Forms of Resistance by Women in Ravensbrück

Educational Material for High School and University (Undergraduate or Graduate) students

by

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Introduction

Abstract

This unit is aimed at secondary school, undergraduate, and graduate students. It examines the various forms of resistance of different women from Europe who were incarcerated in the female concentration camp of Ravensbrück between 1939 and 1945. By focusing on the individual historical experiences and narratives of both Jewish and non-Jewish women during the Holocaust, students can develop a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the life of women under Nazi rule in Germany and its allies. With this material we shed light on the vital role of women in the survival of the persecuted and in the ultimate victory over fascism. By illuminating how women responded to the oppression and targeted violence, we aim to showcase their courage, resilience, creativity, and loyalty.

The chapter explores the biographies of persecuted women who resisted Nazi oppression - either inside the Ravensbrück concentration camp and its subcamps, or before being deported to Ravensbrück. Among them are the Czech antifascist journalist **Milena Jesenská** and the German former communist **Magarete Buber-Neumann**, who became "camp sisters" (chapter 2). Their deep friendship was a form of solidarity that helped them resist the conditions of extermination that they were placed in. **Gina Finzi Schönheit**, a woman from Italy in a "mixed-marriage" with a Jewish husband, was deported to Ravensbrück in 1944. Her letters to family members can be seen as a form of resistance through words that could save lives in the destructive environment of the concentration camp (chapter 3). For Finzi Schönheit and others, writing became a means of survival. Resistance was not only expressed through writing, but also through creating material objects. For instance, Magarete Buber-Neumann asked fellow female inmates to make a handkerchief for her "camp sister", Milena. On the stolen fabric, they stitched Milena's prisoner number: "4714".[1]This unit also features **Antonie Maurer,** who lived in Friedberg in a "mixed-marriage" and was persecuted both as a communist and as a Jew (chapter 1). Maurer was a member of the Communist Party and opposed the Nazi regime before her incarceration in Ravensbrück. In the case of **Wanda Wojtasik Półtawska**, her involvement with the Polish "Union for Armed Struggle" may have played a crucial role when she organized

[1] Gabriele Knapp, " Widerstand und Resistenz", in: Inga Eschebach (ed.): *Das Frauen-Konzentrationslager Ravensbrück- Neue Beiträge zur Geschichte und Nachgeschichte*, Berlin 2014, pp. 219-234, here 226.

resistance with other Polish women against the medical experiments conducted on them in the camp (chapter 4). Solidarity among other groups of incarcerated women was also important for Sinti or Roma women and their acts of resistance (chapter 5). For instance, **Zilly Schmidt** was supported by Jehovah' Witness women, who gave her extra food in Ravensbrück and she later managed to escape from the Wittenberg subcamp with her cousin Tilla with the help of a forced laborer. This chapter also covers the experiences of the German Sinti **Philomena Franz** and the Austrian Romni **Ceija Stojka**, who not only engaged in various acts of resistance ranging from physical to metaphysical.

Sources

Resistance or help for the persecuted was often expressed in secret in order to avoid repression by the Nazis and their collaborators. As a result, acts of resistance only became known when the state institutions and perpetrators were informed, prompting further measures, e.g. actions by the Gestapo or police. These institutions often created files on these processes, many of which are still preserved in archives today. However, these files do not always provide information about the subsequent fate of the persons named in the documents. Furthermore, they primarily reflect the perpetrators' perspective on the events and are not depictions of what really happened, let alone the experiences of the persecuted. For this reason, postwar records such as oral or written testimonies constitute an important addition. For persecuted **Sinti and Roma** women, these testimonies are especially crucial as most of the documents were produced by the criminal police that persecuted them and mostly reflect their ideological and racist bias. The chapter on the resistance of Sinti and Roma women therefore relies heavily on memoirs written after the war. Some of these, such as those by **Philomena Franz** and **Ceija Stojka**, were the first accounts of this persecuted group and were published in the 1980s.

The **biography on Gina Finzi Schönheit** is based on a range of primary and secondary sources, including an interview with her son Franco Schönheit, as well as works by Alexander Stille, Rosa De Feo, and reconstructions from several historical institutes (CDEC Milano, Istituto della storia della Resistenza of Ferrara)

The biography of **Olga Blumenthal** is based only on a limited number of primary sources (e.g. a banknote from the Bank of Italy signed by Carlo Blumenthal) and more extensive publications by Italian historians about her life.

The sources used for the biographies of **two Polish "rabbits", Krystyna Czyż-Wilgat** and **Wanda Wojtasik Półtawska**, include various first-hand accounts, such as postwar

testimonies, memoirs, and secret wartime correspondence between the prisoners and their families. However, these documents do not provide a complete picture of the subjects of this study, as the authors primarily focused on their wartime experiences. Additionally, one must consider the typical pitfalls of working with ego-documents, including memory distortion and subjectivity. In the case of Krystyna Czyż-Wilgat, there is also a reluctance to dwell on her individual experiences. To create a more comprehensive biography, the information from her testimonies was supplemented by insights provided by Krystyna Czyż-Wilgat's family and a biographical essay published in 2007.

For the biography of **Antonie Maurer**, archival material from the central Hesse region was consulted. This material includes both files created by the Nazi authorities, such as the Gestapo, and files created after the war, in the context of compensation proceedings. Additionally, Peter Neuhof's book *Als die Braunen kamen* (When the Browns Came) provided valuable information. As Antonie's nephew, Peter Neuhof recorded the family history and frequently referenced Antonie's story.

It should be noted that Antonie never personally described her life or her experience of persecution. As a result, the reconstruction of her life story remains fragmentary. We can only speculate how she might have told it herself, how she was politically involved, how she experienced her time in Ravensbrück and how she ultimately died. Nevertheless, we hope that we have done her justice by reconstructing the available materials.

In the biographies of **Milena Jesenská and Margarete Buber-Neumann**, the author relied on newly discovered primary sources, such as Milena's letters from Ravensbrück , as well as other primary sources such as Franz Kafka's letters to Milena, and secondary sources such as biographies written by Milena's daughter, Jena, and by Margarete Buber-Neumann, along with newspaper articles and more recent biographies. In Jena's biography of her mother, it is her subjective perspective that shines through, having experienced the enormous love of her mother, but also the pain of losing her at an early age, and not having had her around enough during their time together. In contrast, Margarete's biography of Milena is written with the devotion and love of a friend who experienced the same terror and torture that ultimately led to her friend's death.

Ravensbrück, a concentration camp for women

Ravensbrück was one of the most central places of persecution of women under Nazism. The camp was opened in May 1939 near the town of Fürstenberg in Brandenburg, approximately 100 kilometers northeast of Berlin, as the central women's concentration camp of the Nazi regime. After the war began, the SS continuously expanded the camp to accommodate the influx of women from the occupied countries who were now also committed there. From 1942, over 40 satellite camps were set up, many of them serving the German war economy.[2] In addition to the women's camp, the camp complex in Fürstenberg also included a smaller camp for men, the Siemens camp - a forced labor camp for the German company -, and the Uckermark "youth protection camp" for young girls.

In total, around 120,000 women and children from over 30 countries and 20,000 men were deported to Ravensbrück. These men and women were incarcerated for various reasons: they were "racially" persecuted as Jews or Sinti and Roma, or for political reasons, such as being communists or social democrats. Additionally, they were persecuted as "asocials" or allegedly "criminals," and on the grounds of their beliefs such as Jehovah's Witnesses. Depending on the category of persecution, prisoners were forced to wear a "Winkel", a triangle on their clothes, that indicated the prisoner category by color: Jews were forced to wear a yellow star, "asocials" a black triangle, criminals a green triangle, and political prisoners a red triangle. However, these categorizations were blurry. For instance, many Jewish women sent to Ravensbrück were not incarcerated specifically as Jews, but rather as political prisoners or "asocials". Similarly, many Sinti and Roma women had to wear the black triangle.

Ravensbrück was a place of extreme suffering: prisoners had to perform forced labor, were subjected to medical experimentation, starved, and endured brutal living conditions. In late 1944, a gas chamber was installed at the camp where an estimated 5,000-6,000 people were killed. It is estimated that between 30,000 to 90,000 died at Ravensbrück, of which the majority perished from cold, starvation, shooting, beatings, lethal injections, disease and medical experimentation, while tens of thousands were deported eastward to be murdered in the extermination camps.[3] Ravensbrück operated until April 1945, when the advancing Soviet army liberated

[2] Beßmann, Alyn; Eschebach, Insa (2013): Das Frauen-Konzentrationslager Ravensbrück, Geschichte und Erinnerung, Ausstellungskatalog, Schriftenreihe der Stiftung Brandenburgische Gedenkstätten, Band 41, Metropolverlag, p. 23

[3] Beßmann, Alyn; Eschebach, Insa (2013): Das Frauen-Konzentrationslager Ravensbrück, Geschichte und Erinnerung, Ausstellungskatalog, Schriftenreihe der Stiftung Brandenburgische Gedenkstätten, Band 41, Metropol Verlag, p. 11.

the camp. The camp remains a significant symbol of Nazi atrocities against women. Today, it serves as a reminder and memorial to the resilience of the women who endured it.

Fig. 1: Female prisoners of the concentration camp Ravensbrück performing forced labor. Photographer and date unknown. Source: Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-1985-0417-15 / CC-BY-SA 3.0.

Why focus on resistance by women in Ravensbrück?

For many years, the experiences of women during the Second World War were marginalized in the historiography of the Holocaust while women also kept their silence or emphasized the role played by male resisters. However, women were often equally involved in clandestine activities and played a crucial role in organizing their own survival. Women in the Holocaust faced specific forms of violence, including work exploitation, sexual violence, and medical experiments. Their experiences enable us to understand a broader context of resistance and survival.

In the post-war patriarchal order, it was assumed that there was generally no distinction between male and female experiences in the Holocaust. However, the 1980s brought a paradigmatic shift, closely linked to social upheavals and the women's movement.[4] The first international conference on the topic was held in 1983 in New York, where Esther Katz and Joan Miriam Ringelheim brought up the question of the gendered nature of the Holocaust for the first time, which was followed by numerous scholarly publications and women's memoirs.[5] These works not only focused on the experiences of the persecuted women but also the role of female perpetrators in committing Nazi crimes was questioned and underlined that they were not merely accessories to murder on behalf of state orders; they played a vital role in the Nazi genocidal policies and practices.[6] These crimes, however, were committed by male and female

[4] Kirsten Heinsohn/ Claudia Kemper, "Geschlechtergeschichte", Version: 1.0, in: *Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte*, 04.12.2012.

[5] Esther Katz and Joan Miriam Ringelheim (eds.), *Women Surviving: The Holocaust*, New York 1983; Joan Ringelheim, "Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 10, no. 4, 1985, pp. 741–61; Sybil Milton, "Women and the Holocaust: The Case of German and German-Jewish Women," in Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grossman, Marion Kaplan (eds.): *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany*, New York 1984, 297-333; Vera Laska, *Women in the Resistance and in the Holocaust: the voices of eyewitnesses,* Westport 1983; Gisela Bock, "Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany: Motherhood, Compulsory Sterilization, and the State," in: *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 8, no. 3 (Spring 1983), pp. 400-421; Gisela Bock, *Zwangssterilisation im Nationalsozialismus. Studien zur Rassenpolitik und Frauenpolitik (= Schriften des Zentralinstituts für Sozialwissenschaftliche Forschung der Freien Universität Berlin, Band 48),* Opladen 1986; Gisela Bock, " Ganz normale Frauen. Täter, Opfer, Mitläufer und Zuschauer im Nationalsozialismus", in: Kirsten Heinsohn et al.. (eds.): *Zwischen Karriere und Verfolgung, Campus*, Frankfurt 1997, pp. 245–277; Gisela Bock, "Der Nationalsozialismus und die Frauen", in Bernd Sösemann (ed.): Der Nationalsozialismus und die deutsche Gesellschaft. Einführung und Überblick, Stuttgart 2002; Gisela Bock (ed.), *Genozid und Geschlecht. Jüdische Frauen im nationalsozialistischen Lagersystem*, Frankfurt a. M. 2005; Marion Kaplan, "Did Gender Matter during the Holocaust?" in *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Winter 2019), pp. 37-56.

[6] Ursula Nienhaus, "Himmlers willige Komplizinnen – Weibliche Polizei im Nationalsozialismus 1937 bis 1945", in: Michael Grüttner et al. (eds), *Geschichte und Emanzipation. Festschrift für Reinhard Rürup*, Frankfurt a.M. 1999, pp. 515–539; Kathrin Kompisch, *Täterinnen. Frauen im Nationalsozialismus*, Köln/Weimar/Wien 2008; Sybille Steinbacher, "Einleitung, in ibid (ed.) *Volksgenossinnen. Frauen in der NS-Volksgemeinschaft*, Göttingen 2007, pp. 10–27; Verena Meier, "Täterinnen der Weiblichen Kriminalpolizei bei der NS-Verfolgung von Sinti*ze und Rom*nja", in: *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften* 33 (2022),

perpetrators in "asymmetric networks", as more men occupied more dominant positions.[7] Regarding the persecuted, it is now widely acknowledged that they suffered "different horrors but the same hell".[8]

Initially, "heroic" resistance narratives also carried predominantly male connotations.[9] Female survivors, when interviewed, downplayed their own actions and performance, because they viewed them as "nothing great" according to the dominating understanding of women's roles.[10] Furthermore, Jews and other persecuted groups often stood in the shadow of their non-persecuted supporters. The Jews and other persecuted themselves were primarily responsible for organizing their own survival. They also had to show courage and skill to face extreme situations, including the fear of death, despair, loneliness, and the hardships of surviving for a long time..[11] With regard to the former female inmates of the concentration camp Ravensbrück, the postwar public discourse and collective memory were shaped by intellectuals and politically active women and men who spoke up publicly and organized early lobbying groups.[12] For Ravensbrück, it was the group of female political prisoners who, as early as 1946, organized internationally and became an amplifier for their perspectives on the former concentration camp.[13]

This educational material, however, follows a broad conceptualization of resistance and highlights the various facets of resistance within the concentration camp, where the scope for action of the persecuted was extremely limited due to the omnipresent terror imposed by the guards.

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pp. 144–166; Daniel Patrick Brown, *The Camp Women - The Female Auxilliaries Who Assisted the SS in Running the Nazi Concentration Camp System*, Atglen 2002; Gisela Bock/Dalia Ofer/Leanore J. Weitzman, Gisela Bock, "Ordinary Women in Nazi Germany. Perpetrators, Victims, Followers, and Bystander", in Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (eds.)*Women in the Holocaust*, New Haven/London 2008, pp. 85–100; Wendy Lower, *Hitler's Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields*, London 2014; Wendy Lower, "Male and Female Holocaust Perpetrators and the East German Approach to Justice, 1949-1963," in: *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 24 (2010) Nr. 1, pp. 56–84.

[7] Lerke Gravenhorst, "NS-Verbrechen und asymmetrische Geschlechterdifferenz. Eine kritische Auseinandersetzung mit historischen Analysen zur NS-Täterschaft", in Elke Frietsch, Christina Herkommer (eds.) *Nationalsozialismus und Geschlecht. Zur Politisierung und Ästhetisierung von Körper, „Rasse" und Sexualität im „Dritten Reich" und nach 1945*, Bielefeld 2009, p. 86-108.

[8] Myrna Goldenberg and Amy Shapiro (eds.), *Different Horrors / Same Hell: Gender and the Holocaust*, Seattle 2013.

[9] Kapp, "Widerstand und Reisten", p. 219-234.

[10] Helga Amesberger/ Brigitte Halbmayr (eds.), *Vom Leben und Überleben – Wege nach Auschwitz, Vol 1: Dokumentation und Analyse*, Wien 2001, p. 61f.

[11] Wolfgang Benz, „Juden im Untergrund und ihre Helfer", in: Ibid (ed.), *Überleben im Dritten Reich. Juden im Untergrund und ihre Helfer*, München: C.H.Beck, 2003,p. 11–50, here p. 11.

[12] Kapp, "Widerstand und Reisten", p. 220.

[13] Susan Hogervorst, "Weiblichkeit und Widerstand. Transnationale und nationale Erinnerungskulturen zu Ravensbrück", in: Andreas Ehresmann et al. (eds.) *Die Erinnerung an die nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager. Akteure, Inhalte, Strategien*, Berlin 2011, pp. 77-96.

The concept of resistance is used in this chapter in its many forms, from Yehuda Bauer's *amidah*[14], to political, civic, and armed resistance. Some of the women presented in this chapter engaged in acts of anti-Nazi resistance before arriving in Ravensbrück, which was the reason for their deportation to the camp. This is the case of **Milena Jesenská**, **Margarete Buber-Neumann**, **Krystyna Czyż-Wilgat**, and **Wanda Wojtasik Półtawska** all of whom were active in resistance both before and inside the camp. Other women performed acts of resistance through solidarity, friendship, and outright defiance within the camp such as seen in the biographies of Sinti women **Zilly Schmidt or Philomena Franz**, – who also made several attempts to escape the camp - some successful and some unsuccessful - with the help of others. The biographies of the Romani woman **Ceija Stojka** and Italian Jewish woman **Gina Finzi Schönheit** further highlight that art and letter writing can be seen as acts of resistance.

The scope of actions of the persecuted to resist within the concentration camp system was "completely different than outside," as it was much more limited.[15] One common feature of different definitions of resistance to Nazism is the aspect of putting oneself in danger, which becomes transparent in all the biographies presented.[16] The "communities of solidarity" were of great importance.[17] They created moments of privacy even inside the camp, allowing prisoners to create their own spatial niches where they could escape from the dominant spaces of power and oppression. These niches and communities of solidarity did not necessarily align with the lines of demarcation that separated the different oppressed groups.The chapter thus sheds some light on the various forms of persecution experienced by these women, as well as the ways in which they resisted .

