experiments: Science and Suffering in the Holocaust*, 89.

¹⁵ Benedict, “The Nadir of Nursing,” 130.

well-known and extensive set of experiments at Ravensbrück began on July 24, 1942, on a group of six Polish women. The women's legs were surgically cut open, and bacteria, dirt, glass, and splinters were inserted to cause infection. Then, each woman was treated with a different drug to test their effectiveness.¹⁶ Although this experiment had previously been done on a group of men, the wounds were deeper and injected with more virulent bacteria cultures for this round. The women subjected to this experiment and those that would take place over the following three years would become known as the "Rabbits" by their fellow prisoners as a mark of "sympathy and solidarity."¹⁷

The following experiment consisted of a group of nine women.¹⁸ The artificially created wounds were similar, except they intensified the injected bacteria, cut off the blood supply to the leg, and sent the women back to their barracks rather than holding them in the sick bay.¹⁹ Two groups of the women were given different kinds of sulphonamides, while the third group was given nothing. The experimentation on the rabbits continued over the next few years. Some experiments involved infecting the wounds with tetanus, pus, blood poison or gangrene-causing bacteria, breaking their bones, or transplanting muscle tissue and nerve fibres. The doctors also experimented with different types of treatments of different doses and frequency of administration. It is understood that Gebhardt, who was skeptical of the effectiveness of sulphonamides over surgery, purposefully administered treatment sparingly to cause the experiments to fail. In total, 118 operations were performed on the seventy-four Ravensbrück Rabbits, with some women operated on several times. Most of the victims were female Polish political prisoners ranging from sixteen to forty-seven years old. At least thirteen of the

¹⁶ Helm, *If This Is a Woman: Inside Ravensbrück: Hitler's Concentration Camp for Women*, 214-15.

¹⁷ Weindling, *Victims and Survivors of Nazi Human Experiments: Science and Suffering in the Holocaust*, 90.

¹⁸ Weindling, 89.

¹⁹ Helm, *If This Is a Woman: Inside Ravensbrück: Hitler's Concentration Camp for Women*, 215.

seventy-four women died as a result of experimentation, and six were liquidated after the experimentation was complete. Some known victims are Zofia Kiecol, Weronika Kraska, Kazimiera Kurowska, Aniela Lefanowicz and Alfreda Prus.²⁰

Unlike other camps conducting experiments, the Ravensbrück experiment block was not sealed from the other prisoners. The Rabbits had contact with the other prisoners and were sent back to the barracks if they survived. The awareness of the inhumane practices occurring in the sick bay fostered an environment of solidarity and resistance among the prisoners. Aware of the conditions the Rabbits were subjected to in the *Revier*, prisoners often smuggled food and other essentials through the sick bay windows. If and when subjects returned to their block, they were met with support from their block mates: the other women would tend to them as best they could, including giving them what little rations they were provided. Some women with prior medical experience were ordered to work in the hospital. This placed them in an advantageous position where they could help the Rabbits and collect information by listening to conversations and reading patient charts. Zofia Maczka, for example, was a prisoner who worked as a radiologist in the sick bay and collected information on the injections the experiment subjects received.²¹

It has been noted that the Nazis considered liquidating all of the Rabbits as they became increasingly “disruptive.” In February 1943, the Rabbits and their fellow prisoners began to take greater political action against the Nazi perpetrators. A group of women managed to submit a statement to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) arguing that their prison sentences do not include lawful experimentation that read, “International law does not even permit experimental operations on criminals/political prisoners.” However, the ICRC did nothing to halt the medical crimes in Ravensbrück camp. A month later, prisoner Władysława

²⁰ Weindling, *Victims and Survivors of Nazi Human Experiments: Science and Suffering in the Holocaust*, 20.

²¹ Helm, *If This Is a Woman: Inside Ravensbrück: Hitler's Concentration Camp for Women*, 224.

Karolewska wrote to the camp's commandant, Fritz Suhren, demanding that he prove that experimentation is a part of the Rabbits' prison sentences. The letter was signed by the other Rabbits who protested their circumstances by refusing to show up to the *Revier* for experimentation and, instead, marched to the commandant's office to fight for their demands. On August 15, 1943, another ten prisoners refused to show up to the sick bay for experimentation. They were captured, drugged, and forcefully operated on once again.²²

At the same time the Rabbits were fighting for their rights, other prisoners were attempting to gather proof of the crimes against the Polish women and get the word out to the outside world. Prisoner, Nina Iwanska, came up with the idea of sending letters to their families containing secret messages written in urine. Iwanska and several other prisoners sent out messages containing details of the seventy-four Rabbits, urging their families to pass the information on to various outlets like the BBC, the ICRC, Swiss mission organizations, and Polish exiles living in Lisbon. Furthermore, Joanna Szydlowska, a victim of experimentation, obtained a camera and secretly took photos of her fellow Rabbits and their injuries. The roll of film was given to French prisoner Germaine Tillion who carried it until she was released from the camp.²³

²² Weindling, *Victims and Survivors of Nazi Human Experiments: Science and Suffering in the Holocaust*, 90.

