

Ravensbruck Letters: The Invisible Ink That Shocked the World

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Historical Paper

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Process Paper

When presented with the theme of Communication in History at the end of last school year, I was intrigued by how broad it was. There were endless subjects to explore as communication is an active part of nearly every historical event. As I started my search for a topic, I decided I wanted to focus on the Holocaust and how millions of families communicated discreetly during this time to avoid concentration. I searched for any articles on secret communication or underground connections that happened and came across a news article. This article reported on the donation of letters written in urine which turned into an invisible ink from the Ravensbruck camp to a museum. After reading the article, I was certain that this would be my topic for this year. This topic fits the theme due to the heroic women who risked their lives to inform the world about the conditions of Ravensbruck. I started to research the topic as well as the women who wrote the letters. However, since this topic had just recently made news, I could not find extensive information. I was concerned with finding primary sources so I contacted the museum that these letters were kept in. They sent me a translated transcript and pictures of the letters as well. As my second primary source, I used an online archive that held testimonies from these women and incorporated that information into my paper. The rest of the research came from articles and online encyclopedias. I put together my project by using the firsthand descriptions the women gave in their testimonies about the Ravensbruck concentration camp and used quotes from the letters sent to me by the museum. This project was important for me to do because I realized that without these letters, the world would not have known how deadly and inhumane Ravensbruck was. Remembering history is vital and we should actively take part in preserving it. By acknowledging the risks these women took to write these letters we can honor them and prevent such atrocities from happening in the future. The topic of secret letters

informed the world about the unethical medical experiments taking place and also contributed to the trials that followed World War II. These letters convicted multiple doctors and officers of Ravensbruck and in the end allowed justice to be carried through. Ultimately, the Texas History Fair competition has allowed me to promote a topic that many people do not know about. This topic brings to light a subject that should be given more recognition, which is what this project aims to do.

Paper

Over 80 years have passed since the horrific events of the Holocaust, and what started in 1941, spanning the length of four years until 1945, changed the course of history and the lives of innocent Jewish people for years to follow. By studying history, it is evident how morbid these events were especially what transpired in the German concentration camps. However, a recent survey conducted by Claims Conference showed that “nearly 31 percent of all Americans and more than 41 percent of millennials believe that substantially less than 6 million Jews were killed (two million or fewer) during the Holocaust.”¹ The study also found that “while there were over 40,000 concentration camps and ghettos in Europe during the Holocaust, almost half of Americans (45 percent) cannot name a single one – and this percentage is even higher amongst millennials.”² As this study shows, people are becoming increasingly unaware of the atrocities that took place during World War II, such as the gas chambers and the toxic medical experiments that were conducted. We must remember and honor these victims to show an appreciation for the sacrifices they made to tell their story. What we know about the history during this period can be traced back to the prisoners themselves who fought for a way to have their cries be heard. These prisoners risked their lives against the authority at these camps to let the world know what was taking place. Four Polish women taken to the Ravensbruck concentration camp in Germany did just this and amplified to the world the inhumanities taking place. These women were subject to deadly medical experiments and wrote to their families in urine, which then turned into invisible ink, the details of the medical torture they underwent. These secret letters in urine provided the

¹ “New Survey by Claims Conference Finds Significant Lack of Holocaust Knowledge in the United States.” Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, Inc. (Claims Conference). Accessed February 25, 2021. <http://www.claimscon.org/study>.

² “New Survey by Claims Conference.” Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, Inc.

first insight into what occurred at Ravensbruck and told the world of the realities of the Holocaust.

Hitler rose to power in 1933 and it is known throughout his rule that he held a deadly view towards Jews. Questioning, “Was there any form of filth or profligacy, particularly in cultural life, without at least one Jew involved in it?” in his *Mein Kampf*, it is clear that Hitler held a strong belief in demolishing the Jewish population.³ However, initially, the destruction of the Jewish people was not that of just one basic plan. “At first the concept of ‘Jew’ was defined; then the expropriatory operations were inaugurated; third, the Jews were concentrated in ghettos; finally, the decision was made to annihilate European Jewry.”⁴ In the final stage, all measures were taken “upon Hitler’s orders to kill the European Jew.”⁵ Termination was referred to as the “final solution of the Jewish question”⁶ and was carried out in two ways: through mobile killing operations and killing centers. In the spring of 1941, an order was given to dispatch units of the SS and Police to Soviet territory. Here they would travel from town to town and kill all of the Jewish population in that area. The second method of killing centers, targeted the Jewish population of central, western, and southeastern Europe so “instead of moving the killers to the victims, the victims were brought to the killers.”⁷ The extremes at which the Jewish people were terminated was unprecedented. Seen for the first time, people were killed on an “assembly line basis.”⁸ Certain camps, such as Ravensbruck, came to be utilized for labor and medical experiments, but the ultimate outcome was death.

