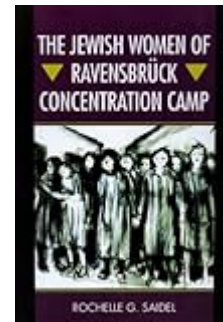


Rochelle G. Sidel. *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004. 336 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-299-19860-2.



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Within the English language literature on concentration camps (the preponderance of which examines Auschwitz-Birkenau), Ravensbrück, the only major female concentration camp, is seriously underrepresented. Even more seriously, none of the studies devoted to the camp address the presence of Jewish women within the camp. This gap is covered by gender and Holocaust scholar Rochelle G. Sidel, whose latest work, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp*, tells the stories of some of the approximately 26,000 Jewish women held in the camp who have been, and been kept, silent for nearly half a century. Sidel's study is a testament to how history can change the future for individuals. While the work fills an important gap in secondary literature, however, it does so with mixed results.

When Sidel visited the Ravensbrück memorial in 1980, neither exhibits nor the staff made any real mention that Jewish women were interned in the camp. The GDR-administered site chose instead to concentrate on Communist heroines imprisoned there. Not until 1993, when Soviet troops finally left the location for good, did work on a Jewish memorial space in the camp begin. This belated recognition incited dozens of the camp's Jewish survivors to return to the place of their imprisonment. Sidel draws most of her information about the goings-on of the camp from her interviews with several of these

internees and many others contacted with their help and that of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Before relaying the specific experiences of these Jewish women, however, Sidel provides a short history of Ravensbrück from its foundation in 1934 to its liberation in 1945.[1] Given that most of the 15,000 survivors (out of the 132,000 women imprisoned at Ravensbrück) arrived in the camp in 1944-45, excavating the history of the camp before that time is rather difficult. But Sidel gathers from SS records and testimony of a handful of early arrivals that the original purpose of the camp (built to house three thousand inmates) was to hold and exploit female political prisoners as Germany prepared for war. After 1939, however, increasing numbers of Jews, Sinti and Roma, "asocials," criminals, and Jehovah's Witnesses arrived there as well.

During the early war years, "even though slave labor, brutality, and torture were routine," conditions in the camp were relatively "organized and orderly" (p. 16). Overcrowding and accompanying sanitation problems were not a major factor, as the prison held only a few thousand women. Inmates even wore clean, matching uniforms. But as thousands upon thousands of women poured into the camp, it became a cesspool of filth, disease, and death. For anyone who miraculously survived the overcrowding, starvation, and backbreaking labor,

the Germans used more direct methods of killing their victims: lethal injections and other “medical” experiments, gas chambers, and shootings.

Saidel’s short history of the camp ends with her contention that the experiences of women were completely unique from those of men in the Holocaust. Some of these distinctly female attributes aided women in their struggles to survive. For instance, “homemaking and nurturing skills were ‘women’s work,’” and these roles equipped them with the tools needed to form surrogate families, care for each other and each other’s children, and keep living spaces as clean as possible, helping to curtail disease (pp. 22, 208-9). Interestingly, although Saidel does not mention it, advocates of women’s rights had fought for decades to break free from these roles, yet they were exactly what helped save the lives of many female concentration camp prisoners.

Conversely, gender-associated qualities also plagued women inside Ravensbrück. Because of social ideals of modesty, many internees were severely traumatized after being forced to strip naked in front of men and other women. Women were also socialized to need male protection. But to survive, women had to overcome this submissiveness and fend for themselves. Whereas men only struggled to survive, women were doubly burdened with the fight for their lives and the attempt to break free from their ingrained self-images. These factors, coupled with abortions, disruption or cessation of menstrual cycles, rape and sexual abuse, and forced prostitution, made Ravensbrück truly “a special hell for women” (p. 12).

This theme of the distinctiveness of female Holocaust experiences runs throughout the remainder of the book, most of which illustrates the individual experiences of either survivors interviewed by Saidel or victims brought to her attention by scholars and survivors. Each chapter focuses on the trials of these women in specific scenarios. The experiences of female inmates at Ravensbrück will be familiar to any reader of the relevant secondary literature.^[2] Thus Saidel highlights the Jewish women of Ravensbrück not because they went through different tribulations than other women in the Holocaust, but because their specific names and stories have never before been singled out. Faithful to this theme, Saidel continually points out examples of how women helped each other cope with the daily grind of living in Ravensbrück, by sharing recipes with one another, making small gifts, writing poems and singing songs, sharing food, and watching over each other’s children. Almost all the women mentioned, in one way or another, “the

importance of the nurturing support they received from family and close friends” (p. 150). Without these relationships, the Jewish women of Ravensbrück would never have survived.