[14] Yehuda Bauer wrote that resistance to the Nazis was not limited to physical opposition but also included any activity that gave the Jewish people dignity and humanity despite the humiliating and inhumane conditions. This passive and spiritual resistance as opposed to physical resistance, and falls under Yehuda Bauer's concept of "amidah", the Hebrew word meaning "to stand up against", which asserts that any act of resisting the destruction of Jewish life and Jews' will to live is an act of defiance. See, for example, Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2001.

[15] Karoline Georg, Paula Oppermann and Verena Meier, Introduction, in: Ibid. (eds.), *Between Collaboration and Resistance. Papers from the 21st Workshop on the History and Memory of National Socialist Camps and Extermination Sites*, Berlin: Metropol, 2020, p. 9-26, here p. 18.

[16] Wolfgang Benz, „Juden im Untergrund und ihre Helfer", in: Ibid (ed.), *Überleben im Dritten Reich. Juden im Untergrund und ihre Helfer*, München: C.H.Beck, 2003, p. 11–50, here p. 11.

[17] Gabriele Knapp, " Widerstand und Resistenz", in: Inga Eschebach (ed.): *Das Frauen-Konzentrationslager Ravensbrück- Neue Beiträge zur Geschichte und Nachgeschichte*, Berlin 2024, pp. 219-234, p. 228-229.

Methodology / Didactics

This unit undertakes a biographical approach by presenting different biographies of Sinti and Roma women, Polish Christian and German, Jewish Czech and Italian women who were politically and/or racially persecuted across Europe and incarcerated at Ravensbrück and its subcamps. Learning through biographies provides students with a personal and relatable way to understand the Holocaust, allowing them to connect emotionally with the experiences of individuals who lived through it. These biographies make historical events more tangible by putting names, faces, and personal stories to what might otherwise seem like abstract numbers or statistics. Through these individual stories, students can grasp the widespread impact of the Holocaust, recognizing how many unique lives were disrupted, altered, or lost, and how women from different persecuted groups resisted.

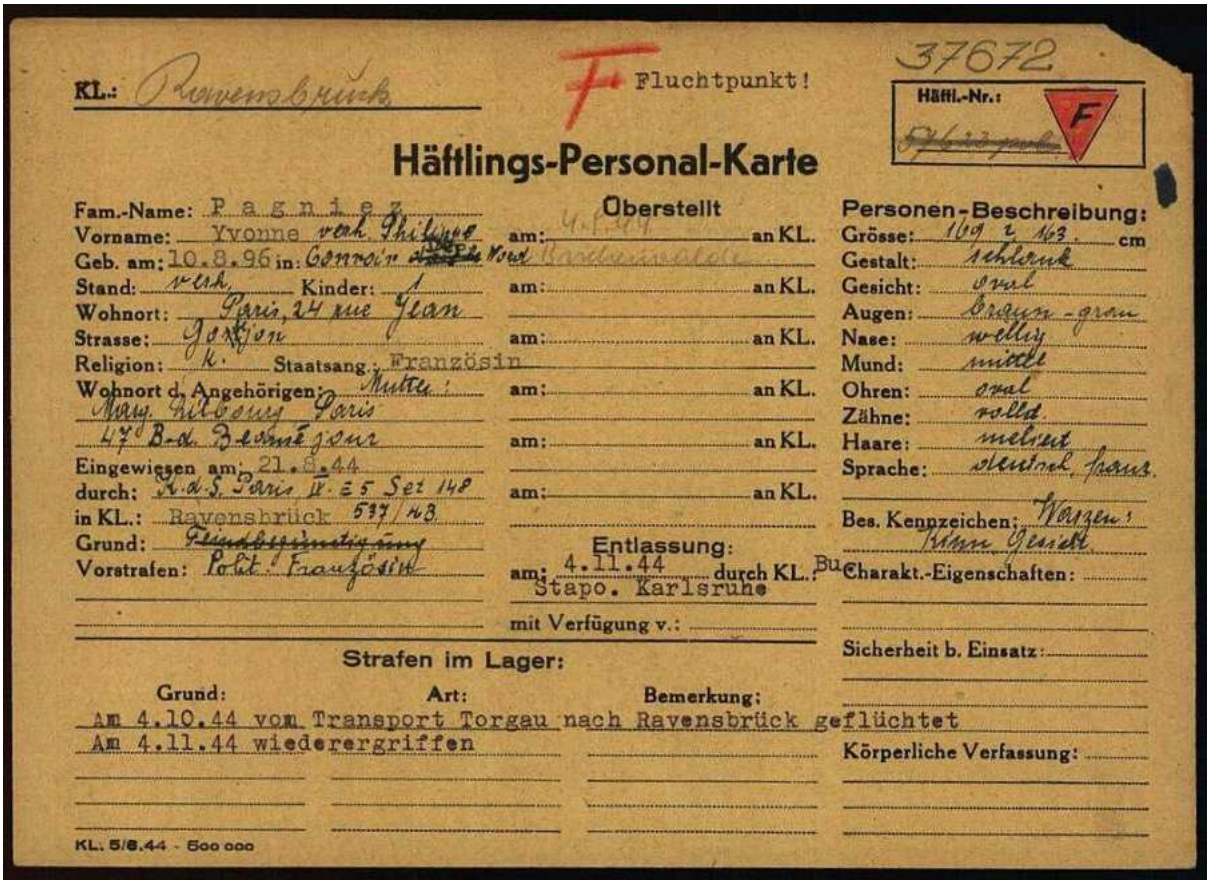
Teaching about female resistance during the Holocaust highlights the courage and resilience of women who opposed Nazi oppression, offering a more nuanced and empowering perspective on this period. It also integrates more female voices into the dominant narratives. These resistance stories challenge the misconception that Holocaust victims were entirely passive, revealing a range of defiant acts, from armed uprisings to cultural and spiritual resistance. Teaching about resistance fosters discussions about agency and moral responsibility, encouraging students to reflect on their own values and their potential to stand up against injustice. Finally, these biographies inspire students to remember and honor these individuals, promoting a deeper, more lasting commitment to combating intolerance and upholding human rights.

The biographies can be taught independently or in an interconnected way, giving teachers and lecturers flexibility in how they integrate them into their classes, depending on their personal time management and students' capabilities. Additionally, students could be asked to conduct their own biographical research on the topic of resistance by female inmates of the Ravensbrück concentration camp, helping to deepen their understanding of the topic. The online archive of the Arolsen Archives offers documents from the camp administration as well as postwar documents related to the tracing of individuals who were persecuted by the Nazi regime and their allies.[18] Furthermore, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum as well as Yad Vashem offer a wide range of sources that are digitized.[19] Oral testimonies can be found in the USC

[18] The Arolsen Archives are accessible via the following link: https://collections.arolsen-archives.org/de/search, accessed 08-01-2025.

[19] The collections of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum are accessible via the following link: https://collections.ushmm.org/search/ and the Yad Vashem digital collections accessible under: https://www.yadvashem.org/collections.html, accessed 08-01-2025.

Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive as well as in the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies.[20]



KL.: Ravensbrück

F Fluchtpunkt!

37672

Häftl.-Nr.:

Häftlings-Personal-Karte

Fam.-Name: Pagniez
Vorname: Yvonne veuve Philippe
Geb. am: 10.8.96 in: Cenon s/Pe Nord
Stand: verh. Kinder: 1
Wohnort: Paris, 24 rue Jean
Strasse: Goujon
Religion: k. Staatsang.: Französin
Wohnort d. Angehörigen: Mutter!
Mme. Gilbert Paris
47 Bd. Beaumarchais
Eingewiesen am: 21.8.44
durch: K.d.S. Paris IV. E 5 Sel 148
in KL.: Ravensbrück 537/43
Grund: Feindbegünstigung
Vorstrafen: Polit. Französin

Oberstellt

am: 4.[illegible] an KL. Bu
am: an KL.
am: an KL.
am: an KL.
am: an KL.

Entlassung:

am: 4.11.44 durch KL.: Stapo. Karlsruhe
mit Verfügung v.:

Personen-Beschreibung:

Grösse: 169 u 163 cm
Gestalt: schlank
Gesicht: oval
Augen: braun-grau
Nase: wellig
Mund: mittel
Ohren: oval
Zähne: voll
Haare: meliert
Sprache: deutsch, franz.
Bes. Kennzeichen: Warzen! Kinn, Gesicht
Charakt.-Eigenschaften:
Sicherheit b. Einsatz:
Körperliche Verfassung:

Strafen im Lager:

Grund:	Art:	Bemerkung:
Am 4.10.44 vom Transport Torgau nach Ravensbrück geflüchtet		
Am 4.11.44 wiedergriffen		

KL. 5/6.44 - 500 000

Fig. 2: Registration card of the French political prisoner Yvonne Pagniez, who was transported from Paris to Ravensbrück on 21. August 1944 and who escaped from the concentration camp on 4. October 1944 but was captured a month later again. Source: Arolsen Archives 1.135/ 7674596 ITS International Archive, CC BY-SA 4.0.

[20] Link to the USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive: https://sfi.usc.edu/what-we-do/collections and link to the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies: https://fortunoff.library.yale.edu/research/search-the-archive/, accessed 08-01-2025.

Chapter 1: Persecuted as a Jew and Communist under National Socialism - Antonie Maurer, née Neuhof, from Friedberg, Germany

Constantin Stremmer and Randi Becker

Antonie Maurer a German-Jewish woman, was persecuted under National Socialism both as a Jew and as a communist and as a result was sent to the Ravensbrück concentration camp.

Fig. 1: Antonie Maurer in 1940. Photographer unknown. Source: Stadtarchiv Friedberg.

Persecution of Communists in Nazi Germany

After the National Socialists came to power in Germany in 1933, resistance groups quickly began to form in many places. In the early years of the Nazi regime, it was mainly communists who actively resisted and who suffered persecution and terror after January 30, 1933. In the summer of 1933, around 15,000 communist functionaries and activists had been placed in 'protective custody'. The resistance activities of these communist as well as social-democratic-oriented resistance groups and individuals, included distributing leaflets and stickers opposing National Socialism, painting slogans on walls and supporting people persecuted for racial or political reasons . The Communist Party of Germany (KPD) was one such organization . The KPD and its subsidiary organizations, such as *Rote Hilfe Deutschlands* (Red Aid of Germany) were organized in many German cities, including the Friedberg area north of Frankfurt, where

Antonie Maurer came from. Anyone discovered or betrayed while engaged in activities connected to these organizations risked arrest, mistreatment, imprisonment in a concentration camp, or execution.

Antonie Maurer's life before incarceration in the concentration camp

Antonie Maurer (née Neuhof) was born on June 8, 1895 to the Jewish couple August and Helene Neuhof in Friedberg (in Hesse). She married the non-Jewish Edgar Maurer on July 28. 1930, and left the Jewish religious community before 1933.

Her husband was a trained draftsman, a member of the Communist Party, and town councilor in Friedberg. He was wounded in the First World War and received a war disability pension. The couple had one son, Rudolf Maurer, who was born on January 9, 1931.

Antonie Maurer worked as a "master dressmaker" and ran her own dressmaking salon at Haingraben 14 in Friedberg. This profession earned her a high annual income of around 3,000 Reichsmark in 1932, while the average income that year was 1,651 Reichsmark. Her husband described Antonie as having “made the lion's share of the family's income”. Colleagues in the industry noted that she had a “demanding and solvent clientele”. Antonie Maurer also employed “at least 2 assistants and 4-5 apprentices” and was known for her exemplary working conditions.

Antisemitic exclusion from economic life

Shortly after the Nazis came to power in Germany, the economic exclusion of Jews began. Jewish businesses were boycotted by the non-Jewish population, and Jews were to be completely excluded from economic life. This exclusion also affected Antonie Maurer. Beginning on January 30, 1933, Antonie and her family became the target of an increasing antisemitic boycott. As a result, her tailoring business saw a drop in income by "around 50%", as the clientele was greatly reduced and because Antonie Maurer lowered prices for the then predominantly Jewish clientele. Antonie Maurer secretly continued to fullfil orders for some loyal customers. In 1933, due to the beginning of political persecution and the incarceration of Edgar, the town administration forced the Maurer family to move from their apartment at Bismarckstrasse 27 (Friedberg) to Usagasse 19. Edgar recalled later: "The city of Friedberg canceled our city-owned flat solely for political reasons. With great difficulty, my wife managed to rent a room for us from a Jewish widow called Arnstein in the old Usagasse."

Fig. 2: Gustel Mönch geb. Neuhof, Rosa Metzger geb. Neuhof, Helene Neuhof, Antonie Maurer geb. Neuhof. Photographer unknown. Source: Stadtarchiv Friedberg.

The beginning persecution of communists

Both Edgar and Antonie were incarcerated in 1933 for political reasons, likely due to their membership in the KPD . Antonie was detained from March 15 to March 17, 1933, at the Friedberg police station in so-called “protective custody” for “political reasons”.

Antonie's husband, Edgar was a member of the KPD and had served on the Friedberg town council for the KPD before the National Socialists came to power. From June 7 until October 30, 1933, he was also imprisoned for political reasons. The Gestapo file on him noted that he had not made any further political appearances after 1933. Antonie is also mentioned in the file, with a note stating: “Edgar was married to a Jewish woman who had also been a member of the KPD”. After 1945, Antonie Maurer also appeared in SED (Social Unity Party) files as a “former member of the KPD”.

In 1934, Antonie Maurer was linked to the ‘Köhne and comrades case’ in Gestapo documents, which documented her political persecution. Fritz Köhne, an employee of the *Rote Hilfe Deutschlands’* legal defense office, was arrested in 1934, and during his court procedure, many names and structures associated with *Rote Hilfe* were mentioned. The Gestapo later appeared to assume that Antonie and Edgar were involved in these *Rote Hilfe* structures. While it is no longer possible to reconstruct how Antonie was really involved in these resistance structures, it is documented that she was then persecuted based on the presumption of her participation.

Fig. 3: Antonie Maurer with husband Edgar and their son Rudi in 1940. Unknown photographer. Source: Stadtarchiv Friedberg.

Antisemitic persecution

On November 10, 1938, as almost everywhere in Germany, pogroms also took place in Friedberg. On that day, Antonie Maurer's workshop was demolished and the Maurer familys' home was also vandalized. Edgar Maurer later recounted: “On November 10, 1938 (...) we (...) were victims of the pogrom - this cursed day. The work of destroying and looting Arnstein's home and business had not yet been completed when the stairwell was already occupied by a jeering gang of pogrom heroes. My mother-in-law and my wife were taken to the police by some people (apparently Polytechnic students). I went with them to protect myself and my then eight-year-old son from possible assault. At the entrance to the police station, the police officers told us that the suspension was not justified and that we could go home. We saw the Arnstein flat and the shop completely devastated. Around the corner of the house was a pile of rubble made of broken glass, paper and textiles.” Antonie Maurer was unable to reopen her workshop after the pogroms as she was banned from her profession and her monthly income fell to 500 RM.

In September 1942, the Jews of Friedberg were deported, though Antonie was not among them. However, her mother Helene Neuhof, was deported to Theresienstadt at the age of over 80. She was murdered in December of the same year. Antonie and Edgar knew about her mother's impending deportation and did their best to prevent it. But she couldn't do anything and wrote to her brother in Berlin: “All the excitement is useless. Our hands are tied.” Her brother and his wife then traveled to Friedberg to see her mother one last time. Antonie's nephew later wrote: “She will have to go on the ‘transport’. The last journey of an eighty-year-old. The four of them sit at the table. Toni, my father's sister, my mother, my father, my grandmother. (...) The four of them sit together for a long time. Farewell without words. Simply silent and letting life pass by in their thoughts once again.”

In Nazi Germany, a marriage between a Jewish and a non-Jewish person was classified as a „mixed marriage“. “Mixed marriages” posed a problem for the National Socialists: Jewish partners were to be isolated from their partner and their non-Jewish environment so that they could be persecuted. At the same time, the National Socialists did not want to take too radical action against those in mixed marriages in order to avoid losing the approval of their non-Jewish relatives. While the Nuremberg Laws of 1935 initially prohibited new “mixed marriages”, existing marriages were left untouched for a long time. Jews living in “mixed mar-

riages" were thus subjected to anti-Jewish measures and marginalized, but they were not required to wear a Jewish star, and they were also initially excluded from the early stages of the extermination of Jews. In particular, marriage where the husband was not Jewish or marriages with non-Jewish children were considered "privileged mixed marriages" and, for the time being, had to be protected from the broader persecution of Jews. The marriage between Antonie and Edgar Maurer was classified by the Nazi regime as a "privileged mixed marriage". For this reason, Antonie did not have to wear a yellow star, but she was forced to use the name "Sara".

It was not until the end of 1944 that efforts to deport people from "mixed marriages" were stepped up. In February 1945, nearly 2,000 Jews from "mixed marriages" were deported to Theresienstadt concentration camp. Because people in "mixed marriages" were protected from deportation for a long time, approximately 13,000 of the estimated 35,000 Jews "in mixed marriages" were able to survive National Socialism.

A list of Jewish women from Friedberg who lived in "mixed marriages" dated February 9, 1942, includes Antonie Maurer and six other women. All the women on this list were murdered in 1944 and 1945. Antonie's brother, Karl Neuhof, who had been awarded the Iron Cross by Emperor Wilhelm II during the First World War, was murdered in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp on November 15, 1943.

