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Ravensbrück concentration camp

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Coordinates: 53°11′20.4″N 13°10′12″E

Ravensbrück (German pronunciation: [ʁa : vəns ˈbʁʏk]) was a notorious (?) women's [concentration camp](#) during [World War II](#), located in northern Germany, 90 km (56 mi) north of [Berlin](#) at a site near the village of Ravensbrück (part of [Fürstenberg/Havel](#)).

Construction of the camp began in November 1938 by SS leader Heinrich Himmler and was unusual in that it was a camp primarily for women and children. The camp opened in May 1939. In the spring of 1941, the SS authorities established a small men's camp adjacent to the main camp. Between 1939 and 1945, over 130,000 female [prisoners](#) passed through the Ravensbrück camp system; around 40,000 were Polish and 26,000 were Jewish.^[1] Between 15,000 and 32,000 of the total survived.^[1] Although the inmates came from every country in German-occupied Europe, the largest single national group incarcerated in the camp consisted of Polish women.

[Siemens & Halske](#) employed many of the slave labor prisoners.^{[2][3]}

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Prisoners [\[edit\]](#)

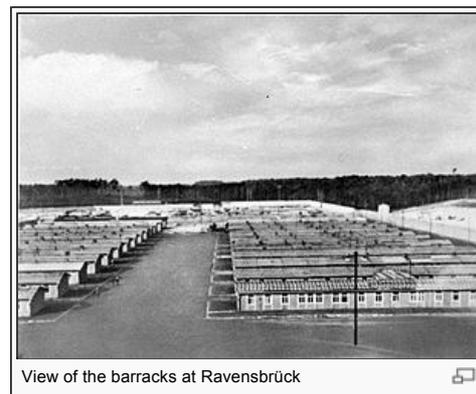
The first prisoners at Ravensbrück were approximately 900 women. The SS had transferred these prisoners from the [Lichtenburg](#) women's concentration camp in [Saxony](#) in May 1939. By the end of 1942, the inmate population of Ravensbrück had grown to about 10,000.

There were children in the camp as well. At first, they arrived with mothers who were [Gypsies](#) or [Jews](#) incarcerated in the camp or were born to imprisoned women. There were few of them at the time. There were a few [Czech](#) children from [Lidice](#) in July 1942. Later the children in the camp represented almost all nations of Europe occupied by Germany. Between April and October 1944 their number increased considerably, consisting of two groups. One group was composed of [Roma](#) children with their mothers or sisters brought into the camp after the [Roma camp](#) in [Auschwitz-Birkenau](#) was closed. The other group included mostly children who were brought with Polish mothers sent to Ravensbrück after the collapse of the [Warsaw Uprising](#) of 1944. With a few exceptions all these children died of starvation. Ravensbrück had 70 sub-camps used for slave labour that were spread across an area from the [Baltic Sea](#) to [Bavaria](#).

Among the thousands executed by the [Germans](#) at Ravensbrück were four female members of the British World War II organization [Special Operations Executive](#): [Denise Bloch](#), [Cecily Lefort](#), [Lilian Rolfe](#) and [Violette Szabo](#). Other victims included the [Roman Catholic](#) nun [Élise Rivet](#), [Elisabeth de Rothschild](#) (the only member of the [Rothschild family](#) to die in the Holocaust), Russian Orthodox nun [St. Maria Skobtsova](#), the 25-year-old French [Princess Anne de Bauffremont-Courtenay](#) and [Olga Benário](#), wife of the Brazilian Communist leader [Luís Carlos Prestes](#). The largest group of executed women at the Ravensbrück camp was composed of 200 young Polish patriots who were members of the [Home Army](#).

