

Abstract of presentation at workshop in Berlin - July 1999

by Judith Buber Agassi

## THE JEWISH PRISONERS OF THE WOMEN'S CONCENTRATION-CAMP RAVENSBRUECK - WHO WERE THEY?

The purpose of our research project is the writing of a previously little known chapter in the history of women in the Holocaust, centered around Ravensbrueck, the only Nazi concentration-camp established especially for women.

As historians and sociologists of gender we have a special interest in the research of the social aspects of women's life during the Holocaust, social structure and networks among the Jewish women prisoners, kinship, camp family and friendship relations, relations with different groups of non-Jewish women prisoners, the behaviour of men and women SS prison guards, and of different kinds of members of the civilian population, in order to discover any differences or similarities between Jewish women and men's conditions, chances of survival, strategies of survival and resistance, the impact of the traumas of their holocaust experience on the survivors, and in their strategies for the reconstruction of their lives.

This chapter is a report and discussion of the results of research that is basic and essential to this project: its purpose is to discover the identities, numbers, dates, origins, and main itineraries of suffering of the about 20 thousand Jewish women, girls and children who ever entered the Women's Concentration-Camp of Ravensbrueck.

Ravensbrueck was never intended especially for Jewish women; Overall Jewish women, girls and children constituted a relatively small minority of its inmates.

Jewish women sent there had 16 different nationalities: first they were sent there from Germany and later from all the countries of Europe then occupied and ruled by Nazi-Germany, as well as from those whose rulers were collaborating in the destruction of their Jewish citizens. They were brought to Ravensbrueck from German, Austrian and Czech police prisons, from ordinary prisons and from other concentration camps, from Dutch and Belgian and French internment camps, from Polish prisons, ghettos, labour camps, straight from Slovakia or Budapest, and many thousands as "graduates" of Auschwitz. Their periods of stay in Ravensbrueck varied from three years to just a few days, their period of suffering during the Holocaust from over 5 years to one year. Four main periods may be defined:

The first period is from May 1939 to the end of 1941 - mostly women from Germany, Austria and annexed parts of Czechoslovakia.

The second period is the year 1942 to the end of January 1943, with hundreds of new Jewish arrivals from the "German Reich" and also from Poland. In February and March 1942 about 700 Jewish women and girls were deported to Bernburg near Dessau to be killed there by poison gas, On October 10, 1942 the last 522 of the about 1300 earlier Jewish inmates were deported to Auschwitz to make this camp situated north of Berlin "judenfrei" - carrying out Himmler's command. After this date only 10 new Jewish arrivals were registered on existing lists, Already on January 30, 1943, these 10 and two others were deported to Auschwitz.

The third period is from February 1943 to summer 1944 with its special Jewish groups - the "Mischlinge" from Uckermark, and from September 1943 the "Mischlinge" from Auschwitz, and then transports of women and of many children with "neutral" papers (Hungarian, Roumanian and Turkish) between October 26, 1943 and the end of June 1944 who arrived from Berlin, Frankfurt, Belgium, the Netherlands and Theresienstadt. (Sporadic transports to Auschwitz of those who had no special status or who had lost it, continued until October 3, 1944.)

The fourth period from mid-August 1944 until May 1945, started with mass transports from Hungary and Slovakia, from three Polish ghettos, followed by many thousands first transported and the driven on foot out of Auschwitz, women and girls from Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and 12 other countries, By then Ravensbrueck had become the central market-place or relay station for female slave labour for the Nazi war industry; finally, with the establishment of "Uckermark" and a special gas chamber and crematorium, it also became a major alternative extermination camp for those considered unfit for work in the camp and those selected and returned there from Akdos and labour camps. In April 45 hundreds of Jewish women from disbanded labour camps.

This chapter is intended first to present and discuss the major findings concerning the numbers and the names, the dates and the origins of these waves of Jewish women prisoners during the six years of the camp's existence.

For several of the other chapters of this research the major sources are written accounts, testimonies, questionnaires by, and especially interviews with the survivors, To answer the questions of this first chapter, the most important sources are various extant camp documents, most of them documents of the SS-administration of Ravensbrueck, some from Auschwitz and Buchenwald, Gestapo and German Police documents and some early post-war documents and documents from the Nuremberg-Trial archives. Written accounts and testimonies of survivors, both Jewish and non-Jewish, written ever since liberation, and systematic questionnaires and interviews with Jewish Ravensbrueck-survivors from 1945 till to-day, will serve as additions, filling some of the serious gaps, and as confirmations or challenges, corrections or refutations of the varied information of the documents.