Arrests as part of the Gitter campaign against political opponents

On August 22th 1944, Antonie Maurer and her husband, Edgar Maurer, were arrested again by the Gestapo in Friedberg. The arrest was part of the so-called "Aktion Gitter" (Action Grille), in which many political opponents of the Nazis were arrested in response to the July 20, 1944 assassination attempt on Adolf Hitler by a resistance group with members of the German military, including Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg on. Antonie and Edgar Maurer were initially deported to a subcamp of Buchenwald. After an air raid on Buchenwald, they were transferred to Dachau. Edgar was imprisoned there, while Antonie was "rejected as unfit for detention" and taken to Giessen. Antonie was later imprisoned in Butzbach, close to her hometown, for a while. There she had to work as a tailor for one of the camp's officers. During this time, her son Rudi was allowed to visit her.

Deportation to Ravensbrück

Antonie Maurer was then taken to the women's concentration camp at Ravensbrück. There Antonie Maurer met her sister-in-law Gertrude Neuhof, who had also been incarcerated there. Gertrude Neuhof later described Antonie´s journey to Ravensbrück, as an "almost unbelievable story," which she told Gertrude: Antonie had been picked up by a single Gestapo officer and taken to Berlin on the night train. Antonie told the officer that she had relatives near Berlin, and the officer allowed her to visit them. They both got off the train in Frohnau and had a coffee together. The officer then sent Antonie to visit her relatives, but they were not home. She then went back to the officer, who eventually took her to Ravensbrück. Antonie said later that she could have escaped, but she did not know where to go.

Her nephew Peter Neuhof, who lived in Berlin, later recalled: "August 1944. We find a note in the letterbox. It must have been posted during the day. A greeting from Toni, my father's sister. Written in a hasty hand. Just a few lines. Unfortunately she hadn't found us. She is currently sitting in Café Herrmann at the railway station, accompanied by an official. She was on her way to Ravensbrück concentration camp. Hopefully we would still be in time. We'll be at Café Herrmann in a few minutes. There's no sign of Toni and her guard. Too late. (...) We are shaken up (...). What can we do? Nothing."

Time in the Ravensbrück concentration camp

The exact date of Antonie Maurer's admission to the Ravensbrück concentration camp is not documented. The *Länder-Personenkatalog* in the Ravensbrück archive states "__.11.1944" as the date of admission. It is documented that she was still in Berlin with the Gestapo officer in August. There is no information about Antonie Maurer's whereabouts during September and October 1944. However, it is also possible that an incorrect date of arrival was noted.

Antonie Maurer was imprisoned in Ravensbrück as both a political prisoner and a Jew, so she was forced to wear the red square, possibly with a star. In the camp , Antonie Maurer was imprisoned in blocks 28b and 18 and was assigned the prisoner number 66477.

Antonie Maurer frequently met with her sister-in-law, Gertrude Neuhof. Gertrude writes that Antonie was housed in a block "where there were almost only Jews" and that "even

the prisoners themselves did not behave in a comradely manner". This latter situation placed a heavy burden on Antonie Maurer, which may be attributed to her political views. There is no documented information about her time in the concentration camp. There are only statements from fellow prisoners, such as her sister-in-law, Gertrude Neuhof. As Antonie Maurer was a trained seamstress, it can be assumed that she had to work in the sewing room or the Ravensbrück textile factory, but there is no record of her work in the block book of Block 18.

There is also no certainty about her state of health in Ravensbrück: while Gertrude reports that Antonie "didn't look any worse" than she did before, another inmate at Ravensbrück, reported that a woman she believed to be Antonie had "severe diarrhea with fever" and "couln't eat anything".

Death of Antonie Maurer

It is certain however, that Antonie remained in Ravensbrück until the spring of 1945. Gertrude Neuhof met Antonie Maurer for the last time shortly before March 21, 1945. There is only speculation about the events that followed: According to Gertrude, Antonie Maurer was to be sent on a transport. However, the Ravensbrück *Kalendarium* does not record any transports to other concentration camps between March 21 and April 1, 1945, only murders. Edgar Mauer suspected that Antonie Maurer had been transferred to Bergen-Belsen, but he later learned from acquaintances there that his wife had never arrived. In November 1945, her son Rudi filled out a search request for his mother. He wrote the following about her death: "On March 20 or 21, my mother went on transport. The political prisoners advised her against it and wanted to hide her. For reasons that I and my father cannot explain, she did not accept this offer, but went on the death transport, perhaps in consideration of escape possibilities or out of resignation. At that time, two transports left Ravensbrück, one to Rügen and one to Bergen-Belsen, of which we discovered survivors. There were very few of them who didn't know my mother; my mother was certainly not among the survivors. It can be assumed that my mother is no longer among the living and that she perished miserably somewhere in northern Germany." Another theory, based on the testimony of a fellow prisoner, was that Antonie was pushed into

a pit by a female guard and drowned there. However, this report turned out to be a mistake. It is also possible that Antonie Maurer was murdered in the Uckermark concentration camp after March 21, 1945. This would be conclusive according to the Ravensbrück *Kalendarium* and two local historians, Thomas Petrasch and Klaus-Dieter Rack, who also assume that Antonie Maurer was murdered in Uckermark. Whether Antonie Maurer was murdered in Uckermark, died during a transport or death march, or died in Ravensbrück due to illness and malnutrition, remains uncertain. Her husband, Edgar Maurer, ruled out the possibility of her survival.

Her nephew concludes: "Toni Mauerer remained in Ravensbrück until April 1945. She would often meet with my mother in secret. Both will look to the future with confidence. We have survived the worst, they will say. The war and their time of suffering is coming to an end. But we'll never hear from Toni again. She must have been murdered in the last days of the war. All enquiries will come to nothing."

Compensation and Remembrance

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, various laws introduced the possibility of applying for compensation for the injustices suffered under National Socialism. Applications could be submitted by the victims themselves, if they had survived, but also by relatives of those who had been murdered. The legal basis for compensation was repeatedly discussed and amended. In principle, anyone who had been persecuted on political, racial, religious or ideological grounds and had suffered damage to their life, body, health, freedom, property or assets, as well as to their professional or economic advancement, was entitled to receive compensation. However, even after 1945, the German authorities were still staffed with old Nazis, who often treated applicants in a discriminatory manner. As a result, anti-communism, antisemitism and antigypsyism continued for a long time in the compensation proceedings. Many survivors were denied compensation or had to fight for it for a very long time.

Edgar Maurer submitted an application for compensation for his deceased wife in March 1951. Antonie Maurer's application took a long time to process, particularly because although the authorities recognized that she had been persecuted on racial grounds, she had already left the Jewish religious community before the Nazi regime came to power and was therefore not recognized as a persecuted Jew under the provisions of the Compensation Act. In 1957, Edgar and Rudolf Maurer received financial compensation under several categories:

"loss of liberty", "destruction and imprisonment of property", "occupational damage," and a "training grant".

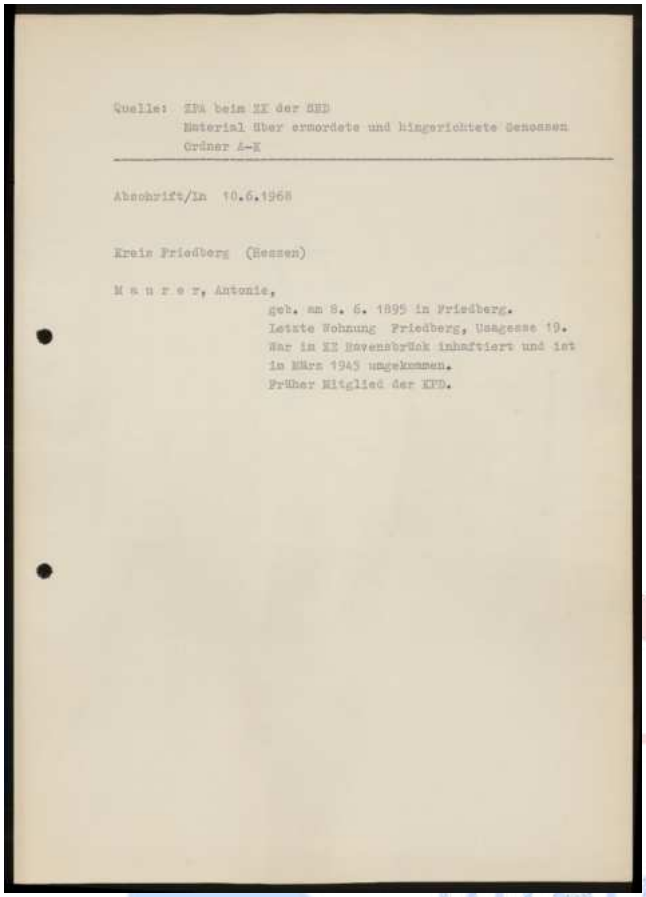
The question of Antonie Maurer's Jewish identity also resurfaced in the issues surrounding her commemoration: her name did not initially appear on a plaque erected by the town of Friedberg in memory of the persecuted Jews because the town had based the plaque on records from the Jewish community in the 1930s. By that time, however, Antonie Maurer had already left the community. Her family then campaigned for the plaque to be changed and arranged for Antonie Maurer's name to be added. Today, her memory is also honored by the naming of a street in her hometown of Friedberg.

Fig. 4: Memory plaque in Friedberg 2004 with the added name of Antonie Maurer. Unknown photographer. Source: Stadtarchiv Friedberg.

Fig. 5: Street named after Antonie Maurer. Photographed by Constantin Stremmer, Source: Constantin Stremmer.

Material

1. Index of the Central Party Archive of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) of the German Democratic Republic



Quelle: ZPA beim ZK der SED
Material über ermordete und hingerichtete Genossen
Grüner A-K

Abschrift/Ln 10.6.1968

Kreis Friedberg (Hessen)

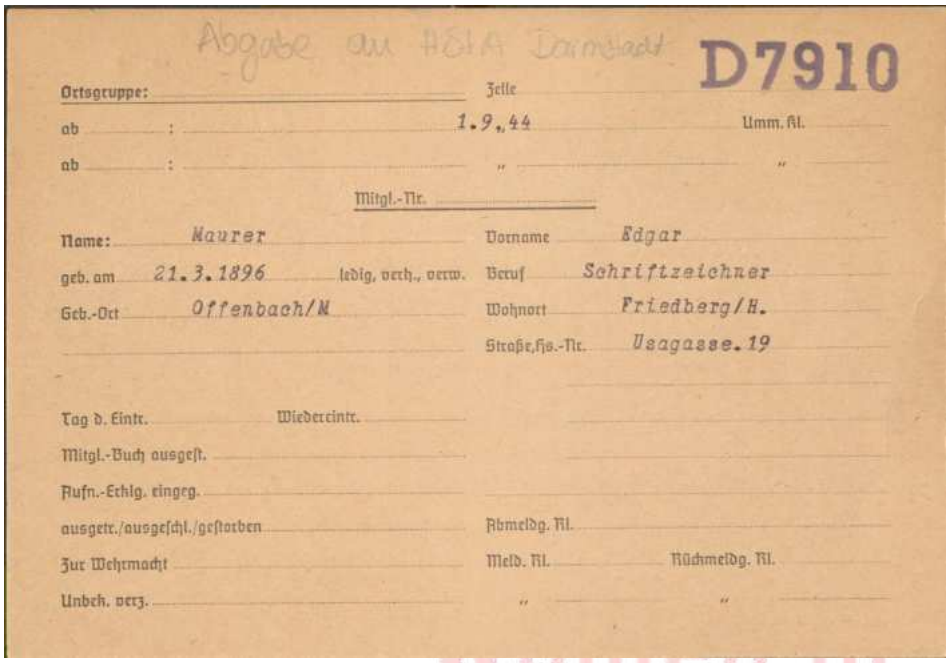
M a u r e r, Antonie,
geb. am 8. 6. 1895 in Friedberg.
Letzte Wohnung Friedberg, Usagasse 19.
War in KZ Ravensbrück inhaftiert und ist
im März 1945 umgekommen.
Früher Mitglied der KPD.

English translation:

Transcript from 10 June 1968
District of Friedberg (Hesse)
Maurer, Antonie
Born on 8 June 1895 in Friedberg. Last residence Friedberg, Usagasse 19. Was imprisoned in the Ravenbrück concentration camp and died in March 1945. Former member of the KPD.

Source: Bundesarchiv, DY 30 38273, folders A-K.

2. Edgar Maurer index card



Abgabe an HStA Darmstadt

D7910

Ortsgruppe: Zelle

ab : 1.9.44 Umm. Kl.

ab : " "

Mitgl.-Nr.

Name: Maurer Vorname Edgar

geb. am 21.3.1896 ledig, verh., verw. Beruf Schriftzeichner

Geb.-Ort Offenbach/M Wohnort Friedberg/H.

Straße, Hs.-Nr. Usagasse. 19

Tag d. Eintr. Wiedereintr.

Mitgl.-Buch ausgest.

Aufn.-Erklg. eingeg.

ausgetr./ausgeschl./gestorben Abmeldg. Kl.

Zur Wehrmacht Meld. Kl. Rückmeldg. Kl.

Unbch. verz. " "

English translation:

Name: Maurer

First name: Edgar

Born on: 21.3.1896

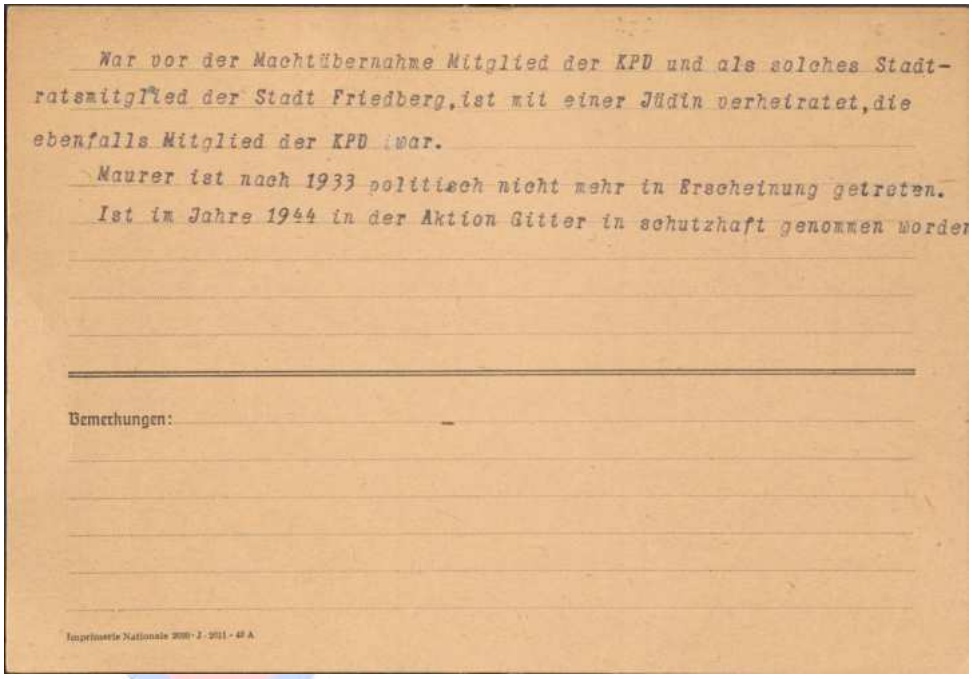
single, married, widowed: not specified

Occupation: Draftsman

Place of birth: Offenbach am Main

Place of residence: Friedberg, Hesse

Street, house number: Usagasse 19



War vor der Machtübernahme Mitglied der KPD und als solches Stadtratsmitglied der Stadt Friedberg, ist mit einer Jüdin verheiratet, die ebenfalls Mitglied der KPD war.

Maurer ist nach 1933 politisch nicht mehr in Erscheinung getreten.

Ist im Jahre 1944 in der Aktion Gitter in schutzhaft genommen worden

Bemerkungen: –

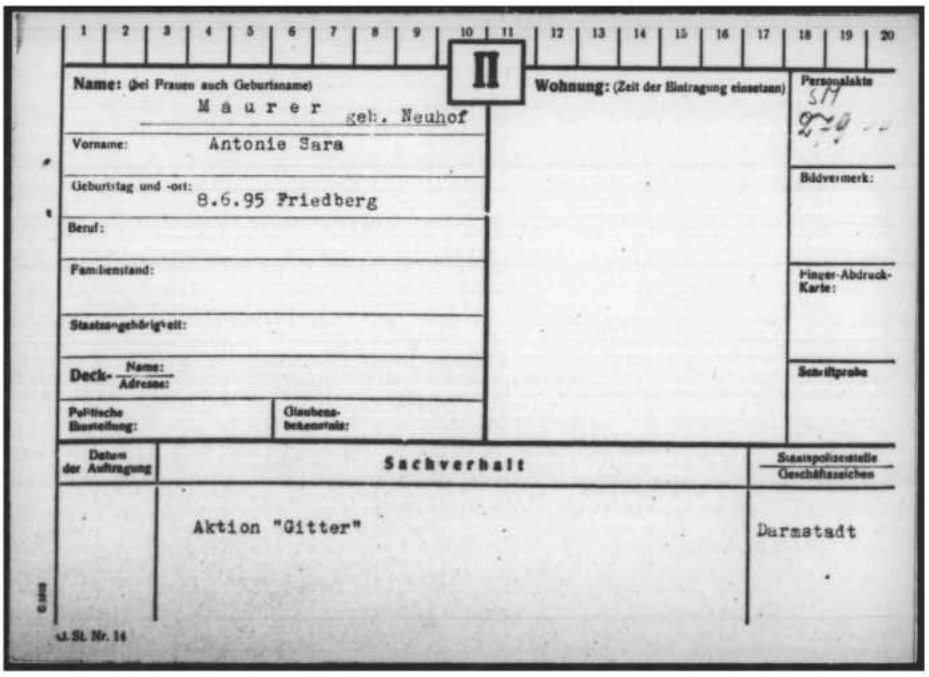
Imprimerie Nationale

English translation:

A member of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) before the seizure of power and as such a member of the Friedberg town council, he is married to a Jewish woman who was also a member of the KPD. Maurer was no longer politically active after 1933. He was taken into protective custody in 1944 as part of Aktion Gitter.