Among the survivors of the Ravensbrück camp was Christian author and speaker [Corrie ten Boom](#). Corrie ten Boom and her family were arrested by the Nazis for harbouring Jews in their home in [Haarlem](#), the Netherlands. The ordeal of Corrie and her sister [Betsie ten Boom](#) in the camp is documented in her book *The Hiding Place* which was eventually produced as a motion picture. Countess [Karolina Lanckoronska](#), a Polish art historian and author of *Michelangelo in Ravensbruck* also was imprisoned in the camp from 1943–1945. [Eileen Nearne](#), a member of the Special Operations Executive was a prisoner in 1944 before being transferred to another work camp and escaping. Additional Ravensbruck survivors include Gemma LaGuardia Gluck (sister of American politician and [United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration](#) (UNRRA) director, [Fiorello LaGuardia](#)) - who wrote a memoir about her experiences at the camp and afterward^[4] - her daughter Yolande, and Yolande's baby son. During her imprisonment in Ravensbrück, the anthropologist and member of the [French resistance](#) [Germaine Tillion](#) secretly wrote a comic operetta about camp life titled *Le Verfügbar aux Enfers*. In 1975, she published a comprehensive study of the camp, *Ravensbruck: An eyewitness account of a women's concentration camp*.

In 1945, just prior to liberation, the poet, playwright and author of *The Green Goos*, [Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński](#), managed to save one of the Ravensbruck inmates from certain death. Her name was Lucyna Wolanowska. They began living together, and in January 1946 their son was born, also named Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński. Later that same year Lucyna Wolanowska and her son emigrated to Australia ^{[*dubious*] – [discuss](#)]}.



View of the barracks at Ravensbrück



[Will Lammert](#), Memorial *Tragende* (Woman with Burden) for the Ravensbrück Concentration Camp memorial site, 1959

Some prominent female prisoners:

- [Vera Albreht](#), Slovenian poet
- [Elisabeth Barbier](#)(Campbell) French Resistance-founder [Reseau Vaneau](#)
- [Henryka Bartnicka-Tajchert](#)
- [Esther Béjarano](#)
- [Maja Berezowska](#)
- [Halina Birenbaum](#)
- [Betsie ten Boom](#)
- [Corrie ten Boom](#)
- [Margarete Buber-Neumann](#)
- Mother of [Adolf Burger](#)
- [Anica Černež](#), Slovenian poet
- [Geneviève de Gaulle-Anthonioz](#)
- The mother and sister of [Juliette Gréco](#). (The 16-year old Juliette was arrested but was deemed too young for deportation and stayed in France.)
- [Mirjana Gross](#), Croatian historian and writer
- [Odette Hallowes](#)
- [Bolesława Janiak \(Niksa\)](#)
- [France Jarre](#) (née Pejot), mother of musician [Jean Michel Jarre](#) (Maurice Jarre's wife)
- [Milena Jesenská](#)
- [Halina Krahelska](#)
- [Countess Karolina Lanckorońska](#)
- [Gemma LaGuardia Gluck](#), sister of [Fiorello La Guardia](#), mayor of New York
- [Violette Lecoq](#), French artist
- [Jannette L'herminier](#), French Resistance - Sister of Capitaine de Corvette Jean l'Herminier
- [Lise London](#)^[5]
- [Anja Lundholm](#)
- [Mother Maria](#), (Saint Maria Skobtsova), nun
- [Eileen Nearne](#), a.k.a. Agent Rose (escaped)
- [Emmy Nikis](#), wife of [Mario Nikis](#)
- [Andrée Peel](#), French Resistance
- [Jadwiga Ptach](#)
- [Sylvia Salvesen](#), author
- [Odette Sansom](#)
- [Jadwiga Sawik](#), [Henryk Ślawik](#)'s wife
- [Nadia Stiers](#) (née Reznik in 1903 at [Hâncești](#), Roumanie) communist militant
- [Ceija Stojka](#)
- [Violette Szabo](#)
- [Seren Tuvel](#), author of [The Seamstress](#)
- [Rose Van Thyn](#)
- [Gabrielle Weidner](#)
- [Hanna Zemer](#), Slovak-born Israeli journalist
- [Hortense Clews](#)

Prominent male prisoners:

- [Jurek Becker](#) as child
- [Eugen Bolz](#)
- [Leopold Engleitner](#)
- [August Froehlich](#)
- [Julius Leber](#)
- [Hjalmar Schacht](#)
- [Otto Schniewind](#)
- [Karl Seitz](#)
- [Fritz Wolffheim](#)

Guards [[edit](#)]

Besides the male Nazi administrators, the camp staff included over 150 female SS guards assigned to oversee the prisoners at one time during the camp's operational period.

