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Judith Buber Agassi's *The Jewish Prisoners of the Women's Concentration Camp Ravensbrück: Who Were They?* is very careful and very moving. It presents the results of her seven years of historical and sociological study of the Jewish prisoners of Ravensbrück, the only Nazi concentration camp for women only. Very little was known then about the number, origins, characteristics and itineraries of the prisoners, including dates of arrival, conditions, length of stay and fate. She shows that this camp played a significant role in the Holocaust history of Jewish women, girls and children, as it ceased to be a place of arbitrary and unlimited incarceration and became a place of transit for extermination, and a labor camp for the war industry, a central slave market, and finally another death camp.

Dr. Buber Agassi's data base includes nearly 16,000 names of Jewish prisoners of Ravensbrück. She divides the history of the camp into five very different periods that saw different kinds of populations, originating from different parts of European Jewry, suffering and dying under very different conditions. No prisoner group escaped systematic regimentation, humiliations, brutal punishments, long hours of hard labor, and the continuously deteriorating conditions of nutrition, housing and sanitation. Yet the Jewish prisoners suffered more of these than most others, and from summer 1944 to the end were assigned the worst and most dangerous work tasks in the German war industry and in the maintenance of military airfields — in Ravensbrück itself and in over a dozen different external labor camps of Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen and Flossenbürg. Until October 1944 Jewish Ravensbrück prisoners considered too old or sick for work were sent to be killed in Auschwitz. Of the thousands of mainly young arrivals from Auschwitz in August and September 1944 who were soon sent to external labor camps of Buchenwald, hundreds who were considered no longer suitable for work were soon returned to Auschwitz. From the labor camps of Sachsenhausen those found to be pregnant or otherwise unsuitable for work were returned to Ravensbrück, where most soon perished.

Whereas the rate of survival of the total Ravensbrück prisoner population is presumed to be about one in two, the known rate of survival of its Jewish camp population is considerably lower.

The specific quality of this book stems from Dr. Buber Agassi's inclusion here of a study of the social aspects of life under these terrible conditions, comparing those of other prisoner categories to those of the Jewish prisoners. Only during the first years of the camp a clandestine social organization existed that encompassed all the Jewish prisoners. It ended with the death of most of the Jewish prisoners in the "Euthanasia" gas chamber of Bernburg in March/April 1942. Already in the end of 1942 nearly all the remaining and new Jewish prisoners of Ravensbrück were killed in Auschwitz and the camp remained "judenfrei" (free of Jews) until September 1943, when special categories of Jews arrived. One category comprised Jewish women and children with (often tenuous) Hungarian, Rumanian, Turkish or Spanish citizenship, arrested in Germany, Belgium or the Netherlands. Another category



was that of "Mischlinge" (part-Jews). There was then still some organization of sub-groups such as that of the Dutch-speaking Jewish mothers who succeeded in supplying some schooling for their children. The bond between mothers and children was strong and presumably it was the major contributor to the relatively high survival rate of the children. From August 1944 to the end of the year about five times the number of Jewish women and girls arrived in the camp than had arrived over the previous five years. By far the largest group was of those originating from Hungary, coming either from Auschwitz or — in November and December — directly, largely on foot, from Budapest; the second largest group was of those originating from Poland, either from Auschwitz, directly from three Polish Ghettos, or from one large Polish labor camp; the third group was of direct family transports from Slovakia.

There are several important findings here. There were no contacts between the Jewish arrivals of this period with those from the previous. The arrivals of August and September and part of those of November 1944 had no time to establish even sub-group organizations, as most of them were soon transferred to external labor camps. Among those who staid for several months energy was very low, due to the catastrophic housing and sanitation conditions, starvation diet, spreading epidemics and the resulting high mortality. Tensions and even hostility developed, due to misconceptions, between many of the Polish/Jewish arrivals and the Hungarian/Jewish arrivals: the Hungarian group (as well as of the much smaller Italian group) had no common language with most Jewish prisoners from other countries. This precluded any joint Jewish social organization. Nevertheless we know of at least one instance of extreme danger when this lack of Jewish solidarity was overcome by one woman's extreme courage and initiative.

Dr. Buber Agassi's most important sociological finding is that of the prevalence and resilience of "small groups", also called "camp families", among the Jewish women and girls of Ravensbrück, originating from different countries and from traditional as well as from "assimilated" families, who arrived there in 1944 and in 1945. She examined the origins, composition, and functioning of this form of social organization of Jewish women concentration camp prisoners, of its contribution to the will to survive and even to survival proper.

In addition she discusses here the matters of the meaning of resistance and heroism for Jewish women concentration-camp prisoners, the relations between Jewish and non-Jewish prisoners in the camp, the gender specific characteristics of the camp's Jewish population, and their moral judgments and attitudes towards themselves, towards their jailers, and towards the German civilian population.

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