Source: Speyer State Archives: Edgar Maurer index card, fonds R 22 1.

3. Neustadt an der Weinstraße Gestapo card index



1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20

II

Name: (bei Frauen auch Geburtsname) M a u r e r geb. Neuhof

Wohnung: (Zeit der Eintragung einsetzen)

Personalakte

Vorname: Antonie Sara

Geburtstag und -ort: 8.6.95 Friedberg

Bildvermerk:

Beruf:

Familienstand:

Finger-Abdruck-Karte:

Staatsangehörigkeit:

Deck-Name: Adresse:

Schriftprobe

Politische Einstellung:

Glaubensbekenntnis:

Datum der Auftragung	Sachverhalt	Staatspolizeistelle Geschäftszeichen
	Aktion "Gitter"	Darmstadt

Vordruck St. Nr. 14

English translation:

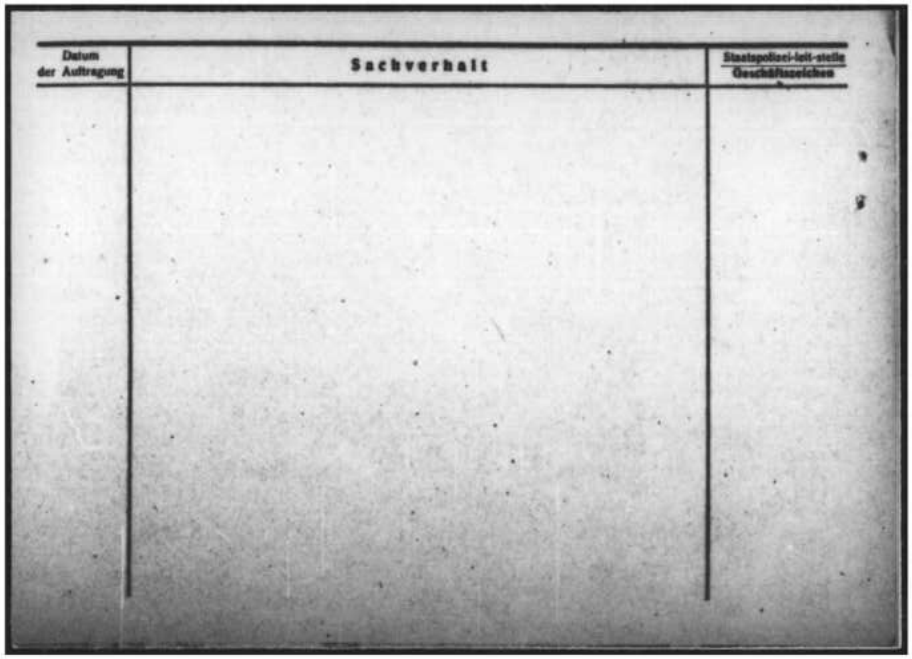
Name: Maurer née Neuhof

First name: Antonie Sara

Date and place of birth: 8.6.95 Friedberg

Facts: ‘Gitter’ action

State police: Darmstadt



Datum der Auftragung	Sachverhalt	Staatspolizei-leit-stelle Geschäftszeichen

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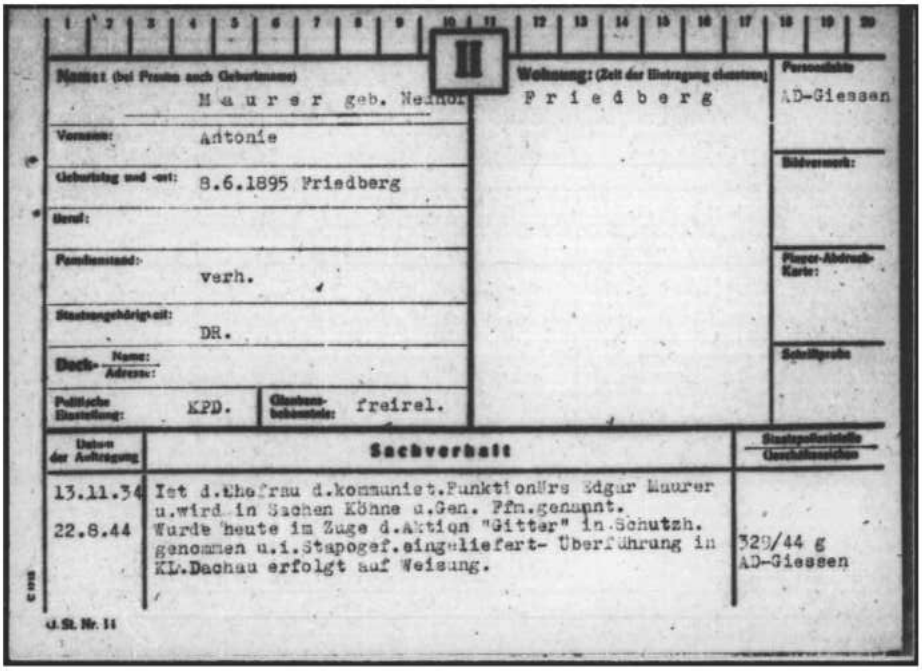


II

Name: (bei Frauen auch Geburtsname) Maurer geb. Neuhof

Wohnung: (Zeit der Eintragung eingetragen) Friedberg

Personalakte: AD-Giessen

Vornamen: Antonie

Geburtstag und -ort: 8.6.1895 Friedberg

Bildvermerk:

Beruf:

Familienstand: verh.

Finger-Abdruck-Karte:

Staatsangehörigkeit: DR.

Deck-Name: Adresse:

Schriftprobe

Politische Einstellung: KPD.

Glaubensbekenntnis: freirel.

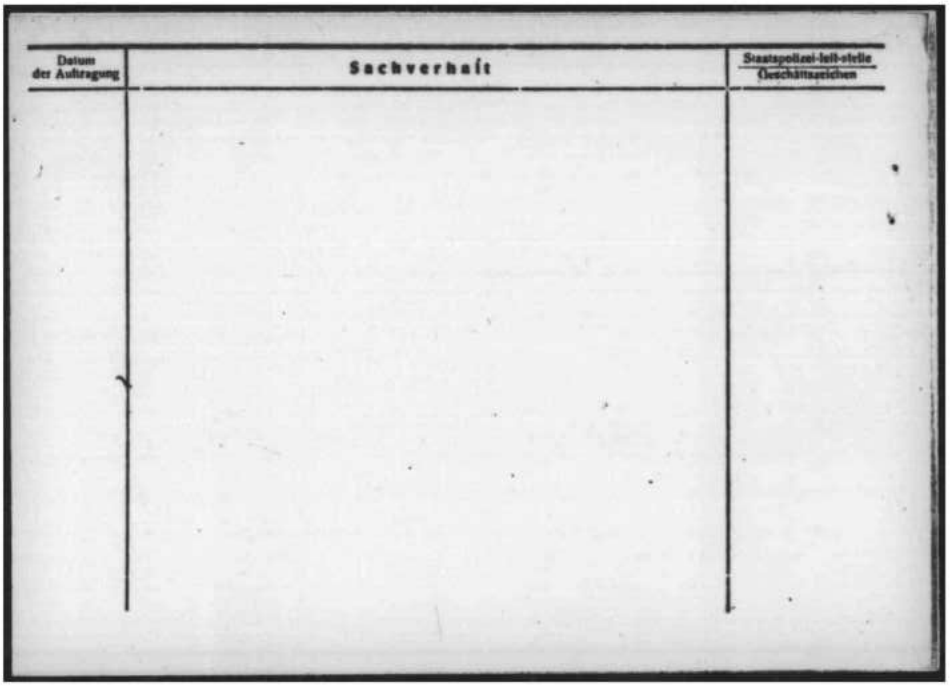
Datum der Anfragung	Sachverhalt	Staatspolizeistelle Geschäftszeichen
13.11.34 22.8.44	Ist d.Ehefrau d.kommunist.Funktionärs Edgar Maurer u.wird in Sachen Köhne u.Gen. Ffm.genannt. Wurde heute im Zuge d.Aktion "Gitter" in Schutzh. genommen u.i.Stapogef.eingeliefert- Überführung in KL.Dachau erfolgt auf Weisung.	329/44 g AD-Giessen

u.St. Nr. 11

English translation:

Surname: Maurer née Neuhof
First name: Antonie
Date and place of birth: 8 June 1895 Friedberg
Residence: Friedberg
Personal file: AD Gießen
Occupation: Not specified
Marital status: married
Nationality: German Reich
Deck name / address: not specified
Political affiliation: KPD
Creed: Free religious
Facts of the case:
13.11.34: Is the wife of the communist functionary Edgar and is named in the Köhne and Comrades Frankfurt case.

22.8.44: Was taken into protective custody today as part of the ‘Gitter’ operation and sent to Gestapo prison. Transferred to Dachau concentration camp by order.



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Source: ITS Digital Archive, Arolsen Archive, 1.2.3.7/ 12567995 and 12567996, Neustadt an der Weinstraße Gestapo card index.

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Chapter 2: Milena and Margarete: Two antifascist anti-Stalinists in Ravensbrück

Olga Stefan

The Holocaust in Bohemia and Moravia

In 1939, Nazi Germany invaded the Czech lands of Bohemia and Moravia, violating the Munich Pact. The region was then made a German Protectorate, annexed to Nazi Germany, and placed under the leadership of a Nazi-appointed protector. In contrast, Slovakia remained independent, governed by the authoritarian fascist Catholic priest, Joseph Tiso. During the war, the Nazis and their Czech collaborators killed more than 75,000 of the 90,000 Czech Jews living in this region. Most of them were deported to Terezín, and from there, to other concentration camps in the East. However, Jews were not the only group targeted for persecution. Non-Jewish political prisoners and Roma and Sinti were also victimized. This paper focuses on the biography of Milena Jesenská, a non-Jewish Czech journalist who was deported to Ravensbrück for her antifascist resistance activities and died there near the end of the war.

Milena Jesenská before the war

While Milena Jesenská (b. Prague, 10 August 1896 – d. Ravensbrück, 17 May 1944) is perhaps more well-known today due to her famous paramour Franz Kafka, the author of the *Metamorphosis* and *The Trial*, among many other writings, in her day at the beginning of the 20th century she was esteemed in her own right as a journalist and translator. Furthermore, I argue that today she deserves to be remembered for her courageous actions and writings.

Born into a bourgeois Christian family - her father Jan Jesenský was a dental surgeon and professor at Charles University, while her mother passed away when Milena was a teenager - Milena attended Minerva, the first academic gymnasium for girls in the Austro-Hungarian empire, and later studied for a year at the Faculty of Medicine of the Prague Conservatory. However, she dropped out and pursued a career in journalism and literature instead.

A brilliant writer and journalist, Jesenská contributed to a number of progressive Czech magazines and newspapers, some of which catered primarily to a Jewish public. She also

worked as a translator of Kafka's and other authors' writings from German to Czech. Jesenská was an independent, emancipated, and rebellious woman who chose her own path and defied social conventions. In 1917, she married the Jewish intellectual Ernst Pollak, against the wishes of her antisemitic father, and moved with him from Prague to Vienna. However, their marriage was not a harmonious one, and it ended in divorce in 1925. It was during this period that she met and fell in love with Franz Kafka. Their passionate epistolary relationship lasted on and off until the famous writer's death in 1924. Upon his death, Milena inherited all of his journals.

In one of his letters, written shortly before his death while he was already suffering from tuberculosis, Kafka wrote to her:

> *"And this letters after all are nothing but torture, born of torture, incurable torture, create only torture, incurable torture, what's the good of it — what's the good of it — and it's getting even worse — during this winter? To be silent, this is the only way to live, here and there. In sadness, all right, what does it matter? It renders sleep more childlike and deeper. But torture, this means driving a plough through the sleep — and through the day — this is unbearable."*

> *"How on earth did anyone get the idea that people can communicate with one another by letter! Of a distant person one can think, and of a person who is near one can catch hold — all else goes beyond human strength. Writing letters, however, means to denude oneself before the ghosts, something for which they greedily wait. Written kisses don't reach their destination, rather they are drunk on the way by the ghosts."*

After her split from Pollak, Jesenská returned to Prague, and in 1927, married the Bauhaus architect Jaromír Krejčar with whom she had her only child, Jana Honza Černá (1928-1985), who, like her mother, became a poet and journalist.

During the interwar years, Milena continued her career as a journalist and writer, establishing herself as one of the most well-known and respected voices of her time. She also became a communist, and struggled with a morphine addiction following an accident that left her with a disability in her left leg. However, upon learning of the Stalinist purges, she became disillusioned with and critical of communism.

Milena Jesenská at Ravensbrück

During the war, Jana assisted her mother with her resistance activities, including hiding Jewish refugees and others persecuted by the Nazis. Milena was eventually caught for her antifascist work and was jailed for several months in Prague's Pankrác Prison before being transferred to Dresden. In November 1940, she was moved from the Dresden prison to the Ravensbrück concentration camp.

Fig 1: Portrait of Milena Jesenská, around 1938. Photographer unknown. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

At Ravensbrück, Milena met Margarete Buber-Neumann (1901-1989), a former German Communist Party activist and the non-Jewish daughter-in-law of the famous Jewish philosopher Martin Buber. Margarete's two daughters whom she had with Rafael Buber, the philosopher's Communist son, were sent to Palestine with their Jewish grandparents to escape the anti-Jewish persecution that had already started in Germany, culminating in the Holocaust. After her marriage to Buber ended in divorce, Margarete married the German Comintern activist Hans Neumann. In 1935, they were both deported from Switzerland to the Soviet Union, where Hans was executed during the Stalinist purges while Margarete was imprisoned for "counter-revolutionary agitation" and sent to the Gulag. In 1940, in the context of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Margarete was handed over to the Nazis and sent to Ravensbrück camp as a political prisoner, like Milena. There the two women became very close, united by their similar experiences, their engagement with antifascism, and their lost faith in communism. In the Ra-

vensbrück artifact collection, there is a handkerchief that Margarete Buber-Neumann commissioned - at great risk - from one of the inmates as a present to Milena for her birthday, which illustrates the great bond these two women shared.

Biographies and Letters

Three biographies of Milena Jesenská were written after the war: one by Jena, her daughter, another by Margarete Buber–Neumann, the first to be published, in 1969, and the third by Alena Wagnerová (1936), a Czech journalist who has also written about Kafka and other Bohemian writers. Wagnerová based her research on interviews with Jana Černá and documentation collected by Jaroslava Vondráčková, who had worked with Milena at *Národní listy*.

Fig 2: Portrait of Margarete Buber-Neumann, around 1950. Photographer unknown. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

In her subjective account, Jana often criticizes her mother's absence and her focus on her career. At the same time she attempts to rehabilitate her in Communist Czechoslovakia, where Milena had been denounced as an anti-communist. Milena was expelled from the Communist party already in 1935 due to her unconventional lifestyle, and she was further ostracized in Ravensbrück by the Communist women there, who saw her friendship with the anti-Stalinist Buber as a threat. It was not until after 1990 that Jesenská was embraced by Czech historiography as both a courageous antifascist and talented writer. Jana also wrote in her biography of her mother that it was because of her that the Gestapo was able to trace her mother, leading to her deportation to Ravensbrück.

Buber-Neumann's biography of Milena was inspired not only by her personal experiences in the camp, but also by Milena's wish that "these experiences be recorded". In the concentration camp, Buber and Jesenská made plans for the publication of a book after their release, about the Siberian prison camps and the German concentration camps. In her portrayal of Milena's life, Buber-Neumann paints a loving picture of a heroine with an extraordinary will to survive, admired and appreciated by her fellow prisoners. However, until recently, there was little material left in Milena's own voice from her years of incarceration and deportation.

Several years ago, a young woman named Anna Militz, while writing her Masters thesis on Milena's second husband - the father of Jana - discovered in his Stasi file a pack of fourteen letters written by Milena from jail and Ravensbrück. The letters were addressed to her father and her young daughter, but there is also a final letter from Margarete to Milena's father about her death in 1944. Analyzed by Wagnerová in the 2015 *Neue Rundschau*, these letters reveal in her own voice and for the first time Milena's preoccupations and despair during her incarceration and concentration camp years. It is believed that the letters reached the Stasi file of Jaromír Krejčar in 1950, after Jana herself left the envelope containing them in an inn. The innkeeper handed the envelope over to the local police station, who then forwarded it to the security bureau, as Krejčar was a fugitive at the time.