³ Herzstein, R. (1980). *The Nazis*. Time-Life Books.

⁴ Hilberg, R. (2019). *The Destruction of the European Jews*. Martino Fine Books.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

The beginnings of these medical experiments transpired at the Ravensbruck concentration camp in Germany. Ravensbruck began construction in 1938 and was operational from 1939 to 1945. This camp was originally for women and became the largest camp for women in the German Reich. The camp had 18 barracks, two of which served as sick wards. Two other barracks served as warehouses and another one was as a penal block. Ravensbruck camp also had a prison block which was later rebuilt in 1939. The remaining 12 barracks served as the prisoners' housing, in which prisoners slept in three-tiered wooden bunks and each barrack had one washroom and toilet.⁹ However, the sanitary conditions were poor, “infested with myriads of lice and fleas.”¹⁰ As a result, Ravensbruck also suffered from a typhoid outbreak. The infections were “nothing out of the ordinary” with the average mortality rate “in the male ward...twenty people daily.”¹¹ Alongside the unhygienic conditions, prisoners were kept malnourished and the nutrition given to the inmates was inadequate. A testimony given by Wanda Wojtasik who was in the prisons said women were given only “25 grams of bread and half a liter of barley soup.”¹² Some women would end up “weighing 32 kilos” which is approximately 70 pounds.¹³ On top of the terrible living conditions, women in these camps were forced to do labor work. Tasks ranged

⁹ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. “Ravensbruck.” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accessed February 25, 2021. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/ravensbrueck>

¹⁰ Iwanska, Janina. Testimony, in Materials on Ravensbrück concentration camp, 1941-1945. “Chronicles of Terror.” Institute of National Remembrance. Accessed February 25, 2021. <https://www.zapisyterroru.pl/dlibra/publication/1441/edition/1424/content?navq=aHR0cDovL3d3dy56YXBpc3l0ZXJyb3JlLnBsL2RsaWJyYS9yZXN1bHRzP2FjdGlvbj1BZHhbmNlZFNlYXJjaEFjdGlvbiZ0eXBIPS0zJnNlYXJjaF9hdHRpZDE9Njcmc2VhcmNoX3ZhbHVlMT1Sb2JiZXJ5JnA9NzQ&navref=MTM2OzEycCAxMmc7MTF6IDE0MTsxM2s>.

¹¹ Iwanska, Materials on Ravensbrück.

¹² Wojtasik, Wanda. Testimony, in Materials on Ravensbruck concentration camp, 1941-1945. “Chronicles of Terror.” Institute of National Remembrance. Accessed February 25, 2021. <https://www.zapisyterroru.pl/dlibra/publication/1399/edition/1382/content?navq=aHR0cDovL3d3dy56YXBpc3l0ZXJyb3JlLnBsL2RsaWJyYS9yZXN1bHRzP2FjdGlvbj1BZHhbmNlZFNlYXJjaEFjdGlvbiZ0eXBIPS0zJnNlYXJjaF9hdHRpZDE9Njcmc2VhcmNoX3ZhbHVlMT1Sb2JiZXJ5JnA9NzQ&navref=MTQyOzEzbcCAxMnY7MTJlIDJm cDsyZjY>.

¹³ Iwanska, Materials on Ravensbrück.

from “digging ditches, pouring sand, carrying dirt and stones on slings, unloading stone from the ship, throwing bricks, carrying sacks of cement, carrying coke and earth in wheelbarrows, and then sewing large straw boots for the sentinels.”¹⁴ These inmates were also subject to selections where “Germans isolated those prisoners considered too weak or injured to work and killed them.”¹⁵ Prisoners were killed by gunshots then later gas chambers and finally progressed to injections at Ravensbrück.