Ravensbrück served as a training camp for over 4,000 female overseers. The technical term for a female guard in a Nazi camp was an [Aufseherin](#). The women either stayed in the camp or eventually served in other camps. The female chief overseers (*Lagerfuehrerinnen* and *Oberaufseherinnen*) in Ravensbrück were:

- May 1939 – 1941: Oberaufseherin [Emma Zimmer](#) and assistant [Johanna Langefeld](#)
- 1941 – March 1942: Oberaufseherin [Johanna Langefeld](#)
- March–October 1942: Oberaufseherin [Maria Mandel](#)
- October 1942 – August 1943 [Johanna Langefeld](#) who returned from [Auschwitz](#)
- August 1943 – September 1944 Chef Oberaufseherin [Anna Klein](#) (née Plaubel), with deputy wardress [Dorothea Binz](#)
- September 1944 – April 1945 Chef Oberaufseherin [Luise Brunner](#), Lagerfuehrerin [Lotte Toberentz](#) (January 1945–April), with deputy wardress (Stellvertrende Oberaufseherin) [Dorothea Binz](#)
- [Vera Salvequart](#)

Quite a few of these women went on to serve as chief wardresses in other camps. Several dozen block overseers (Blockführerinnen), accompanied by dogs, SS men and whips oversaw the prisoners in their living quarters in Ravensbrück, at roll call and during food distribution. These women were usually described as inhumane and sadistic. At any single time, a report overseer (Rapportführerin) handled the roll calls and general discipline of the internees. [Rosel Laurenzen](#) originally served as head of the labor pool at the camp (Arbeitsdienstführerin) along with her assistant [Gertrud Schoeber](#). In 1944 [Greta Boesel](#) took over this command. Other high ranking SS women included [Christel Jankowsky](#), [Ilse](#)

Goeritz, **Margot Dreschel** and **Elisabeth Kammer**. Head wardress at the **Uckermark death complex** of Ravensbrück was **Ruth Closius** (January 1945 – March 1945). Regular **Aufseherinnen** were not usually granted access to the internees' compound unless they supervised inside work details. Most of the 'SS' women met their prisoner work gangs at the gate each morning and returned them later in the day. The treatment by the SS women in Ravensbrück was normally brutal. **Elfriede Muller**, an SS **Aufseherin** in the camp was so harsh that the prisoners nicknamed her "The Beast of Ravensbrück".

In 1973 the **United States** government extradited **Hermine Braunsteiner** for trial in Germany for **war crimes**.

In 2006 the **United States** government expelled **Elfriede Rinkel**, an 84 year-old woman who had resided in **San Francisco** since 1959. It was discovered that she had been a guard at Ravensbrück from 1944 to 1945.^[6]

Camp Commanders [edit]

- **SS-Hauptsturmführer – Max Kögel**, May 1939 – August 1942
- **SS-Hauptsturmführer – Fritz Suhren**, August 1942 – liberation in 1945

Life in the camp [edit]