Milena's love and longing for her daughter, nicknamed Honzo, are evident in one letter addressed to Jana from prison, before she was deported to Ravensbrück:

> *"Honzo, dear little one, such a sad letter you wrote - and on such lovely stationery! There I must write something cheerful, so that you are no longer sentimental. I am quite well Honzičko, I am not afraid for myself. Outside my window there is a garden where I walk for 1/2 hour every day. It looks like a monastery garden. Blackbirds are there and 8 big trees. Otherwise I sew buttons and wait, wait, wait until I can be with you again. ...*
>
> *I get 2 books in 14 days. Now de Coster, Eulenspiegel. Quite a wonderful book. And the German classics! What whimsical reading it is here and beautiful! I got the package too. Thank you very much. I was not allowed to keep the figs and the longed for soap was not there….And the letter, as I expected! Why two blank pages, Honza! I was sorry for that. I have to put many questions to you so that you know what to write. What is the birch tree doing on the balcony? Did you get my shoes? ... Is grandfather well? And Aunt Růžena? Is father healthy and does he have a job? ... Please be brave, you are my best comrade."*

In one heartbreaking letter, Milena writes of her experience in the concentration camp,

"wandering from one straw sack to another...going to the toilet in front of twelve people...no water...bedbugs...loneliness...crazy longing for Honza".

Despite her fraught relationship with her father - who had been both nationalistic and antisemitic, and had even had her committed to a psychiatric institution because of her love affair with the Jewish Pollak - the letters they sent to each other are filled with love and tenderness. In one letter, Milena writes,

"You have no idea what your tender words mean to me, you make me quite happy, send me, please, some again soon."

Her last letter to her father, written on a typewriter because her fingers had stiffened from rheumatism, was sent on September 13, 1943. In it she writes,

"I cannot allow myself to be unable to work, because every worker is needed and only the one who works has the right to live," she wrote, asking her father to get her the injections that had always helped her so far….I have no other wish than to lie in bed with you and let you take care of me."

Seemingly saying goodbye, she continues,

"I thank you for every good word and every package and if something should happen to me, you can know that I was with you until the last moment and that I did not allow myself weak minutes at all, because I am thinking of you".

Nine months later, Margarete Buber-Neumann wrote to Milena's father, informing him of Milena's death "without fear, without pain":

"No one has lived so much, felt so strongly, but also suffered as much as she did. Milena knew about the tragedy of our generation, because she could think. She wanted to put down these thoughts, to warn of what was to come, but for years she suspected that she

would never see freedom again. How often she said: 'I have to write another book, the book, I have to create something eternal.' Through her life, Milena has created eternity."

Milena Jesenská memory postwar

In 1995, Milena Jesenská was posthumously awarded the title “Righteous Among the Nations” by Yad Vashem for her efforts to save Jews and others persecuted by the Nazis during the war.

Material

1. Handkerchief for Milena Jesenská

Source: Handkerchief “4714”: Birthday present from fellow prisoners to Milena Jesenská; cotton blend fabric, 20.7 x 21.0 cm; Ravensbrück Memorial Site, V3553 B1.

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Chapter 3: Acts of Resilience and Solidarity: The Stories of Gina Finzi Schönheit and Olga Blumenthal from Italy

Alessandro Matta

The lives of **Gina Finzi Schönheit** and **Olga Blumenthal** highlight extraordinary courage, resilience, and solidarity during the Nazi persecution in Italy. Gina, a teacher and member of a "mixed" Jewish family was targeted by antisemitic persecution. She not only managed to release her Jewish husband from imprisonment but later on also demonstrated acts of resistance inside the concentration camp of Ravensbrück when writing letters to her husband and son in Buchenwald or writing for other inmates or trading goods in order to maintain humanity and dignity. Similarly, Olga, an extraordinarily accomplished female academic at Ca' Foscari University, faced persecution under Fascist racial laws and was demoted in her teaching position. In late 1944 she was deported and her acts during this arrest by Nazi officials exemplify her agency despite her old age of 71 years as well as the solidarity of non-persecuted individuals. Their stories not only shed light on the immense challenges faced by women of different age groups and in different social positions during the Holocaust but also emphasize their enduring strength in the face of oppression as well as acts of solidarity by others.

The persecution of Jews in Italy during the 1930s and 1940s was deeply tied to Fascist Italian ideology and its alliance with Nazi Germany as well as the Nazi occupation. The rise of Benito Mussolini's Fascist regime and the adoption of racial policies drastically changed the lives of Italian Jews, especially after the introduction of "Racial Laws" or "Leggi Razziali" in 1938. These laws were modeled after Germany's Nuremberg Laws of 1935, with some specifics for all Italians (for example, there were no laws concerning "mixed race" cases, or Mischlinge like in Germany, and the expulsion of Jewish students from schools occurred in October 1938, whereas in Germany this policy was enforcedafter the Night of Broken Glass(Kristallnacht) in November 1938 . After Mussolini's government collapsed in 1943 and the Nazis occupied northern and central Italy, the persecution of Jews intensified under Nazi guidance

and Italian local collaboration. Deportations to concentration and extermination camps like Auschwitz or Ravensbrück began from October 1943 onwards.

Gina Finzi Schönheit

Gina Finzi was born in Ferrara on August 31, 1901, and she was the daughter of Carlo Finzi and Emma Balboni and raised in a Catholic family. In the 1920s she married Carlo Schönheit, who was Jewish, and the son of Samuele Schönheit and Renata Visentini. In 1927 Gina and Carlo had a son named Franco. Gina was a schoolteacher and Carlo worked as a traveling salesman in the Ferrara countryside for companies producing socks, pajamas and underwear.

The family was affected by the antisemitic laws of 1938; however, due to the status of a "mixed" family, they were initially able to live a relatively normal life. After the enactment of anti-Jewish laws, Gina became a teacher, but only at the "Jewish" school that had been opened on Via Vignatagliata in a building just below the Schönheit's family home. Meanwhile, Franco was expelled from the public school following the 1938 laws and was forced to continue his studies privately.

At the Jewish school on Vignatagliata Street, some people remember Gina for her courageous and impressive character as a teacher. One witness recalled:

> *"My teacher is Mrs. Gina Schonheit, who has always frightened me enormously, tall and large as she is, with that big voice. Mine is a multi-grade class that includes fourth and fifth-grade children. The classroom is the largest in the school. Many of my classmates are new, at least to me, but the entire layout of the class is changed."*

All changed after September 8, 1943, following the armistice and the Nazi occupation of central and northern Italy. When the Germans arrived on September 9, 1943, the family did not flee to Switzerland, because they needed money to bribe the guards and because, like most Italian Jews, they could not imagine the sad fate they were about to encounter.

On the night of November 15, 1943, after the body of the Italian National Fascist Party (Partito Nazionale Fascista) leader Igino Ghisellini was found following an ambush, fascist squads of Ferrara searched house-to-house for Jews and suspected anti-fascists. The Schönheit family was awakened at two in the morning by the sound of machine gun butts pounding

against their door. Carlo Schönheit, the head of the family, turned on the light to check the time; when the fascists realized someone was home, they arrested him.

The morning after Carlo Schönheit's arrest, Gina and her son Franco went to visit Carlo in prison where they saw about a hundred people crowded together and guarded by fascists with weapons in their hands. They immediately set out to free him and succeeded by taking advantage of the fact that they had Catholic relatives (the mothers of both Gina and Carlo). They were also supported by the archbishop of Ferrara. Gina's persistent efforts in freeing her husband from imprisonment constituted an act of resistance in a hostile environment that also targeted "miffed" couples. By mid-January Carlo Schönheit was free but he could not leave Ferrara, under threat of retaliation against all his relatives.

With the progress of the war and antisemitic persecution, "mixed" families became a target of deportations as well. On February 25, 1944, the Schönheit family was locked up in the old synagogue on Via Mazzini, which had been ransacked by the fascists in 1941. The next day, they were forced to board a train to the Fossoli camp (Modena), where, following the instructions of the Italian authorities, they took books, clothes, blankets, and mattresses. Just four days earlier, a train had left from this transit camp for Auschwitz. The Schönheits managed to stay in the transit camp until August 1944: due to their "mixed" status they were able to delay their fate by working in the camp administration, and organizing deportations. Even though they suffered from cold and hunger, they could still conduct various forms of resistance in Fossoli; they read, played cards, and managed to obtain food from outside the camp. On April 5, 1944, Franco Schönheit witnessed the departure of his uncles, two cousins, and his uncle's parents to Auschwitz. During the summer, the Germans considered the possible release of the intermarried Jews; however, after the assassination attempt on Hitler on July 20, 1944, the order was issued to deport all remaining inmates of the camp. On August 2, 1944, the Schönheit family left with the last convoy. In Nuremberg, the family was separated: Gina was sent to Ravensbrück, while Carlo and Franco headed for Buchenwald.

In Ravensbrück concentration camp

While in Buchenwald camp, Carlo and Franco miraculously received a letter from Gina Schönheit from Ravensbrück. In terse German (all letters were subject to Nazi censorship), she reassured them of her health. The exchange of letters lasted three to four months. Gina also showed strength and powerful acts of resistance by helping other inmates to write and send letters to their relatives. Gina told her son in one of these letters that she did not want to leave him: "We

have to live, so that one day we can see each other again". This can be understood as a form of deep solidarity across the spaces of confinement as she motivated her son to continue to survive. It is also crucial to emphasize that Gina managed to send letters from Ravensbrück to her relatives, despite the remarkable challenge that her family members were also imprisoned in a camp. This act holds significant value and could provide a foundation for studying other letters sent from concentration camps as a form of resistance.

Furthermore, she worked as a seamstress in the camp, managing to always stay clean and tidy by trading bread for soap to wash herself. The privileged forced labor position enabled her to trade scarce resources like bread for soap, which can be understood as an act of resistance. She actively resisted the camp's attempts to strip prisoners of their self-respect and individuality. Her effort to stay clean and tidy was a subtle but powerful form of defiance against the oppressive system, preserving her sense of identity. She thus showed her determination to maintain her dignity and humanity under dehumanizing conditions.

Liberation and returning home

After the liberation of Buchenwald, Carlo and Franco Schönheit managed to leave for Italy on June 20, 1945. Before boarding the train to Weimar, Carlo recited the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the deceased, in front of the crematorium. They arrived in Ferrara on June 27. Their house above the Jewish school had been ransacked and devastated; they received 5,000 lire from the archbishop to help them start over. A month later, they received an invitation to move into the home of Renzo Bonfiglioli, the father of Franco Schönheit's future wife, Dory Bonfiglioli, who had returned with his family from Switzerland. From the Bonfiglioli family, the Schönheits learned that Gina Schönheit was still alive on the eve of the liberation of Ravensbück, at the time of the forced marches. On the evening of August 30, 1945, while Franco Schönheit was studying for his high school diploma, Gina Schönheit returned to Ferrara, malnourished but alive. The Schönheits resumed their old life: Carlo traveled by train through the Ferrara countryside trying to sell the company's products, Gina returned to teaching at the Jewish school and their son Franco Schönheit graduated and enrolled at university to study chemistry and eventually found work in Milan at a company producing adhesive labels, where he finally became the director.

Gina Finzi Schönheit passed away in Ferrara July 25, 1986 – it was the same day that her son Franco decided to visit a school for the first time to talk about his story and to show the letters sent by his mother from Ravensbrück.

Olga Blumenthal: From Italian antifascism to the Ravensbrück camp.

Olga Blumenthal was born in Venice on April 20, 1873, to Carlo Blumenthal, a banker, and Minna Goldschmidt. Her father was a prominent figure in the social and political life of the lagoon city.

There is little information available about Olga's childhood and youth. In 1919, she began teaching as an assistant to the chair of the Department of German Language and Literature at the Royal Higher Institute of Economic and Commercial Sciences in Venice. Olga was one of the pioneering women graduating from university and maintaining a position in higher education. Between 1870 and 1900, 224 women graduated in Italy, but none from Ca' Foscari, where women were almost absent in the early years. By 1910, only 7 women were among 4,449 members, earning 3 degrees and 49 teaching diplomas, mostly in languages like French, English, and German. Starting in the 1910s, women's enrollment grew steadily, reaching 24% by 1940, as language teaching became a popular career path for women.

In the teaching sector of higher education during the early decades of the 20th century, the presence of women was very limited: in the 1920/21 school year, out of 1,076 teachers at the Royal High Schools, only 136 were women; in 1922, among 720 full professors employed at universities, only two were women, making Olga’s career an extraordinary example for women at that time.

In 1919, Olga Blumenthal was appointed assistant professor of German language and literature. From 1926, she taught the Italian language to foreign students. On September 2, 1921, she married the intellectual Gilberto Secrétant, a professor of Italian literature at the same institute, who passed away a month later, following an illness. In 1923, in agreement with her late husband's brothers, Olga donated 1500 volumes on literature, economics and law to the Ca' Foscari Library, of which the Blumenthal-Secrétant fund is still an integral part.

Antisemitic persecution at the university

In 1936, the Faculty of Economics and Commerce was established, and the Institute was officially recognized as a state university. In 1936, Ca Foscari obtained authorization to award degrees in Modern Languages and Literatures. While the institution grew in influence and the number of members increased, even in the linguistic sector, Olga's career did not progress at the same rate: she held the position of German language assistant until 1934, after which she carried out her work as a German language reader. In the inaugural report of the academic year 1937/38, the new rector, Agostino Lanzillo, a friend of Mussoliniand motivated by antisemitism, announced that "after many years, Mrs. Olga Secrétant-Blumenthal leaves the position of reader in the Chair of German Literature." Olga was 64 years old and no longer eligible to continue teaching; under pressure from some colleagues, she was hired as a "voluntary assistant".

In 1938, with the implementation of the racial laws, a crackdown was implemented in the university's policies, increasingly in line with the state's antisemitic stance. On September 15, Royal Decree No. 1390, titled "Provisions for the Defense of the Race in Fascist Schools", was issued. This decree followed a census launched in August by the Minister of National Education, Giuseppe Bottai, that aimed at "Aryanizing" the education sector, which required identification of "Jewish" personnel at all educational institutions. The census mandated that pupils and teachers "of Jewish race", i.e. born to Jewish parents even if they professed a different religion, be expelled from all public institutions, academies, and cultural institutes of every order and degree. In Italian universities, 676 people were "declassified from the list of those with intellectual abilities or those suited to the nation." At Ca' Foscari, in compliance with the September decree, Gino Luzzatto, Adolfo Ravà (Private Law Institutions) and Gustavo Sarfatti (Maritime Law) were removed from their teaching positions.

Olga Blumenthal's personal file, which the Bottai investigation had to compile, was never sent to Rome (the reason remains unknown), and therefore she did not appear on the list of Jewish teachers at Ca' Foscari. However, the decree's injunction still applied to her, and she was therefore permanently removed from teaching. She retired to private life, continuing to work as a teacher at the Jewish school.

Deportation to camps as well as acts of resistance and solidarity

On October 30, 1944, at five in the morning, Olga was arrested by the Germans and taken to the Giudecca prison. She was 71 years old, alone, and sick. Olga instructed her maid, who was present during the arrest by the Nazis, to donate her underwear to her friends, and she gave her doorman a small bundle of her jewels before leaving her home forever. Her maid Vittoria Roman gave some belongings to the De Cal family, owners of Olga's home, and to Mr. Rigo Giuseppe, the building's doorman to whom Olga had entrusted some of her jewels before her deportation. Olga Blumenthal was later transferred to Trieste, to the Risiera di San Sabba, and on November 28, 1944, she was deported to the Nazi concentration camp of Ravensbrück with convoy 41T. She died there on February 25, 1945 at the age of seventy-one. News of her death reached her colleagues only several months later.

Olga's actions during her arrest and deportation can be understood as acts of resistance because they demonstrate her agency and defiance. Despite her vulnerable position - being 71 years old, alone, and ill - she made deliberate choices of self-preservation. By instructing her maid to distribute her belongings and entrusting her valuables to others, Olga ensured her possessions would not fall into the hands of her oppressors. Furthermore, the actions of Olga's maid, her landlady, as well as her doorman can be understood as acts of solidarity because these non-persecuted Italians demonstrated their willingness to support a persecuted individual. By safeguarding Olga's possessions and honoring her wishes, they showed loyalty and solidarity for her even under the threat of Nazi oppression and violence. Their actions thus reflect moral courage and empathy, as they could have chosen to refuse.

Post-war commemoration

On November 10, 1945, during the inauguration of the new academic year, Gino Luzzatto, the first post-war rector, who had been removed from teaching at Ca' Foscari in 1938 following the application of the racial laws, expressed his condolences and condemned Nazi barbarity, and specified that he had received information of Olga Blumenthal's death only the day before, referring to her as a German-language reader "whom colleagues and students have always remembered and remember with profound veneration".

On January 22, 2018, eighty years after the enactment of the antisemitic laws and as part of the Remembrance Day celebrations, a stumbling stone (Stolperstein) in memory of Olga Blumenthal was placed under the entrance arch of Palazzo Foscari, the historic seat of the Venetian university.

Fig. 1: Stolperstein for Olga Blumenthal in Venice. Photographer: Christian Michelides, 2018. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

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Chapter 4: *"Wir sind doch keine Versuchskaninchen"*[21] – Krystyna Czyż-Wilgat and Wanda Wojtasik Półtawska, Polish "rabbits"[22] from Ravensbrück

Sylwia Szymańska-Smolkin

Poland under the German occupation

On September 1, 1939, Nazi Germany launched a war against Poland. Within a month, Poland was defeated and the country was divided between the Third Reich and the Soviet Union in accordance with the secret Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of August 23, 1939, and the subsequent Treaty of Friendship signed on September 28, 1939. These agreements established Germany and the Soviet Union's respective spheres of influence, divided up the territorial spoils and regulated trade between the two powers.

On October 8, 1939, Germany annexed former Polish territories along its eastern border. The remaining areas of German-occupied Poland were designated as the *Generalgouvernement für die besetzten polnischen Gebiete* (the General Government for the occupied Polish territories) on October 12, 1939, under a civilian governor general Hans Frank.