Apart from these grueling circumstances, Ravensbrück also had an aspect to it that was not known to the world at that time. The bone and muscle operations that were conducted here were a well-kept secret. Prisoners were “commonly referred to as ‘guinea pigs’”¹⁶ as doctors conducted experiments researching various methods of treating wounds and how to prevent infections.¹⁷ They also tested setting and transplanting bones, including amputations. The selfish medical trials administered on these women were incredibly gruesome and endangered their lives while leaving lasting effects. Former political prisoner, Krystyna Czyż provided in her testimony that she and ten other women “received injections in our right legs, whereafter we experienced fevers in excess of 40°C (104°F).”¹⁸ The patient’s legs would be “swelled from the knees to the toes and were “reddish-blue” in color.¹⁹ Another prisoner, Wanda Wojtasik, said her wounds were “green and yellow.”²⁰ The injections were noted as filled with liquid that was “lemon yellow...while others were crimson.”²¹ The women were, however, never told precisely what the

¹⁴ Wojtasik, Materials on Ravensbrück.

¹⁵ “Ravensbrück,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

¹⁶ Iwanska, Materials on Ravensbrück.

¹⁷ Ravensbrück,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

¹⁸ Czyż, Krystyna. Testimony, in Materials on Ravensbrück concentration camp, 1941-1945. “Chronicles of Terror.” Institute of National Remembrance. Accessed February 25, 2021. https://www.zapisyterroru.pl/dlibra/show-content?id=1370&&navref=MTJpOzEyMSAxMnI7MTJhIDEyajsxMjI&format_id=6.

¹⁹ Czyż, Materials on Ravensbrück.

²⁰ Wojtasik, Materials on Ravensbrück.

²¹ Czyż, Materials on Ravensbrück.

injections were. These operations would leave the women with “muscle decay” and “chipped bone” causing agonizing pain and an inability to walk.²² Apart from bone operations, the doctors would also introduce bacteria into the incisions and conduct tests. Another prisoner, Janina Iwanska, endured red welts, enlarged lymph nodes, lack of appetite, vomiting, and headaches due to the bacteria.²³ From these incisions, her dressing would become soaked as proper medical attention was not provided to treat the wounds, “dressing which was changed half an hour earlier is soaked with odorous black and red slime” and had to be painfully changed periodically.²⁴ In the final months of concentration, women like Inwanska and Czyż were aware of the liability they were to camp authorities. The patients were living proof of the unethical practices that were upheld and lived in a fear of being executed to erase evidence of the experiments. Suffering from excruciating pain and neglect from doctors, this wave of hopelessness pushed the women of Ravensbruck to “communicate through the Underground with the Polish government” and initiate a series of correspondence that highlighted the atrocities of the Holocaust never seen before.²⁵

Four women are noted for their bravery in sending these secret letters donned with invisible ink through urine. This group consisted of the “Girl Guides: Krystyna Czyż, the sisters Janina and Krystyna Iwanska, and Wanda Wojtasik.” The first message was “written in invisible ink on the regular camp paper, covertly” and instructed the “families to heat the letter with an electric iron.” However, the writers had to devise a way to inform the recipients about the hidden

²² Iwanska, Materials on Ravensbrück.

²³ Iwanska, Materials on Ravensbrück.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Dowell, Stuart. “Extraordinary story of secret ‘letter-writing group’ who used own URINE as invisible ink to reveal death camp horrors.” Polish Press Agency. Accessed February 25, 2021. <https://www.thefirstnews.com/article/extraordinary-story-of-secret-letter-writing-group-who-used-own-urine-as-invisible-ink-to-reveal-death-camp-horrors-10040>.

messages without drawing suspicion from censors. Czyż recalled that “she had enjoyed reading stories for children with her brother by the popular pre-war author Kornel Makuszyński.” In the first letter, Czyż referred to a story in which a boy is kidnapped. His kidnappers instruct him to write a letter telling his family that he is okay and that he has left for a trip. However, the boy is clever, and in “the letter that he wrote, the first letter of each line read from top to bottom revealed a secret message.” Czyż’s family deciphered the meaning of this reference and found the secret message Czyż wrote. She wrote “‘list mocsem’ or letter in urine,” but her brother “missed the last two letters, reading ‘list mocz’, which means soak the letter.” As a result, the “first letter became diluted in water and the content did not survive.” to be preserved. Fortunately, Czyż’s family was still able to read the message and “eventually worked out what they had to do and started to iron each letter, the heat from which revealed the secret content.” The letter also contained instructions on how to confirm that the messages were received. For example, one of the confirmation methods was “adding a blue thread in a parcel.” After the women received verification from their families “they became completely absorbed in writing the letters.” thus sparking a communications mission that opened up the hushed and hidden practices of Ravensbruck²⁶.