When a new prisoner arrived at Ravensbrück she was required to wear a color-coded triangle (a *Winkel*) that identified her by category with a letter sewn within the triangle indicating the prisoner's nationality. Polish women wore a red triangle denoting a political prisoner with a letter "P". By 1942, **Polish** women became the largest national component at the camp. Jewish women wore yellow triangles but sometimes, unlike the other prisoners, they wore a second triangle for the other categories or for "*race defilement*". Some detainees had their hair shaved, such as those from Czechoslovakia and Poland, but "Aryan" transports did not. In 1943, for instance, a group of Norwegian women came to the camp. (Norwegians/Scandinavians were ranked by the Nazis as the purest of all Aryans.) None had their hair shaved. Between 1942 and 1943 almost all Jewish women from the Ravensbrück camp were sent to Auschwitz in several transports following Nazi policy to make Germany "*Judenrein*" (cleansed of Jews). Common criminals wore green triangles, **Soviet** prisoners of war, **German** and **Austrian Communists** had red triangles and members of the **Jehovah's Witnesses** were labeled with lavender triangles. Classified separately with black triangles were prostitutes, **Gypsies**, lesbians, or women who refused to marry (?).

Based on the Nazis incomplete transport list "*Zugangsliste*" consisting 25,028 names of women sent by Nazis to the camp, it is estimated that the Ravensbrück prisoner population's ethnic structure was the following: **Poles** 24.9%, **Germans** 19.9%, **Jews**

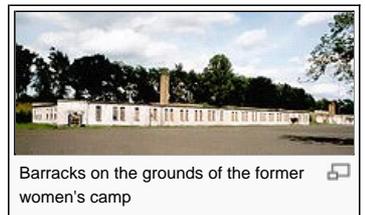
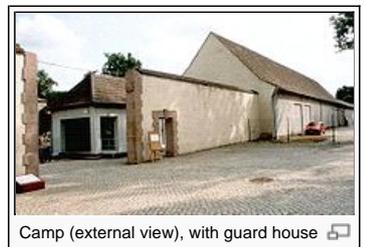
15.1%, **Russians** 15.0%, **French** 7.3%, **Gypsies** 5.4%, other 12.4%. **Gestapo** categorized the

inmates as follows: political 83.54%, anti-social 12.35%, criminal 2.02%, Jehovah Witnesses 1.11%, **racial defilement** 0.78%, other 0.20%. The list is one of the most important documents, preserved in the last moments of the camp operation by courageous members of the **Polish underground girl guides** unit "**Mury**" (The Walls). The rest of the camp documents were burned by escaping **SS** overseers in pits or in the crematorium.

One form of resistance was the secret education programs organized by prisoners for their fellow inmates. All national groups had some sort of program. The most extensive were among Polish women where various high-school-level classes were taught by experienced teachers.

In 1939 and 1940 camp living conditions were acceptable: laundry and bed-linen were changed regularly, the food was adequate, although in the first winter of 1939/40 limitations began to be noticeable. The German Communist, **Margarete Buber-Neumann**, came to Ravensbrück as an inmate after nearly two years in a Russian Soviet Gulag. She described her first impressions of Ravensbrück in comparison to the Soviet camp in Karaganda: "I looked across the great square, and could not believe my eyes. It was surrounded by manicured lawns, covered by flower beds on which bloomed bright red flowers. A wide Street, which led to a large open area, was flanked by two rows of wooden barracks, on both sides stood rows of young trees and along the roadside ran straight flower beds as far as the eye could see. The square and the streets seemed freshly raked. To the left towards the watchtower, I saw a white wooden barrack and beside it a large cage, the size of a birdhouse the like you see at a zoo. Within it paraded peacocks (stolzierten) and on a climbing tree dangled monkeys and a parrot which always screamed the same word, "Mama". I wondered, 'this is a concentration camp'?"^[7] Her first meal in Ravensbrück also exceeded her expectations when she was served sweet porridge with dried fruit (backobst), plus a generous portion of bread, margarine and sausage." During the first year of their stay in the camp from August 1940 to August 1941 roughly 47 women died. During the last year of the camps existence about 80 inmates died each day from disease or famine related causes.