From the outset, the Polish population was subjected to draconian laws, forced labor, restrictions, and persecution of various professional and ethnic groups. Among those persecuted were Jews, intelligentsia, political and cultural figures, and clergy. Despite the threat of death or incarceration in concentration camps (such as Auschwitz and Ravensbrück for female prisoners), groups of resistance were organized across occupied Poland. Involved in those underground organizations were men, women, and youth.

Polish women in Ravensbrück

Polish women, young girls, and later also children, comprised the largest group of prisoners in Ravensbrück, totalling approximately 40,000. Around 8000 of them survived the war. The first Polish

[21] German for "We are not guinea pigs". Wanda Wojtasik Półtawska protested the operation, telling Dr Schiedlausky who was administering her anesthesia: "Wir sind doch keine Versuchskaninchen." Wanda Półtawska, *I boję się snów*, Częstochowa, Edycja Świętego Pawła, 2009, p. 76.

[22] The term "rabbits", as used throughout the text, refers to the name used in the Ravensbrück camp to describe the victims of medical experiments. This term did not originate from the Nazi camp personnel and was not typically used by the German camp doctors. Instead, it was adopted by the women subjected to these experiments and by their fellow prisoners. The term was widely used in their own postwar testimonies and memoirs and in subject literature. It symbolized their use as human guinea pigs and also alluded to the mobility issues they faced, as their injuries from the forced operations caused them to hop like rabbits.

women imprisoned in Ravensbrück arrived in September and October 1939; they were social and education activists from the Polish minority in the territories of the Third Reich.[23] Beginning in November 1939, prisoners from the annexed territories, and from August 1940, those from the General Government, began arriving in Ravensbrück. After the Warsaw Uprising in 1944, another 12,000 women arrived in the camp.

The Polish inmates in Ravensbrück came from all walks of life. Among them were Girl Guides, teachers, professors, artists, and poets who contributed to various forms of resistance within the camp.[24] The prisoners celebrated national and religious holidays, sang together, read books and newspapers, recited poetry, etc. They organized clandestine education, delivering lectures on history, literature, geography, and other subjects. In November 1941, teacher and Girl Guides leader Józefa Kantor established a clandestine group of scouts for older girls called *Mury* (Walls). Their members participated in various collective acts of resistance, including aiding elderly inmates, victims of medical experiments, and children.[25] They were guided by their motto "Persevere and help others survive." Kantor was also involved in the clandestine education of young girls in the camp, while other girls received education at the secondary and upper secondary levels.

"Rabbits" – victims of medical experiments

On September 23, 1941, a joint *Sondertransport* of 415 Polish political prisoners from Lublin and Warsaw arrived at Ravensbrück. They came from the notorious prisons of the Lublin Castle and Pawiak in Warsaw. In occupied Poland, *Sondertransport* indicated prisoners sentenced to death. During their three-week quarantine, the group organized a cultural life with lectures, singing and poetry readings. On May 31, 1942, another *Sondertransport* arrived. Young, healthy women from these two transports were selected as subjects of medical experiments. On August 1, 1942, the first experimental surgeries were performed on six young Polish women, with the last surgeries occurring a year later, on August 16, 1943.

In total, 86 women were subjected to operations, conducted against their will by Dr. Karl Franz Gebhardt, Heinrich Himmler's personal doctor, with assistance from Dr. Fritz Fischer and camp doctors Herta Oberheuser, Gerhard Schiedlausky, Percival Treite and Ralf Rosenthal. Among the victims, 74

[23] *Beyond Human Endurance. The Ravensbrück Women Tell Their Stories*, Interpress Publishers, Warszawa, 1970, p. 8.

[24] For more information on various forms of resistance in Ravensbrück see Wanda Kiedrzyńska, *Ravensbrück*, Książka i Wiedza, Warszawa, 1965, pp. 250-307.

[25] *I trzeba było żyć… Kobiety w KL Ravensbrück. Und man musste leben… Frauen im KZ Ravensbrück, Katalog wystawy.* Muzeum Niepodległości, Warszawa, 2012, p. 17. https://muzn.pl/pl/palac/i-trzeba-bylo-zyc/, accessed 15-03-2024.

were young and healthy Polish women: 70 from the September 23, 1941 transport (66 from Lublin and 4 from Warsaw) and four from the May 31, 1942 transport (all from Lublin).[26] All those women had been sentenced to death for their illegal political activities. Their operations involved surgeries on their legs, aimed at recreating war wounds and infecting them with bacteria by inserting foreign objects such as wood chips and shards of glass. The doctors also experimented with incisions, setting and transplanting bones, removing and damaging nerves, muscles, and bones in the legs and treating wounds with various chemical substances.[27] The victims of these experiments were referred to as "rabbits" (*króliki* in Polish, *Versuchskaninchen* in German) reflecting their use as laboratory animals for medical experiments.[28] Twelve other women of different nationalities also underwent operations. The women looked after one another as they were often left without basic medical care. Other prisoners helped them by providing food and medicine.[29]

The young women believed that the operations would exempt them from the death sentence they had received.[30] However, the execution of Marysia Gnaś, one of the political prisoners who underwent surgery, in February 1943, shattered their hopes for survival. In total, six "rabbits" were executed, and another six women died due to postoperative complications; most of those who survived were left disabled for the rest of their lives.[31]

This chapter discusses the acts of resistance by the Polish women subjected to medical experiments through the biographies of Krystyna Czyż-Wilgat and Wanda Wojtasik Półtawska, who were among the initiators of secret correspondences with their families, detailing the conditions in the camp, the medical experiments conducted on Polish political prisoners, and the executions.

[26] *I trzeba było żyć*, p. 15. In her introduction to *Beyond Human Endurance*, Wanda Kiedrzyńska gives the number of 66 Polish women from the September 1941 Sondertransport (62 from Lublin and 4 from Warsaw) and then 8 from the May 1942 Sondertransport, *Beyond Human Endurance*, p. 16.

[27] "The Rabbits of Ravensbrück", http://www.rememberravensbruck.com/projects, accessed 18-10-2024.

[28] See footnote 2.

[29] Półtawska, *I boję się snów*, pp. 87-88, 93, 96-97, 99.

[30] Ibid., pp. 107-108; Krystyna Czyż's deposition for the Main Commission for Investigation of German Crimes "Zeznania Krystyny Czyżówny, byłej więźniarki politycznej (nr 7708) obozu koncentracyjnego w Ravensbrück", Archives of the Institute of National Remembrance (hereafter AIPN) GK182/64, p. 241.

[31] *Beyond Human Endurance*, pp. 63, 68.

Krystyna Czyż -Wilgat's biography

Krystyna Czyż-Wilgat was born on October 11, 1923, in Lublin to Maria and Tomasz Czyż, both of whom were teachers.[32] From an early age, she was involved in the Girls Guides movement. She attended an all-girls gymnasium, which she completed clandestinely during the German occupation. Since September 1939, she had been employed in a daycare for children.[33] During the German occupation, Krystyna was involved in the underground movement, participating in the Grey Ranks (*Szare Szeregi*)[34] and served as a liaison for the Union of Armed Struggle (*Związek Walki Zbrojnej*, *ZWZ*). She was only 17 years old when she was arrested on March 4, 1941 and imprisoned at the Gestapo prison "Pod Zegarem" before being transferred to the Lublin Castle. On September 21, 1941, she was transported to Ravensbrück, where she arrived two days later. In the camp, she attended clandestine classes.

Fig. 1: A photograph of Krystyna Czyż, June 1948. Photographer uknown. Source: Muzeum Narodowe w Lublinie, ML/MART/991.

[32] This biography is based on the following publications: Krystyna Czyż-Wilgat's testimony in *Beyond Human Endurance*, her deposition AIPN, GK 182/64, pp. 238-247; Stanisława Witkowska, *Hm dr Krystyna Czyż-Wilgatowa – więźniarka obozu w Ravensbrück w latach 1941-1945"*, Komenda Chorągwi ZHP w Lublinie, no. 24, June 2007, and correspondence with Maria Wilgat, Krystyna Czyż-Wilgat's daughter.

[33] Information provided by Maria Wilgat.

[34] Grey Ranks (*Szare Szeregi*) were an underground paramilitary youth organization formed by the Polish Scouting Association (*Związek Harcerstwa Polskiego*) during the Second World War. By mid-1944, the organization had approximately 20,000 members. Members of the Grey Ranks participated in various forms of resistance including sabotage, intelligence gathering, and later armed combat, including participation in the 1944 Warsaw Uprising.

Krystyna Czyż-Wilgat was operated on November 22, 1942, along with ten other women. She received injections to her right leg. In January 1943, Czyż-Wilgat, Wanda Półtawska, Janina Iwańska and Krystyna Iwańska initiated a secret correspondence using invisible ink (urine) to inform their families about the experimental surgeries conducted on a group of Polish political prisoners.[35] All four women came from Lublin and had arrived in Ravensbrück in the September 1943 *Sondertransport*. They were later joined by Zofia Sokulska and Alicja Jurkowska (also from Lublin), and Bogumiła Bąbińska and Wojciecha Buraczyńska (from Warsaw). It was Janina Iwańska's idea to use invisible ink to write messages. The text appeared after the letter was ironed with a hot iron. To make the families aware there is a hidden message in the official letters, Krystyna Czyż reminded her brother of their favourite book by Kornel Makuszyński, *The Twelfth Grade Devil*, in which the protagonist writes a letter containing an encrypted message.[36]

The women composed the letters in the attic of their block. Initially, they wrote between the lines of the official letters, which each inmate was allowed to send once a month, written in German, and censored by camp authorities and later, on the inside of the envelopes. They maintained their secret correspondence for a year and a half, until June 1944, informing their families about the dire conditions inside the camp and detailing the victims, types of operations, and names of executed political prisoners. Understandably, given the circumstances, the information they relied on was not always accurate. They also arranged for their letters to be sent from outside the camp through regular post. For example, inmates working outside the camp in Hohenlychen smuggled the letters to mail them by the German Post. When Krystyna Czyż-Wilgat and Wanda Wojtasik Półtawska worked briefly outside the camp they established contact with Polish POWs in Neustrelitz. One of these POWs, Eugeniusz Świderski, conveyed information about the situation in the camp, including executions of Polish prisoners and the experiments in his correspondence with Aniela Chałubińska, a friend of the Czyż family. The Polish POWs also provided them with books, medicine, stationery supplies, and communiques.[37]

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[35] *Beyond Human Endurance*, p. 64. According to Wojtasik Półtawska, the decision to inform the families about the situation in the camp followed the first executions of the two "rabbits" in February 1943, as the other victims of these operations realized they would be killed to prevent information about the experiments from escaping the camp. They decided to inform their families about the situation in the camp, hoping the information would reach the Polish government-in-exile. Półtawska, *I boję się snów*, p. 108. Four more "rabbits" were executed on September 23, 1943. Ibid., p. 126.

[36] *Beyond Human Endurance*, p. 64. The book *Szatan z siódmej klasy* was published in Polish in 1937.

[37] *Beyond Human Endurance*, pp. 66, 125; Grzywacz, *Blizny*, p. 245-246 ebook; Witkowska, *Hm dr Krystyna Czyż-Wilgatowa*, p. 6; correspondence with Dr Maria Wilgat.

Fig. 2: Camp letter from Krystyna Czyż to her father written in Polish on the inside of an official envelope with invisible ink (urine), postmarked June 22, 1943. Source: Muzeum Narodowe w Lublinie, ML/MART/2374/1-2.

The information about the medical experiments was relayed to London and reported by a Polish radio network in England.[38] The camp authorities were furious and suspected that a radio was hidden in the camp, subjecting the bloc of the "rabbits" (so-called *Piratenblock*) to constant searches.[39]

Left largely without proper medical care, the "rabbits" supported each other in their recovery after the operations. Some were already acquaintances from their work in the resistance, while other

[38] Witkowska, "*Hm dr Krystyna Czyż-Wilgatowa*", p. 5.

[39] Półtawska, *I boję się snów*, p. 128.

prisoners also assisted them with food and medications. They even managed to procure a camera, capturing images of the worst injuries, and smuggling them out of the camp.

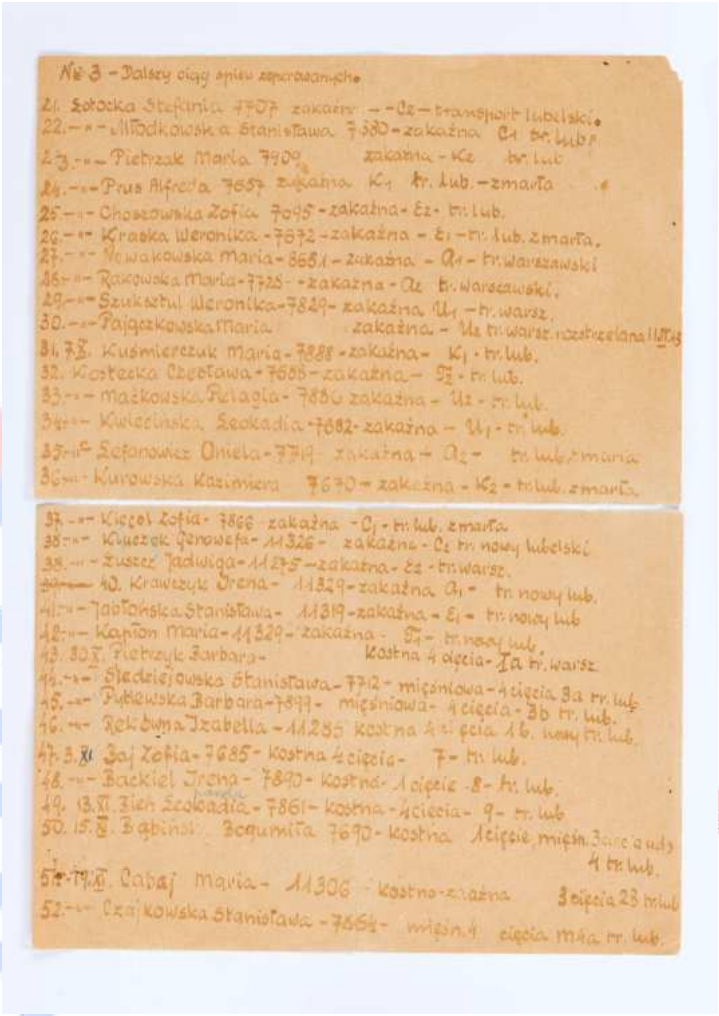

Fig. 3: List No. 3 with names of operated women, their prisoner numbers, and type of surgery. The list was sent in an illegal letter in Polish written by Krystyna Czyż in pencil and urine, dated May 20, 1943. Source: Muzeum Narodowe w Lublinie, ML/MART/2391/1-2.

In March 1943, when prisoners were summoned for operations, they refused to comply. Czyż-Wilgat and several other "rabbits" protested the procedure and submitted a petition to the camp commandant, asking if he was aware of the illegal operations being conducted in violation of international law.[40] Wanda Wojtasik Półtawska wrote in her memoir that the "rabbits" did not believe their protest would lead to any change; their primary goal was to express their stance through action, as they could no longer tolerate their powerlessness and passivity.[41] No new victims were taken for the operations,

[40] Półtawska, *I boję się snów*, p. 110.
[41] Ibid., p. 111.

only those who had been previously operated on. Those who protested were punished by being sent to work. Although a pause in the operations followed, Czyż-Wilgat believed it was not a direct result of the protest.[42] In August 1943, ten new women were called for operations. A second protest ensued, resulting in the summoned women being locked up in the jail, with five of them operated on in unhygienic conditions in a bunker. As a punishment, the entire block was locked down for three days without food.[43]

In February 1945, after learning that the "rabbits" were slated for execution, they hid in different blocs of the camp with assistance from fellow inmates. They concealed their identities by assuming the names and prisoner numbers of deceased inmates, aiming to save at least some who could bear witness.[44] Many camp inmates showed solidarity with the "rabbits", and a collective effort was made to prevent the Germans from discovering their whereabouts.

On 13 February 1945, using false names and prisoner numbers, Czyż-Wilgat and Wojtasik Półtawska presented themselves as inmates from Auschwitz and joined a transport to a small subcamp of Ravensbrück located in Neustadt-Glewe.[45] They remained there until 2 May 1945, when the camp was liberated by the Red Army.[46] Along with Wojtasik Półtawska and five other prisoners, Czyż-Wilgat left for Poland, arriving in Lublin on May 28, 1945.

After the war, Czyż-Wilgat completed her high school and university education, eventually working at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin. In 1949, she married Tadeusz Wilgat and they had two children. In 1967, she earned her PhD in geography and became an assistant professor. In 1979, she retired early due to health issues and passed away on June 13, 2011, at the age of 87.

[42] "Zeznania Krystyny Czyżówny, byłej więźniarki politycznej (nr 7708) obozu koncentracyjnego w Ravensbrück", AIPN, GK182/64, p. 241.

[43] Półtawska, *I boję się snów*, pp. 117-124.

[44] Urszula Wińska, *Więzi. Losy więźniarek z Ravensbrück*, Wydawnictwo "Marpress", Gdańsk, 1992, p. 79. See also Dariusz Zaborek, *Czesałam ciepłe króliki. Rozmowa z Alicją Gawlikowską-Świerczyńską*, Wydawnictwo Czarne, Wołowiec, 2018, pp. 57-58.

[45] Półtawska, *I boję się snów*, pp. 143-152. Eighteen "rabbits" departed from the camp in this manner. Wanda Kiedrzyńska, *Ravensbrück*, Książka i Wiedza, Warszawa, 1961, p. 213.