After the initial letter, the group of four women expanded to others in the camp and became more meticulous. They discovered ways to include more information into the letters beyond the paper by using the “inside of the envelopes filling all the empty space with secret messages.”²⁷ Additionally, as some prisoners left the camp daily to do labor work, they “managed to send letters via the regular German postal service.”²⁸ These letters “were not

²⁶ “Extraordinary story of secret ‘letter-writing group’ who used own URINE as invisible ink to reveal death camp horrors.” Polish Press Agency.

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

personal, and were more like intelligence reports.”²⁹ The content mostly involved the experiments and would provide a list of names, deaths, and details of the procedures being conducted. Despite all of the information these couriers had, the women did not include accounts of their own operations. Instead, they would attempt at maintaining a positive tone to uplift their families. For example, one letter expressed the writer’s hope of reuniting with her family, “I believe that soon we will live as before.”³⁰ In another letter, the writer urged her family to stay optimistic, “I am happy that you are all healthy and strong. When I know that you are healthy, I think more calmly about everything, because a healthy person can endure so much more, both physically and morally.”³¹ In addition to their goal of breaking the barrier of communication that Ravensbruck had, these women used these letters as a way to remain hopeful and persevere the horrific circumstances they underwent. The letters also spoke about ways to smuggle in items without alerting the camp which monitored and heavily censored the incoming and outgoing mail. The letters would ask the families to “send toothpaste.”³² These tubes were sent filled with letters that could not be seen thus avoiding censorship and allowing the women to read exactly what their families had written. Another method was hiding letters “in the double bottom of a tin” or “underneath a jar of jam.”³³ The daring women of Ravensbruck took on the challenges they faced with unique solutions to fight for the truth.

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ “Letter 1 addressed to Jadwiga Michalewska.” Ravensbruck Letters. “Under the Clock” Martyr Museum, Lublin, Poland.

³¹ “Letter 2 addressed to Jadwiga Michalewska.” Ravensbruck Letters. “Under the Clock” Martyr Museum, Lublin, Poland.

³² “Letter 1” Ravensbruck Letter.

³³ David, Gil. “The Brilliant Code Used by Concentration Camp Inmates to Tell the World About Nazi Experiments.” Haaretz. February 25, 2021. <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/premium/MAGAZINE-nazis-experimented-on-these-women-they-told-the-world-using-brilliant-code-1.7249737>.

Eventually, the letters were sent to the Polish underground by the women's families and then on to the International Red Cross, the Vatican, and the Polish government-in-exile in London.³⁴ As a result, a broadcast by a Polish radio station in England told the Germans that officers and doctors "at the camp were responsible for the fate of the women, and they were warned that if any mass murders took place or experiments continued they and their families would be hunted down to the ends of the earth."³⁵ When this information reached back to the camp "it electrified the women, who saw that their efforts were bringing results."³⁶ They wrote the letters through the end of the war and "managed to survive until the Red Army liberated the camp in April 1945."³⁷

The courage and determination that the four Polish prisoners showed over four years resulted in the difference of how we perceive history today. Without their letters, the reality of Ravensbruck may have never been known, or destroyed in a way that diminished its significance. The correspondence from the Girl Guides was later used in the trials following the war and helped convict the doctors and other authority figures at Ravensbruck delivering justice to the victims. As with all history, it is founded on the voices of the people and with these letters' firsthand insight we gained a deeper understanding into the toll the Holocaust took.

³⁴ "Extraordinary story of secret 'letter-writing group' who used own URINE as invisible ink to reveal death camp horrors." Polish Press Agency.

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Ibid

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources:

Czyż, Krystyna. Testimony, in Materials on Ravensbrück concentration camp, 1941-1945.

“Chronicles of Terror.” Institute of National Remembrance. Accessed February 25, 2021.
https://www.zapisyterroru.pl/dlibra/show-content?id=1370&&navref=MTJpOzEyMSAxMnI7MTJhIDEyajsxMjI&format_id=6.

This source was used to explain what experiments happened at the Ravensbrück camp. I also used it for details of how living at the camp was.

Iwanska, Janina. Testimony, in Materials on Ravensbrück concentration camp, 1941-1945.

