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The Jewish Women of Ravensbruck Concentration Camp

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University of Wisconsin Press
978-0-299-19860-2
(April 15, 2004)

"I do not remember much more, except the pushcarts laden with emaciated, naked corpses, their limbs often hanging over the side of the cart. Once in a while some would fall off … being picked up and thrown back on the heap." This horror was recounted by a survivor of Ravensbruck Concentration Camp in Germany, the only Nazi camp specifically established for women. Of the 132,000 prisoners held there from 1939 to 1945, about twenty percent were Jewish. The others were Gypsies, criminals, Jehovah's Witnesses, prostitutes, lesbians, and political prisoners.

Drawing on interviews with survivors in the United States and Europe, as well as on previously unpublished testimonies, documents, and photographs from private archives, the author has graphically reconstructed the workings of everyday life in the camp. The descriptions encompass a whole range of issues and activities-illness and death, hunger, torture, fear of rape, political maneuvering, humiliation, and acts of resistance.

Saidel explains that the Jewish women had to confront certain questions both as Jews and as women. Gender-associated qualities intensified the suffering of some of the women. For example, because of the social relations of the time, girls were brought up to be modest, and many women were traumatized when forced to parade naked before men, and even before other women. Women were also taught to be submissive, and they had to overcome this ingrained self-image to stay alive.

Saidel, a senior scientific researcher at the Center for the Study of Women and Gender at the University of Sao Paulo, is the author of Never Too Late to Remember: The Politics Behind New York City's Holocaust Museum and The Outraged Conscience: Seekers of Justice for Nazi War Criminals in America. Here, she discusses her involvement with the camp's memorial site, which she first visited in 1980 (the site had no mention of the Jewish victims). She also tells how some of the women were able to rebuild their lives after liberation.

Her book blends the larger history of Nazi Germany-essential to understanding how most of the inmates ended up in the camp-with the women's experiences there. Other books have been

written on this subject, but Saidel's narrows the focus to the experience of Jewish women.

Saidel has created a work that is essential to understanding these women's determination to survive. Her writing is objective and controlled in recounting one of the darkest episodes in history. Without this book, these victims' voices might have been forgotten.