Starting in the summer of 1942, **medical experiments** were conducted without consent on 86 women; 74 of them were Polish inmates. There were two types of the experiments done on the Polish political prisoners. The first type tested the efficacy of **sulfonamide** drugs. These experiments involved deliberate cutting into and infecting leg bones and muscles with virulent bacteria, cutting nerves, introducing substances like pieces of wood or glass into tissues and fracturing bones. The second set of experiments studied bone, muscle and nerve regeneration and the possibility of transplanting bones from one person to another. Out of the 74 Polish victims, called *Króliki*, *Kaninchen*, *Lapins* or *Rabbits* by the experimenters, five died as a result of the experiments, six with unhealed wounds were executed and the rest survived with permanent physical damage, due to assistance from other inmates. Four of them — **Jadwiga Dzido**, **Maria Broel-Plater**, **Władysława Karolewska** and **Maria Kuśmierczuk** — testified against Nazi doctors at the **Doctors' Trial** in 1946.



Between 120 and 140 Gypsy women were [sterilized](#) in the camp in January 1945. All had been deceived into signing the consent form, having been told by the camp overseers that the German authorities would release them if they complied.

All inmates were required to do heavy labor ranging from strenuous outdoor jobs to building the [V-2 rocket](#) parts for [Siemens](#). The SS also built several factories near Ravensbrück for the production of textiles and electrical components.

The women forced to work at Ravensbrück concentration camps industries used their skills in sewing and the fact that they had access to the factory to make shoddy soldiers' socks. They made adjustments on the machines to make the fabric thin at the heel and the toe, which made the socks easily broken when the German soldiers marched. This gave the soldiers sore feet.

For the women in the camp, it was important to retain some of their dignity and the feeling that they were still human beings. Therefore, they made necklaces, bracelets and other personal items like small dolls and books to keep as part of their dignity. These personal effects were of great importance to the women and many of them risked their lives to keep these possessions. Some of these types of effects can be seen at the exhibition "Voices from Ravensbrück" (hosted by Lund University Library, Sweden).^[8]

The bodies of those killed in the camp were cremated in the nearby Fürstenberg crematorium until 1943. In that year SS authorities constructed a crematorium at a site near the camp prison. In the autumn of 1944 the SS constructed a gas chamber near the crematorium. The Germans gassed several thousand prisoners at Ravensbrück before the camp's liberation in April 1945.

"On March 30, 1945: Jewish women being led to their deaths at the Ravensbrück, Germany, camp grapple with their SS guards. Nine of the women escape but are recaptured and murdered with the rest."^[9]

Death march and liberation [\[edit\]](#)



Female prisoners gathered when the Red Cross arrive to Ravensbrück in April 1945. The white paint marks shows they are prisoners. See footnote ^[10]

With the Soviet [Red Army's](#) rapid approach in the spring of 1945, the [SS](#) decided to exterminate as many prisoners as they could in order to avoid leaving anyone to testify as to what had occurred in the camp. By the time the Russians were only hours away, at the end of March, the SS ordered the women still physically well enough to walk to leave the camp, forcing over 20,000 prisoners on a death march toward northern Mecklenburg. Shortly before the evacuation, the Germans had handed over 7000 female prisoners, mostly French, to officials of the Swedish and Danish Red Cross. Fewer than 3,500 malnourished and sickly women and 300 men remained in the camp when it was liberated by the Red Army on April 30, 1945. The survivors of the Death March were liberated in the following hours by a Russian scout unit.



1st Ravensbrück Trial 1947: The Sentencing

By the time liberation came for the survivors, tens of thousands (estimates are about 30,000 to 40,000) of women and children had perished there.

SS guards, female guards and former prisoners with administrative positions at the camp were arrested at the end of the war by the [Allies](#) and tried at the [Hamburg Ravensbrück Trials](#) from 1946 to 1948. Sixteen of the accused were found guilty of war crimes and [crimes against humanity](#) and sentenced to death.