[46] In her testimony for the Main Commission for Investigation of German Crimes, Krystyna Czyż-Wilgat states that she remained in the camp until the arrival of American forces on May 2, 1945; "Zeznania Krystyny Czyżówny", p. 242. According to information provided by Stacey Fitzgerald, "an American unit on a secret mission to meet up with the Soviet army actually passed through Neustadt-Glewe before the Soviet Army arrived." This detail comes from correspondence between Stacey Fitzgerald and Maria Wilgat shared with me by Maria Wilgat. Stacey Fitzgerald is currently producing and directing a feature length documentary film, "Saving the Rabbits of Ravensbrück".

Biography of Wanda Wojtasik Półtawska

Wanda Wiktoria Wojtasik Półtawska was born on November 2, 1921, in Lublin, Poland. She was the youngest of three daughters of Adam and Anna (née Chaber) Wojtasik.[47] Her father was a postal clerk, and her mother was a homemaker. She graduated from the elite Ursuline Sisters' gymnasium and became a Girl Guide in her first year of high school. In 1938, she passed the so-called "small high school diploma" and enrolled in a two-year humanities program. After the outbreak of the war, she continued her studies clandestinely.

In September 1939, along with a group of other Girl Guides, Wojtasik Półtawska joined the auxiliary service. Following the German occupation of Lublin, she engaged in underground activities. As a member of the Grey Ranks, she delivered weapons, money, leaflets, medical supplies, and messages. She also worked as a liaison for the underground organization Union for Armed Struggle. On February 17, 1941, she was arrested by the Gestapo and sentenced to death. She was beaten during her interrogation at the Gestapo jail "Pod Zegarem", then imprisoned for seven months at Lublin Castle, and transported to Ravensbrück concentration camp. She arrived at the camp on September 23, 1941, as part of a *Sondertransport* from Lublin.

Wanda Wojtasik Półtawska was among the first group of women subjected to operations on August 1, 1942, where she endured medical experiments, in which her lower legs were cut and infected with virulent bacteria. After witnessing mass murder in the camp, she promised herself that if she survived the war, she would become a doctor. In February 1945, under an assumed identity, she was transferred to the Neustadt-Glewe camp.[48] She was liberated in May 1945 and embarked on a three-week journey back to Poland. In 1947, she married Andrzej Półtawski, and they had four daughters.

In 1951, Wojtasik Półtawska graduated from medical school at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow and earned a doctorate in psychiatry in 1964. She worked at the Psychiatric Clinic of the Medical Academy in Cracow and the Youth and Marriage Counseling Center of the Jagiellonian University. She researched the so-called "Auschwitz children," survivors of the concentration camp at Auschwitz who were imprisoned there as children. While working at a clinic at Jagiellonian University in 1956,

[47] The following biographical note is based on the information published in Półtawska's memoir, Wanda Wojtasik's testimony for the Main Commission for Investigation of German Crimes, IPN GK 182/164, pp. 182-189, https://www.zapisyterroru.pl/dlibra/show-content?id=1382&&navref=MTJrOzEyMyAx-MnY7MTJlIDEybDsxMjQ&format_id=3, accessed 10-04-2024; obituaries in the press Robert D. McFadden, "Wanda Poltawska, 101, Who Forged a Friendship With a Future Pope, Dies", https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/30/world/europe/wanda-poltawska-dead.html, accessed 10-10-2024; "Nie żyje Wanda Półtawska. Kim była przyjaciółka Jana Pawła II?" https://www.polskieradio.pl/39/156/artykul/2838206,nie-zyje-wanda-poltawska-kim-byla-przyjaciolka-jana-pawla-ii, accessed 10-10-2024; *Życiorys dr Wandy Półtawskiej,* https://www.kul.pl/zyciorys-dr-wandy-poltawskiej,art_12047.html, accessed 10-10-2024, and her biogram in "Ocalały nie po to aby żyć, ale by dać świadectwo" Życiorysy "królików" z Ravensbrück, https://archive.is/lnm7w, accessed 15-03-2024.

[48] Półtawska, *I boję się snów*, pp. 141-142.

she met Karol Wojtyła, who would later become Pope John Paul II, and they maintained a close friendship until his death. It is said that she influenced his views on the importance of family and the value of life.

Since 1955, Wojtasik Półtawska lectured on pastoral medicine at the Theology Department and later Pontifical Academy of Theology in Cracow, serving as director of the Institute of Family Theology since 1967. She also taught at the John Paul II Institute at the Lateran University in Rome and was a member of the Pontifical Council for the Family and the Pontifical Academy Pro Vita. She received numerous state and church honors, including the Order of the White Eagle, Poland's highest award, and authored many scientific and popular literature publications. Known for her conservative views, which some consider antifeminist, she defended traditional family values and Catholic dogma, opposing contraception, abortion, and premarital sex.[49]

After her wartime experiences, Wojtasik Półtawska lost her faith in humanity and was haunted by nightmares about the camp. Following her teacher's suggestion, she began writing down her memories during sleepless nights in the summer of 1945, setting them aside until 1961. This personal and very intimate document, intended to help her cope, was revised, and published as *I boję się snów* (*And I Am Afraid of My Dreams*). Wojtasik Półtawska passed away on October 24, 2023, at the age of 101.

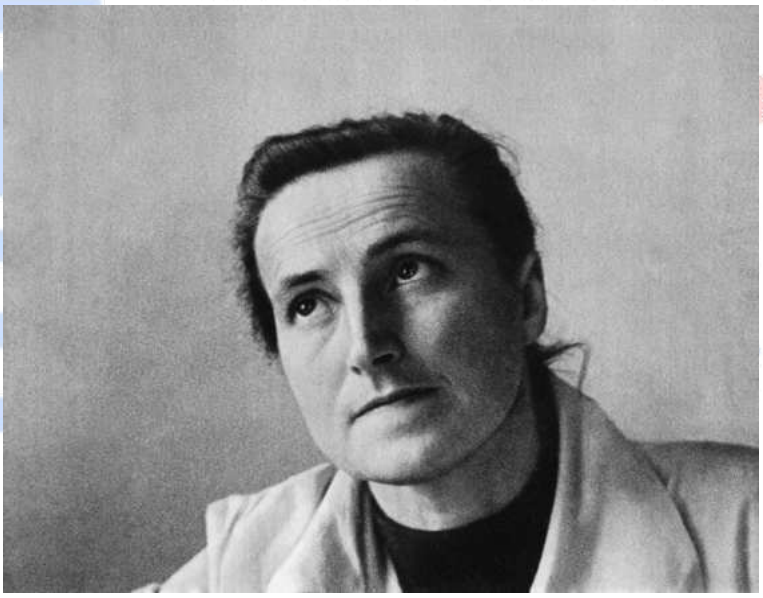

Fig. 4: A photograph of Wanda Wojtasik Półtawska, 1963. Photographer unknown. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

[49] *Wanda Poltawska,* https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/30/world/europe/wanda-poltawska-dead.html, accessed 10-10-2024.

Postwar

The surviving victims of medical experiments in Ravensbrück faced lifelong disabilities. In 1946, a group of 49 "rabbits" were examined for the Nuremberg trial by Professor Kornel Michejda, head of the Surgical Clinic of the Medical Academy in Gdańsk.

Some of the women were unable to perform any work and relied on special pensions provided by the Polish state. They had to wait for many years to receive any compensation from Germany for the unlawful operations.

On July 26, 1951, the government of the Federal Republic of Germany passed a resolution to compensate surviving victims of Nazi medical experiments and established the *Härtefonds* (Hardship Funds). However, Polish victims did not receive compensation as Eastern European applicants were excluded due to logistical and administrative issues.[50] The plight of the Polish medical experiment victims was brought to broader awareness in 1958 by an American philanthropist and activist Caroline Ferriday and Norman Cousin, the editor-in-chief of the *Saturday Review*. They were instrumental in advocating for the Polish victims and raising funds to bring 35 former inmates operated on in Ravensbrück to the United States to receive medical treatment.[51] The women spent six months there; among them was Krystyna Czyż-Wilgat.[52]

On May 5, 1960, the Bundestag passed a resolution recommending that Polish women and girls who, as victims of concentration camps, suffered the most serious damage to their health be provided with appropriate compensation. In the following years, the compensation procedure was implemented.[53] In 1961, 53 victims of medical experiments received compensation of more than 2.5 million German Marks.[54] In November 1972, the German government signed a comprehensive agreement with Poland on the compensation of victims of medical experiments.

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[50] Ruth Jolanda Weinberger, "'Seeking Justice, Not Charity'. Medical Experiment Victims' Struggle with Purposefully Inadequate Compensation", *Eastern European Holocaust Studies*, 2024, https://doi.org/10.1515/eehs-2023-0042, accessed 09-09- 2024.

[51] Their stay in the United States was reported by Norman Cousin in his article "The Ladies Depart", *Friends Journal. A Quaker Weekly*, Vol. 5 No. 28, August 8, 1959, pp. 441-444, online https://www.friendsjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/emember/downloads/1959/HC12-50201.pdf. accessed 25-11-2024.

[52] Barbara Oratowska, "Polki „króliki" z KL Ravensbrück na leczeniu w USA", http://www.ravensbruck.pl/pl/ciekawostki/polki-kroliki-z-kl-ravensbrck-na-leczeniu-w-usa, accessed 15-08-2024; "Caroline Ferriday", https://www.rememberravensbruck.com/caroline-ferriday, accessed 25-11-2024.

[53] Zbigniew Stanuch, *Ravensbrück. Historia nie do zapomnienia. Perspektywa polska*, Szczecin 2020, ebook, p. 94, https://ipn.gov.pl/pl/publikacje/publikacje-edukacyjne-i/99837,Ravensbrck-Historia-nie-do-zapomnienia-Perspektywa-polska.html, accessed 10-10-2024.

[54] United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC, "Christmas Card Given to a Polish Prisoner at Ravensbrück", https://perspectives.ushmm.org/item/christmas-card-given-to-a-polish-prisoner-at-ravensbrueck/collection/concentration-camp-prisoners, accessed 25-11-2024.

On March 30, 2011, the Senate of Poland (the upper house of the Polish parliament) passed a resolution establishing April as a month of remembrance of the victims of the German Nazi Ravensbrück concentration camp. Thanks to this, interest in the history of the camp and the fate of Polish prisoners increased and led to educational and commemorative initiatives.

Resistance

The resilience and acts of resistance demonstrated by Wanda Wojtasik Półtawska and Krystyna Czyż-Wilgat were deeply rooted in their prewar experiences in the Girl Guides movement and their wartime involvement in underground activities. Their courage manifested not only in their participation in activities in camps such as clandestine education and secret correspondence but also in fostering solidarity within the camp.

Material

1. **Excerpt from Krystyna Czyż-Wilgat's testimony, in which she describes the decision to share information about the medical experiments with their families**

"We assumed that those in Poland knew that there was hunger in the camp, that its inmates were decimated by diseases, that executions were held regularly, that the Germans were treating us inhumanly. It was the same in all the camps. But we were to experience something that nobody could have imagined before it happened: experimental operations on healthy women, against their will. Several of our group died as a result of these operations, many were crippled for life and all of us, regardless of the degree of damage done to our health, suffered mental torture that cannot be forgotten.
We thought that the world must get to know of the shameful acts of German doctors. At the same time we realized that we would have to give full and accurate information. We were quite prepared for the possibility of our being exterminated as living proofs of these acts, so the matter of getting news through became more important than ever. We also hoped that bringing the truth about the operations to the world might have an influence in preventing a decision that one day could be a matter of life or death to those who had operations."

Source: *Beyond Human Endurance. The Ravensbrück Women Tell Their Stories*, Interpress Publishers, Warsaw, 1970, p. 63.

2. **Excerpts from the May 1943 clandestine letter sent to the families in Lublin**

"For the time being no operations are being performed. All those operated on have returned from the hospital to the barracks. For the time being we are not working. It is not known what has caused the stoppage of the operations which they considered essential and important, whether it was the protest of the women who had had operations or the publicity given them. Publicity is a thing they are afraid of and try to avoid, even in the camp itself. We are afraid they might want to remove those operated as living proofs of their crime. It should be borne in mind that during the last twenty months, about every fourth Polish woman from the transport of political prisoners has been shot. On April 30th, five more were shot under the pretext they were to be in a transport to Auschwitz; this was done to distract our attention from it, following the previous one. As we realized what was happening, the next person to be taken, Frankiewicz from Warsaw, was taken in a mixed transport, with two asocial cases on the list of abnormal persons. Next they built a crematory outside the wall of the camp, so there would be no proofs. A thing that could help us is for everything happening here to be broadcast by the London radio. The only thing to stop them is the disclosure of the secret.

"... we shall keep going till the end, for certain, if only they still want to keep us. Sign: pencil in parcel."

Source: *Beyond Human Endurance. The Ravensbrück Women Tell Their Stories*, Interpress Publishers, Warsaw, 1970, p. 71.

3. Excerpt from Wanda Półtawska, where she describes the protest against further operations in March 1943

"Next morning a new list arrived. Five women were to present themselves at the rewir.[55] *With one voice they said "No". Instead they would go and see the commandant. We sat down and prepared a 'petition' for them to take with them. Mrs Chorazyna drew it up as we clustered round her, flushed with excitement. In a few brief sentences we stated that we, the undersigned political prisoner, wished to know whether the commandant was aware that experiments were being performed on completely healthy women in his camp – all of them political prisoners. We stated that these experiments had led to maiming and even death – here we gave the names of those who had died as a result of the experiments; that international law forbade experiments on human beings without their consent; and that we, the victims, hereby registered a formal protest against such experiments.*

We all signed the petition for the record, I must admit that a few signatures were missing. But this fact was basically unimportant, since any consequences would automatically fall on the whole group; and in any case the authorities would probably not even notice the absence of one or two signatures.

We were perfectly well aware of what the consequences might be, but we didn't care. To be honest, we didn't really expect that our protest would yield any positive result, nor did we suppose it would affect the course of the experiments already in progress. What mattered most was that we could be seen to be making a stand. For too long we had provided living proof of our own powerlessness and passivity."

Source: Wanda Półtawska, *And I am Afraid of My Dreams*, Translated from Polish by Mary Craig, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1987, pp. 112-113.

[55] Rewir (Polish) is an adaptation of German word *Revier* (short for *Krankenrevier*, infirmary). It was a sick room for prisoners in a concentration camp.

4. **Excerpt from Wanda Półtawska, in which she describes solidarity and help provided to the "rabbits" by other inmates in February 1945, when it became clear that the "rabbits" were to be executed**

"And it was thanks to unprecedented solidarity of the camp; to the cooperation of all the women, Poles and non-Poles alike; and especially the efforts of our own block officials and of Mother Liberakowa, that all the 'guinea-pigs' soon had guaranteed, regular hiding-places. The camp was whole-hearted in its protection of the 'guinea-pigs'. Everyone helped in some way, some deliberately, others by default. From the moment when the heroic decision was taken to protect us, there had been a dramatic – and universal – change of mood. Gone were the lifeless zombies; in their place were women with flushed, animated faces, whispering excitedly and with a tense wariness about the eyes. Full of fight and spirit, we were human beings again."

Source: Wanda Półtawska, *And I am Afraid of My Dreams*, Translated from Polish by Mary Craig, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1987, p. 149.

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Chapter 5: Sinti and Roma Women and Resistance

Verena Meier

Between 250,000 and 500,000 members of the Sinti and Roma minority fell victim to the genocidal policies of the Nazis and their collaborators across Europe. This chapter specifically focuses on Romani women in the women's concentration camp of Ravensbrück in particular, shedding light on their agency and forms of resistance.

Sinti and Roma Women in the concentration camp Ravensbrück

As many as 4,567 male and female Sinti and Roma of various nationalities were imprisoned in Ravensbrück concentration camp from its opening in 1939 until the end of the war. The first transport of eight Sinti and Roma women arrived in Ravensbrück between May 15 and 18 1939, when 974 women were transferred from the Lichtenburg concentration camp. On 29 June 1939, 440 Sinti and Roma, including young people from the age of 14, arrived at Ravensbrück from Lower Austria and Burgenland. By the spring of 1941, at least 550 girls and women from Germany and its annexed territories had been incarcerated in the camp.

A large number of these women had been previously imprisoned in the extermination and concentration camp Auschwitz-Birkenau. The "Gypsy Family Camp," established in February 1943, was a special camp for Sinti and Roma located in a separate area of Auschwitz-Birkenau (sector B II e). Around 23,000 Sinti and Roma were from Germany and territories annexed by the Nazis were deported there. Unlike other parts of the Auschwitz concentration and extermination camp, families in the "Gypsy Family Camp", were allowed to stay together; however, the living conditions were still extremely poor. The camp was dissolved in late July and early August 1944, when the Nazis murdered approximately 4,300 people in the gas chambers, whom they classified as "unfit to work". Before all the remaining inmates were murdered in the night of 2-3 August 1944, three transports with around 1,320 Romani men and women were sent to Ravensbrück - 1,107 of whom were women. Hungarian Roma constituted the largest group. 500 of them arrived in October and November 1944, either from the Komárom camp in Hungary or via Auschwitz.

In the Ravensbrück concentration camp, Romani women came from various nationalities, including Germany, Austria, Poland, Czechoslowkia, Hungary, Yugoslavia and Italy, and Greece. They spoke the national language of the country they were deported from, as well as different local dialects of the Romani language, reflecting the diversity of this group. Sinti and Roma women in the Ravensbrück concentration camp lived in inhumane conditions in overcrowded barracks, without sufficient hygiene or food. They were forced to work, often in the cane mat weaving mill, the straw shoe weaving mill, the tailor's shop, the furrier's shop of the SS-owned textile and leather recycling company, the laundry, and the Siemens & Halske factory located near the main camp. The inmates suffered from chronic hunger, illness and abuse by female overseers. Many were victims of medical experiments by Dr. Carl Clauberg, Walter Sonntag, Horst Schumann and Franz Bernhard Luca, who forcibly sterilized the women.