²³ Joanna Szydlowska, *Clandestine Photograph of the Disfigured Leg of Maria Kusmierczuk, a Polish Political Prisoner in the Ravensbrueck Concentration Camp*, October 1944, Photograph, October 1944, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1156936>.



“Clandestine photograph of the disfigured leg of Maria Kusmierczuk, a Polish political prisoner in the Ravensbrueck concentration camp.”²⁴

Moreover, in December of 1943, a prisoner named Aka Kolodziejczyk was released from Ravensbruck, smuggling a list of the war wound experiment victims and the dates of all their operations.²⁵ Renée Dubna, a French political prisoner who spent time in Ravensbruck, recalled in her testimony with the SHOA Foundation that to save the Rabbits from future experimentation, they would swap their numbered armbands with those of corpses so they could not be identified as subjects of the experiments.²⁶

Karolina Lanckorońska, as recorded in her memoir *Michelangelo in Ravensbrück: One Woman's War Against the Nazis*, was a Polish aristocrat imprisoned at Ravensbrück for working with the Polish underground and refusing to disavow her loyalty to Poland. Due to her noble status, Lanckorońska was given special treatment in the camp. Having been an art historian prior to the war, she used her time in the camp to teach her fellow prisoners. She spent two days a

²⁴ Szydlowska, *Clandestine Photograph of the Disfigured Leg of Maria Kusmierczuk*.

²⁵ Weindling, *Victims and Survivors of Nazi Human Experiments: Science and Suffering in the Holocaust*, 92.

²⁶ Renée Dubna, Renée Dubna Testimony, interview by Pamela Grant-Goldblatt, March 26, 1997, <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/29796>.

week in the sickbay with the Rabbits teaching them the history of the Renaissance. Although seemingly unhelpful, Lanckorońska's work reaffirmed the humanity of women in the most dehumanizing situation. Reflecting on the Ravensbrück Rabbits, she recalls the mass solidarity that formed around the group of women: "The 'rabbits' were a cause of special anxiety. The whole camp surrounded those sixty women (mostly young girls) with a certain kind of veneration related to their suffering."²⁷

Women's resistance efforts in Ravensbrück proved crucial to the outcome of the post-war retribution for the crimes committed within the camp walls. The information disseminated by the prisoners outside the camp was successful: the Polish underground press printed the details of the war wound experiments, which reached Great Britain and Switzerland.²⁸ According to Susan Benedict, The British war crimes investigations into the crimes of Ravensbrück were "one of the most substantial bodies of legal testimony and scientific expertise on human rights violations in experimental research before the establishment of the Nuremberg Doctors' Trial." Their evidence, combined with the testimonies of many of the Rabbits themselves, was used in the Ravensbrück Trials, which began on December 3, 1946, in Hamburg, Germany, where several medical staff members of Ravensbrück were charged with war crimes and crimes against humanity.²⁹ The three most culpable doctors, responsible for the experiments in the camp, were tried at the Nuremberg Doctors' Trials. Wilhelm Beigleboeck and Herta Oberhauser, whom survivors described as someone who "seemed to take pleasure in the pain she was causing" and "Never seemed bothered by the smell of rotting flesh,"³⁰ were both found guilty of war crimes

²⁷ Karolina Lanckorońska, *Michelangelo in Ravensbrück: One Woman's War Against the Nazis*, trans. Noel Clark (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2007).

²⁸ Weindling, *Victims and Survivors of Nazi Human Experiments: Science and Suffering in the Holocaust*, 91.

²⁹ Ulf Schmidt, "'The Scars of Ravensbrück': Medical Experiments and British War Crimes Policy, 1945–1950," *German History* 23, no. 1 (January 2005): 20–49, <https://doi.org/10.1191/0266355405gh334oa>.

³⁰ Helm, *If This Is a Woman: Inside Ravensbrück: Hitler's Concentration Camp for Women*, 222–235.

and crimes against humanity but only received fifteen and twenty years in prison respectively. Fritz Fischer, who led the series of experiments, received a life sentence for war crimes and crimes against humanity.³¹ At the trial, several of their victims provided testimony and evidence of the doctors' crimes. A doctor presented a breakdown of the injuries of Maria Kusmierczuk and Jadwiga Dzido. He provided x-rays of their legs and demonstrated the debilitating aspects of their injuries.³²

Despite the efforts of the Ravensbrück women, many of the Rabbits did not survive the crimes against them, and the rest would live with debilitating injuries and traumatic memories for the rest of their lives. However, the decision not to isolate the subjects of experimentation from the rest of the camp allowed the prisoners to see the whole reality of what was happening around them. It provided the opportunity to work together to draw global attention to the issue and ensure that it never happens again. The solidarity and accompanying resistance efforts of the female prisoners of Ravensbrück were fostered by circumstances within the camp that did not exist in other experimental camps, and the results were crucial to the outcome of the post-war retribution process for Ravensbrück and other camps that partook in human experimentation.

³¹ *Verdict Announced in Medical Case* (Subsequent Nuremberg Proceedings), accessed March 14, 2023, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/film/verdict-announced-in-medical-case>.

³² *Victims of Medical Experiments Testify during Medical Case* (Subsequent Nuremberg Proceedings), accessed March 14, 2023, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/film/victims-of-medical-experiments-testify-during-medical-case>.

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