During different periods Jewish women, girls and children varied from less than 10% to 20% and more of all the prisoners arriving in the camp, During the first half of 1943 there were hardly any Jews arriving or in the camp. Yet during the 6 last months of the camp the percentage of Jews among the tens of thousands of prisoners arriving then, was much higher. Unfortunately, any lists with the numbers from 95,684 to 101,576, i.e. nearly 6000, between the beginning of December 1944 and the 23rd of January 1945 are missing. We know that on December 18th a huge Todesmarsch, nearly all Jewish, left Auschwitz. Survivors tell us that they were told that this was the last transport out of Auschwitz. After several days of being driven on foot and then travelling crowded into open railway carriages, they arrived in Ravensbrueck; two of them (Lidia Rosenfeld-Vago and her sister) received the numbers 99626 and 99627. They could hardly have arrived before January 22. The last existing list from Auschwitz is from January 23 with the numbers 101577-102299 - over 56% of them Jewish; thus during one or two days at least 2700 women and girls arrived in Ravensbrueck. well over half of them Jewish,

Over the next three days there were only a few Jews among the 516 arrivals. The last prisoner number is 102815, until recently it was assumed that this signified the total number of prisoners being registered. However there has been found in the Warsaw Archive an Ueberstellungs-liste of 480 Jewish women from Ravensbrueck to Buchenwald on March 3, 1945, with the numbers 142954 to 143433, so now we know that for this period we are missing the names of 40000 women arriving in Ravensbrueck who still were assigned prisoner numbers! (Two other Jewish survivors with such high numbers have also turned up.)

We know that the Jewish arrivals from disbanded labour camps in April (such as 498 from Krupp-Neukoelln) were no longer registered at all, due to the fact that the names of several thousands of mainly Hungarian Jewish women -of whom we know that they arrived in Ravensbrueck - but whose Ravensbrueck lists do not exist, were found on several Akdo lists, we now have nearly 13 000 legible Jewish names and another 1500 Jewish but not quite legible ones.

All existing 1176 Zugangslisten and 12 relevant Ueberstellungs-listen have been registered on computer, Legible Jewish names appearing on the lists have also been computerized - in the meantime up to the end of 1942.

The many hundreds of survivors who gave testimonies, answered questionnaires or were interviewed from 1945 until now, have given information about the date of their arrival in Ravensbrueck, some even remember their prisoner number, and many also gave information about other prisoners, most of them Jewish, who had arrived together with them, some who had survived, and many who had died before liberation or immediately after.

The names of the known survivors and several basic items of the information given by them, have been put on computerized lists by our colleagues. The names of a considerable part of these can be found on existing Zugangs- and Ueberstellungslisten; the most important data of their testimonies should be added to the computerized names' list. Yet many do not appear on any of the extant Zugangslisten or Ueberstellungslisten, due to the fact that they arrived during one of the large gaps in 1944 or after January 28, 1945.

After completing the computerization and the combination of all these data, we shall be able to discover the identities of the majority of the Jewish prisoners of Ravensbrueck, and to answer many factual questions with a considerable degree of accuracy.

Due to the fact that much of this work of computerization, and of combination of different sets of data has not yet been completed, I shall here try to give preliminary answers - to be completed and corrected later - to the following 12 questions: what were:

1. the numbers of Jewish prisoners of Ravensbrueck, overall and at different periods, their percentage among arrivals and among the general prisoner population,
2. their distribution according to formal reason for arrest, at different periods and compared to non-Jewish arrivals,
3. their distribution according to "nationality" (and place of origin) at different periods and compared to non-Jewish arrivals,

4. their distribution according to marital status, at different periods and compared to non-Jewish arrivals,
  5. their distribution according to age, at different periods and compared to non-Jewish arrivals.
  6. How many Jewish children under age 14 came to Ravensbrueck, at different periods and compared to non-Jewish arrivals, How many Jewish babies were born there out of all known births?
  7. How many arrived in all-Jewish transports, how many in mixed ones.
  8. How many "Mischlinge", or Juedin I. Grades, or II. Grades, arrived in what periods?
  9. When, and how many Jewish prisoners were sent from Ravensbrueck to Bernburg and to Auschwitz?
  9. What information do we have from documents and from testimonies about the number of Jewish prisoners who died or were killed at Ravensbrueck at different periods?
  10. How many and when, were sent from Ravensbrueck to which labour camps (Aussenkommandos) of Ravensbrueck, especially to Neustadt-Glewe or Malchow, or to Akdos of Buchenwald, and what do we know about conditions there, about the numbers and percentage of Jewish women and girls in the population of the labour camp. How many perished there or were selected there to be returned to Ravensbrueck (or to Auschwitz or to Bergen-Belsen).
- (From existing Ueberstellungslisten and Buchenwald documents we can reconstruct data about the major labour camps to which Jewish women and girls were transferred from Ravensbrueck. Valuable research has recently been published on Neustadt-Glewe, Our colleague Irith Dublon-Knebel will present research on Malchow.)
11. How many were sent when, from which previous labour camps to Ravensbrueck? The evidence of Krupp/Neukoelln and Frankfurt/ Walldorf.
  12. For how many Jewish women and girls on labour-camp and Akdo lists do we have data about home-towns and occupations and what do they signify?

[Nearly all the data about topics of liberation and about the itineraries and eventual resettlement of survivors after liberation, cannot be learned from the documents examined here, but from other documents examined by our colleague Sabine Kittel, and from the rich information contained in questionnaires, testimonies and interviews of survivors.]