Memorial site [\[edit\]](#)



East German postage stamp, 1959, memorial of the Ravensbrück Concentration Camp memorial site

On the site of the former concentration camp there is a memorial today. In 1954 the sculptor [Will Lammert](#) was commissioned to design the memorial site between the [crematorium](#), the camp wall and [Schwedtsee Lake](#). Up to his death in 1957 the artist created a large number of sculpted models of women.

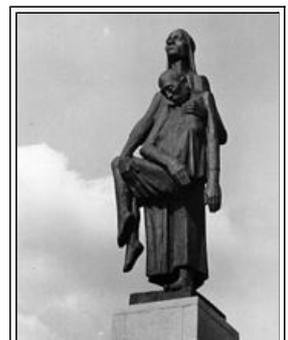
For the inaugural opening of the National Memorial site a scaled-up version of *Tragende* (Woman with Burden) was created (under the supervision of [Fritz Cremer](#)) and exhibited. This central symbolic figure, also known as the "[Pietà of Ravensbrück](#)" stands atop a stele on the peninsular in Lake Schwedtsee. The "Zwei Stehende" (Two Women Standing) monument also has its origins in Lammert's models. Other statues, which were also originally

created for Ravensbrück, have been on display at the Old Jewish Cemetery in [Berlin Mitte](#) since 1985, in commemoration of the Jewish victims of fascism.

Since 1984 the former [SS](#) headquarters have housed the "Museum des antifaschistischen Widerstandskampfes" (Museum of Anti-fascist Resistance). After the withdrawal from Germany of the [Soviet Army](#), which up to 1993 had been using parts of the former camp for military purposes, it became possible to incorporate more areas of the camp into the memorial site.

Today the former accommodation blocks for the female guards are a youth hostel and a youth meeting centre. In the course of reorganisation which took place in the early 1990s, the "Museum des antifaschistischen Widerstandskampfes" was replaced by two new permanent exhibitions: the first exhibition is called "Women of Ravensbrück" and displays the examples of the biographies of 27 former prisoners. The second exhibition is entitled "Ravensbrück. Topography and History of the Women's Concentration Camp". It provides information about the origins of the camp, describes the daily life in the camp and explains the principle of "Vernichtung durch Arbeit" (extermination through work). Since 2004 there has also been an exhibition about the female guards at the Ravensbrück Women's Concentration Camp, housed in another of their former accommodation blocks. There are also temporary exhibitions of special interest held regularly at the memorial.

On 16 and April 17, 2005 a ceremony was held to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the camp's liberation. Among those invited were around 600 survivors from all over the world, mostly eastern Europe. At the same time a new, permanent



Will Lammert, memorial statue *Tragende*, 1959



Model, 1955/56

outdoor exhibition was opened, on the theme of the train transports to Ravensbrück. Its central exhibit is a refurbished goods wagon. The exhibition's information boards describe the origins of the transports and how they developed over time, and explain the different types of train, where they arrived and the part played by the local residents. It is probably the only exhibition so far at a German memorial which is dedicated solely to the subject of the transports to the camp.

Gallery [edit]



The monument *Zwei Stehende* (Two Women Standing) by **Will Lammert** and **Fritz Cremer** in front of the Wall of Nations

Crematorium and road roller

Crematorium – incinerators

Wall of Nations with a mass grave for 300 prisoners

Former SS Commandants, and others, house. Today a museum



Residential house for the SS guards and **Unterführer**

Residential house for the SS guards

Residential area of the SS guards and Aufseherinnen

In fiction and art [edit]

- The 2012 album "Martyrs Prayers" by **The Project** includes a track entitled "Ravensbrück" written by Michael Glen Bell and Duane W.H. Arnold with lyrics based upon a written prayer found in the clothing of a dead child at the time of the camp's liberation.^[11]
- Elizabeth Wein**'s 2013 novel *Rose Under Fire* is principally set in Ravensbrück.

See also [edit]

- List of subcamps of Ravensbrück
- List of Nazi-German concentration camps
- Norbert Masur
- Holocaust memorial landscapes in Germany



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