“Chronicles of Terror.” Institute of National Remembrance. Accessed February 25, 2021.
<https://www.zapisyterroru.pl/dlibra/publication/1441/edition/1424/content?navq=aHR0cDovL3d3dy56YXBpc3l0ZXJyb3J1LnBsL2RsaWJyYS9yZXN1bHRzP2FjdGlvbj1BZHZhbmNIZFNIYXJjaEFjdGlvbiZ0eXBIPS0zJnNIYXJjaF9hdHRpZDE9Njcmc2VhcmNoX3ZhbHVIMT1Sb2JiZXJ5JnA9NzQ&navref=MTM2OzEycCAxMmc7MTF6IDE0MTsxM2s>.

From this source I used the descriptions of the effects of the injections. I also used the details it provided of the injection and healing process.

“Letter 1 addressed to Jadwiga Michalewska.” Ravensbrück Letters. “Under the Clock” Martyr Museum, Lublin, Poland.

This source helped show the way women communicated to their families from the camps.

I was able to see the toll the camps had on the women in the way they wrote to their loved one in the letters.

“Letter 2 addressed to Jadwiga Michalewska.” Ravensbruck Letters. “Under the Clock” Martyr Museum, Lublin, Poland.

This source also served as an insight into how the women wrote about their experiences at Ravensbruck. These letters were informal and it helped me see how the women coped with their situation which I incorporated into the paper.

Wojtasik, Wanda. Testimony, in Materials on Ravensbruck concentration camp, 1941-1945.

“Chronicles of Terror.” Institute of National Remembrance. Accessed February 25, 2021. <https://www.zapisyterroru.pl/dlibra/publication/1399/edition/1382/content?navq=aHR0cDovL3d3dy56YXBpc3l0ZXJyb3J1LnBsL2RsaWJyYS9yZXN1bHRzP2FjdGlvbj1BZHZhbmNlZFNlYXJjaEFjdGlvbiZ0eXBIPS0zJnNlYXJjaF9hdHRpZDE9Njcmc2VhcmNoX3ZhbHVIMT1Sb2JiZXJ5JnA9NzQ&navref=MTQyOzEzbCExMnY7MTJlIDJmcDsyZjY>.

From this source I used the details of the infection and surgical procedures. I also used the descriptions of how the women lived with their wounds after surgery.

Secondary Sources:

Astor, M. (2018, April 12). Holocaust Is Fading From Memory, Survey Finds. *The New York Times*. Retrieved February 22, 2021 from

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/12/us/holocaust-education.html>

This study was included to show how history of the Holocaust is fading from the minds of people today. The study referenced the misinformation that people have about the Holocaust and how little they know the event in general.

David, Gil. “The Brilliant Code Used by Concentration Camp Inmates to Tell the World About Nazi Experiments.” Haaretz. February 25, 2021. <https://www.haaretz.com/world->

[news/premium/MAGAZINE-nazis-experimented-on-these-women-they-told-the-world-using-brilliant-code-1.7249737.](#)

This article provided the ways the women would smuggle items in from their parcels.

The article listed ways the women avoided censorship.

Herzstein, R. (1980). *The Nazis*. Time-Life Books.

This source was used to provide quotes from Hitler expressing his view on the Jews. This provided context behind his pursuing of the demise of European Jews.

Hilberg, R. (2019). *The Destruction of the European Jews*. Martino Fine Books.

This book was used to provide background into the beginning of the Holocaust. The information from this source outlined how the termination of the Jews was carried out.

Dowell, Stuart. "Extraordinary story of secret 'letter-writing group' who used own URINE as invisible ink to reveal death camp horrors." Polish Press Agency. Accessed February 25, 2021. [https://www.thefirstnews.com/article/extraordinary-story-of-secret-letter-writing-group-who-used-own-urine-as-invisible-ink-to-reveal-death-camp-horrors-10040.](https://www.thefirstnews.com/article/extraordinary-story-of-secret-letter-writing-group-who-used-own-urine-as-invisible-ink-to-reveal-death-camp-horrors-10040)

From this article, I found out how the initial letter was decoded. I used this in my paper to show the letter sequence started.

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Ravensbruck. "Ravensbruck." United States

Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accessed February 25, 2021.

[https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/ravensbrueck.](https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/ravensbrueck)

This source was used to outline the Ravensbruck camp and describe the construction and conditions of it.