Biographies and Facets of Resistance

Zilly Schmidt, née Cäcilie Reichmann

One of the Ravensbrück inmates who resisted Nazi oppression was the young Sinti woman Zilly Schmidt, née Cäcilie Reichmann. She was born on 10 July 1924, in Hinternah near Erfurt in Thuringia, Germany. Her parents owned a mobile cinema and showed movies in various locations, mostly in rural areas, during the summer months. She lived with her four siblings, and her parents lived in a caravan with which they traveled from place to place. In the winter months, they had a permanent residence.

After the Nazis came to power in 1933, when Zilly was nine years old, and the persecution of Sinti and Roma intensified, her family left Germany and went to the neighboring territories that the Nazis would eventually annex and place under their control. First, they moved to Eger in the Sudetenland and later to Alsace. Zilly and two of her cousins lived with a French woman who was part of the Résistance and involved in underground activities.

In May 1940, at the age of 15, Zilly gave birth to a daughter named Ursula Josefine, who was nicknamed „Gretel“. Zilly and her partner Moritz Blum separated when he moved abroad to avoid Nazi persecution. In the summer of 1942, when Zilly was 18 years old, her family was arrested by the Gestapo in Strasbourg and eventually transported via a police prison to the “Gypsy camp” Lety near Prague, where around 1,300 Sinti and Roma were incarcerated. Zilly managed to escape from the camp with a male relative, and they went back into hiding in

the Sudetenland. However, the criminal police and Gestapo discovered their hiding place, and on 11 March 1943, they deported her and other family members to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

In Auschwitz, Zilly entered into a relationship with the *Lagerältester* Hermann Dimanski, a communist who had fought in the Spanish Civil War. He managed to spare her from the gas chamber and to put her on a transportation list, thus saving her life. Zilly remained in Auschwitz until 2 August 1944, when she was transferred to the women's concentration camp at Ravensbrück. Other family members, including her parents, her sister "Gucki" and her seven children as well as Zilly's four-year-old daughter, were murdered on the orders of Nazi functionaries during the night of 2-3. August in the gas chambers of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

From Ravensbrück Zilly was transferred to Wittenberg, a subcamp of Ravensbrück , where she worked in an airplane factory. With the help of a forced laborer who provided civilian clothing, she and her cousin Tilla managed to escape from the subcamp. Without the camp uniforms, they were not easily recognized and they made their way on by foot to Berlin, more than 100 kilometers away. After the war, Zilly recalled: *"Normally, what would have happened is I'd either have starved to death in Wittenberg or been liberated there. But I didn't want to wait, I wanted to take my fate into my own hands - so I ran away again. I was always running, always on the lookout."*

In Berlin, Zilly hid with her uncle in the "communal detention camp for Gypsies" in Berlin-Marzahn. From the beginning of 1945 until the end of the war, Zilly lived underground. She went to a refugee office, gave them a false name and claimed to be a refugee from the Eastern German territories that had been occupied by the Red Army. This way she managed to obtain official papers that she could use to get food that was rationed on food stamps and to pass as an "Aryan" woman when the police conducted checks.

Fig. 1: Cover of the Memoires of Zilly Schmidt *»God had something in store for me! Memories of a German Sintezza«*, published by Jana Mechelhoff-Herezi and Uwe Neumärker, Berlin 2021.

Philomena Franz, née Köhler

Another Sinti woman who resisted Nazi oppression within the concentration camp system was Philomena Franz, née Köhler. She was only two years older than Zilly Schmidt and was born on 21 Juli 1922, in Biberach an der Riß in southwest Germany and was the youngest of eight siblings. She grew up in a family of traveling musicians and performers - her father played the cello, and her mother was a singer. Philomena herself was a singer and dancer , performing at venues such as the Lido in Paris and the Winter Gardens in Berlin. In 1939 the Nazi police authorities confiscated the family's car and musical instruments wile they were driving home from Paris to Stuttgart. Eventually, Philomena was forced to work in the metal industry.

In the spring of 1943 she and her family were deported from Stuttgart to Auschwitz-Birkenau. There, she was selected for the camp brothel. She remembered after the war that she had resisted and screamed: *"No, no [...] I want to die like my relatives and brothers and sisters whom you have all killed here. I do not want to be a harlot for you. Kill me!"* The guards then forced her to work in the rock quarry instead.

In May 1944, Philomena was transferred to Ravensbrück, where her sister had also been incarcerated. Both of them were transferred to the Schlieben satellite camp to perform forced labor in an ammunition factory. On 19 July 1944, a total of 998 female inmates, most of whom were Sinti and Roma, were transferred from Ravensbrück to Schlieben. At the factory, Phiolmena and her sister had to pour explosive material into bombs underground. After escaping from the subcamp Schieben in late 1944, she was caught by the members of the *Volkssturm*, a unit of military fighters who had not been drafted for the German army before and then supposed to defend the country when the Allies were approaching, and the Hitler Youth. She was brought back to Ravensbrück, where both her sisters were tortured in retaliation for her escape attempt and one of her sister eventually died from the maltreatment.

Afterward, Philomena was transferred to the Sachsenhausen and, later on, to Auschwitz again. At Auschwitz, a little daughter of a Polish Roma woman hid under Philomena's skirt when the SS guards selected her mother and sister for the gas chambers and Philomena took care of her until she was transferred to the subcamp in Wittenberg, where she was forced to work in an airplane factory. Shortly before the end of the war, Philomena made a second and

successful attempt to escape from the Wittenberg camp. A civilian worker in the labor camp for aircraft production helped her organize insulating pliers and tipped her off that at midnight there would be no electricity in the camp's fence. Philomena Franz and twelve other women went to the fence and made two holes in it to get out. They eventually had to separate to flee through the forests, as their escape was noticed and the guards chased them with machine guns. Philomena swam across the Elbe River and was found in a weakened state by a farmer on one of his fields. He supported her and provided a space for her to hide for several weeks until Soviet troops liberated the area. Philomena Franz survived the Nazi persecution; her parents and five of her siblings died in the concentration camps. After the war, she moved to Munich, where she met her future husband, Conrad Franz. He was a Sinti who survived the Nazi persecution. Together with other Sinti they toured through southern Germany, performing music and dancing for the Allied troops.

Ceija Stojka

Finally, the Austrian Lovara-Roma woman Ceija Stojka**,** who was a child during the Nazi persecution, also demonstrated acts of resistance while incarcerated in Ravensbrück. She was born on 23 May 1933 in Kraubath an der Mur, Steiermark, Austria. Her family lived off mobile horse trading throughout Austria. Ceija had three sisters and three brothers. After the annexation of Austria, the Nazis implemented their persecution measures there as well. One of her sisters was incarcerated in the detention camp for "Gypsies" in Lackenbach. In 1941, the Gestapo arrested her father, Karl Wakar Horvath. He was taken from Dachau concentration camp to the Hartheim killing center in November 1942, where he was murdered.

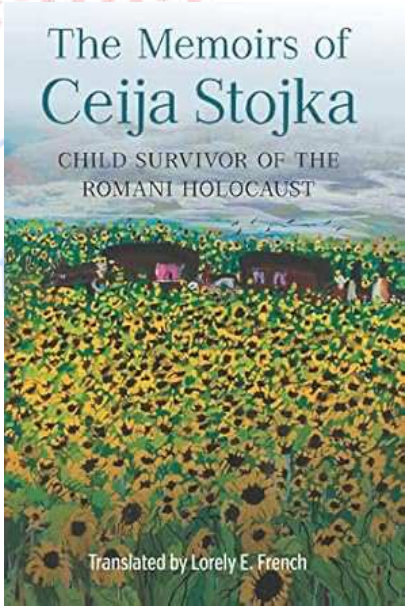

Fig. 2 Cover of The Memoirs of Ceija Stojka: Child Survivor of the Romani Holocaust, by Ceija Stojka, translated by Lorely E. French. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2022. Cover image © Ceija Stojka. All rights reserved.

In 1943, when Ceija Stojka was only ten years old, she and her mother and siblings were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau . There, she was forced to work in a sewing labor detachment. Her mother advised her to lie about her age and claim she was sixteen, not ten. She said that work was the only way out of the extermination camp. In early 1944, Ceija, her mother Sidi, and her sister were transferred to the Ravensbrück women's concentration camp, as they were classified as "fit to work". In Ravensbrück, Ceija made the skirt as an act of self-assertion.

In 1989, at the age of 56, Ceija Stojka began to paint. Art became an important means of self-expression, helping her deal with the trauma of the camps, the persecution, and the ongoing discrimination. She said: "*I always try to portray my feelings and memories. I want to show my own world to the people. It is important to understand that, we are all human beings and art allows us to live and exist. Art can demonstrate and connect us"*.

Facets of resistance

These three women exemplify the different facets of resistance that women expressed while incarcerated in Ravensbrück and other concentration camps. Forms of resistance ranged from escape, risking one's life in the attempt, to creative and metaphysical forms of resistance, such as finding strength in faith or producing material objects as acts of self-assertion in the deprivation of the camp. These biographies further illustrate that solidarity among the inmates of the camp was a crucial factor in the various forms of resistance and means to survive.

Silenced Voices and Ongoing Discrimination after 1945

After the war, these three Sinti and Roma women faced difficulties in claiming compensation for their maltreatment and the loss of their family members due to state persecution. Old stigmas persisted in postwar German and Austrian societies, and often the Nazi persecution based

on racial grounds was denied. Authorities argued that they had been incarcerated as "asocials" or "criminals", which was not recognized as a form of specific Nazi persecution. Furthermore, the criminal police and other perpetrators, such as medical professionals, perpetuated these claims during denazification procedures and trials to exonerate themselves. While postwar society largely believed these claims, survivors continued to face stigmatization and discrimination. In the 1970s, a protest movement of Sinti and Roma emerged in West Germany. The civil rights movement was closely linked to the demand for political recognition of the genocide. It was supported by female Sinti and Roma, as well as leading figures like Simone Veil, the French Holocaust survivor and first female President of the European Parliament. At the end of the 1980s, Ceija Stojka became involved in the Austrian Roma movement.

Although these three Sinti and Roma women received irregular education while their families conducted mobile trading during the interwar period, and their schooling was abruptly stopped following the Nazi discriminatory laws and their incarceration in concentration camps, these women became pioneers in giving their testimonies and writing their memoirs. Philomena Franz published her autobiography, *Zwischen Liebe und Hass*, in 1985, and Ceija Stojka published *Wir leben im Verborgenen. Erinnerungen einer Rom-Zigeunerin* in 1988, which were published in 2022 in an English translation ("The Memoirs of Ceija Stojka: Child Survivor of the Romani Holocaust"). Both women also created art as a means of dealing with the trauma. e.g. by writing poetry and creating visual artworks. Philomena Franz recalled: *"During this phase of detachment from the depression, I also wrote down my suffering*'."

In 2020, Zilly Schmidt's testimony was published, and it became available in English in 2021 under the title *God had something in store for me! Memories of a German Sintezza*. Only at the age of 94, she began speaking publicly as an eye-witness. In the early years after the writings of Philomena Franz and Ceija Stojka were published in the late 1980s, their memoirs received little public attention.

Zilly Schmidt was also motivated lately by the lack of knowledge in the society about the crimes committed against Sinti and Roma during the Nazi regime: *"It means this to me so that it is not forgotten, that people know what we Sinti and Roma also went through, that we lost our families in Auschwitz, that we were gassed."*

Commemoration in Ravensbrück today

The fate of the Sinti and Roma inmates was only gradually incorporated into the commemorative spaces at the memorial site. During the time of the German Democratic Republic (GDR),

the focus was on the fate of the antifascist inmates and resistance fighters, as was the case at all other memorial sites in East Germany as this group played a central role in the antifascist founding myth of the state.

After German reunification, a memorial room dedicated to the Sinti and Roma murdered in the Ravensbrück concentration camp was opened in 1995 in the basement of the cell building. The following dedication text is inscribed in German, English, and Romani on three memorial plaques: “In reverence and mourning, we Sinti and Roma remember our mothers, wives and children who were murdered by the SS in the Ravensbrück concentration camp. We also remember all our people who were victims of Nazi genocide throughout the entire sphere of influence of National Socialism.”

Material

1. Zilly Schmidt describes Ravensbrück and her escape from the Wittenberg sub-camp

Ravensbrück

I got sent from Auschwitz to Ravensbrück on the 2nd of August 1944.Shortly after me, my Polish friend […] got there too. And she said to me when we met again there, 'Zilli, do you know they all got gassed? They gassed the whole of the Gypsy camp.' And I said, 'Help!' - and I fell right down. Collapsed. My nerves couldn't take it anymore, when I heard that. That's how I found out my family had been killed. Probably all of them. Later - in the months after that - I kept trying to tell myself it might not have been all of them, one of them might have survived. But actually ,I knew it very early on for sure: My family, they were all dead. Murdered.

Prisoners

In Ravensbrück, Like in Auschwitz, there were lots of different prisoners. I met political prisoners there, too. They had a red triangle and the gaze had a pink one. The groups all had different triangles: the Jehovahs Witnesses purple and the Sinti black, the black triangle for the 'asocial elements'. There were lots of gay prisoner functionaries in Ravensbrück, lots of gay prisoners altogether, in lots of Jehovah's Witnesses. They went to the gallows for their faith. All they would have had to say, 'we'll give up our faith', and they'd have been released. But no, they didn't do that they went to the gallows. They held firm to their faith. […] They weren't just good for themselves. Sometimes in Ravensbrück - we got so little to eat there, I cried with hunger - they made cake out of their bread and gave some to me. […]

Escape II

From Ravensbrück, we got sent to the Arado factory in Wittenberg an der Elbe. That was an external sub-camp. We worked there, we had to work there. Forced labor. Me and my cousin

Tilla. […] Normally, what would have happened was I'd either have starved to death in Wittenberg or been liberated there. But I didn't want to wait I wanted to take my faith into my own hands - so I ran away again. I was always running, always on the look out: 'What can I do, how do I get out of here?' There was a civilian worker at Arado, a kind man. He worked the same bench as us -my cousin and me. The civilian workers didn't have anything to eat either, but when he did have a bite to eat he'd give us some of it. 'There, girls, I've put something under the table for you.' One day he said to me: 'you know what, girls make a break for it! You won't survive this place.` He liked us, you know, he was an elderly man. Perhaps he had a big family too, never had much for himself… That was at the end of the war. 'But it's all fenced in, there's wire all around, electric wire. How are we to get out of here?` I asked him. 'No, listen girl, there is no electric charge on the wire at such and such a time. They switch it off.` He knew all about it. But apart from that, our clothes were marked, with stripes on the back. Painted on. He even brought us clothes so we could make a break for it; he put them under the work bench, and then he said again: 'Girls, get out of here, you'll die in here.' And I said again: 'We can't get out.' He explained to us what side of the camp we had to leave from: 'there's a hole down there, a dip, you crawl through there and then you're free.' That's what we did. Me and Tila… of course! We took the risk - and we made it.
We managed to get out of there, and then off, off, off, off, run, run, run! Me and Tilla. 'Where do we go now?` we ran up a big hill. […] he heard the dogs barking at the bottom of the hill, searching for us. But they'd never have guessed we were up there. Because the airmen were there. God helped us and we set up there - me and Tilla under the tree. Almost frozen to death, but undiscovered by the guards looking for us. We walked on, the next morning. We slept at a farmhouse the next day. They noticed my number, but I managed to convince them it was my fiancé's field post number. And then I said, 'Tilla, let's get out of here quick, or our times' up.` then we walked to Berlin; it wasn't that far away. I had an uncle there, in Marzahn. It was my Uncle Bawo, my father's brother, and he'd still had contact to my father in Auschwitz. That's how I knew he was still there, in Berlin.

Source: Zilly Schmidt: »God had something in store for me! Memories of a German Sintezza«, published by Jana Mechelhoff-Herezi and Uwe Neumärker, Berlin 2021, pp. 51-54.

2. Philomena Franz describes her escape from Wittenberg subcamp

Around midnight we went to the fence. In the trench, which was reserved for air raids for air raids, we walked about two or three meters in front of the barbed wire. I then went forward and the first and second fence with a pair of pliers. I was the first to crawl through these holes. The others immediately followed. We were free. Now we had to act fast. We then ran down the slope to the road to the road that ran along the Elbe. [...] Suddenly I was alone again, reacted immediately. I reacted immediately and got off the road to the banks of the Elbe. And along there, towards the Russians.

Source: Albus, Michael: Philomena Franz. Die Liebe hat den Tod besiegt. Düsseldorf 1988, p. 66; own translation; also reproduced in Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand/ Bildungsforum Antiziganismus (Ed.): "Wir geben uns nicht die Hände". Bildungsmaterialien zum Widerstand von Sinti und Roma gegen den Nationalsozialismus, p. 46 https://www.gdw-berlin.de/fileadmin/bilder/Bildungsangebote/GDW_Bildungsmaterialien_zum_Widerstand_von_Sinti_und_Roma_2019.pdf, accessed 11-09-2024.

3. Dress created by Ceija Stojka in Ravensbrück while working in the sewing room

Source: Children's skirt by Ceija Stojka: She wore this skirt with red crosses sewn onto it in the Ravensbrück concentration camp; wool, silk, 60.0 x 47.5 cm; Ravensbrück Memorial Site, V265 B2.

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