Despite her successful pursuit of this theme, however, Saidel fails to provide any new arguments to the field of Holocaust studies. As a result, her work reads like a history of the camp through the eyes of Jewish women intended for popular audiences and audiences unfamiliar with the concentration camp system. While this reluctance to pose new questions may have stemmed from the credibility of her most prevalent sources—survivor interviews—which she even admits “are at best a blend of memory and history,” Saidel certainly had opportunities to at least introduce some key issues based on her findings (p. 223). For instance, as Ravensbrück was a women’s camp, every survivor makes some mention of being separated from male loved ones. But Saidel never mentions the effect of that separation on internees. The bonds these women formed raises the question of whether the collective separation from male loved ones helped reinforce them. Additionally, Saidel devotes several chapters to outlining the types of work the women carried out, such as making military uniforms, producing electronic parts for V-1 and V-2 rockets, and manufacturing ammunition. All of this forced labor directly contributed to the German war effort, but Saidel again makes no mention how the Jewish women of Ravensbrück felt about aiding their enemies’ power-hungry designs. Such feelings (like guilt) could have interfered with survivors’ abilities to move on after the war, a time period to which Saidel devotes several pages.

Saidel also points out that several of the Jewish prisoners, like Rachel Rozenbaum Hocherman, disguised themselves as non-Jews (by obtaining false identification papers and speaking the language of the nation to which they claimed allegiance) as they believed they would be dealt with more humanely. But Saidel fails to assess how the concealment of their true identities could have affected such prisoners. Saidel apparently never posed these types of questions to her interviewees; they are not included in her study. While she may have felt some individuals, quite understandably, would be unwilling or unable to share deep feelings about such a traumatic experience, several women were eager to tell their stories. The lasting impression is of a missed opportunity to learn more about the mindsets of survivors.

Even when Saidel does introduce interesting arguments, she only provides one possible interpretation.

For instance, in support of her claim that women had a unique and more difficult cross to bear inside the camps than men because they had to abandon their submissive social roles in order to survive, she neglects the question of comparable male experiences. If men were the dominant gender in society at the time, does it not stand to reason that their being forced to adopt a completely submissive role in concentration camps was just as difficult? Female inmates were taking an empowering step in fending for themselves, whereas men were taking a disempowering one. So while Saidel convincingly demonstrates that women underwent a unique experience in several respects, she at least needs to give passing mention to the experiences of men in order to contrast them with those of women. Without that comparison, Saidel presents an incomplete argument that women in the Holocaust, because they were women, had a more difficult time than men.

Saidel's organization also raises some problems. She arranges the book thematically but spends much of each chapter focusing on specific women and their stories. Saidel spends a few pages in a chapter outlining the experiences of one woman in relation to that chapter's theme, and then jumps to another woman's story, leaving the remainder of the previous woman's tale for a later chapter. As a result, the book becomes quite muddled, forcing the reader to jump back and forth continuously. As an example of how this style of organization impaired the work, throughout the first twelve chapters, Saidel repeatedly highlights the fact that the Red Cross liberated many prisoners in 1945. But she also points out that inmates were still executed, taken on death marches, and left in the camps; as she notes, three thousand women were still in the camp when it was liberated by the Russian Army. This left the reader wondering how the Red Cross managed to save some individuals and failed to rescue others. Not until chapter 13 does Saidel note that Folke Bernadotte, vice-president of the Swedish Red Cross, had arranged a deal with Heinrich Himmler to liberate a fixed number of inmates. The book might have flowed more smoothly had she written this study from evidence gathered from many survivors rather than focusing her attention on long stories representing the experiences of forgotten individuals.

On the other hand, the attention Saidel gives to these women is the greatest strength of the book. 26,000 Jewish women were persecuted by the Nazis at Ravensbrück. Scholars, as well as the Communist government of East

Germany, ignored these women for fifty years. Because of Saidel's determination to make these women heard, she spent years not only performing scholarly research on the camp, but also learning as much as she could from these women and, in the process, forming her own bonds with individuals who credited the relationships they maintained or made anew in the camp with saving their lives. For twenty-three years, Saidel's "emotional and intellectual connections with the women who suffered at the camp continued to grow" (p. 217). Now, "the victims' stories have become a part of [her]" (p. 224).

A book released during the GDR era about the Ravensbrück memorial read that the site "is a memorial to the women of strong will, to the women with knowledge, who held firmly together and who supported and sustained their weaker comrades, the defenseless victims; it is a monument, built here to the everlasting glory of the heroines, who fought here to the very last breath" (quoted, p. 7). Rochelle G. Saidel's tireless efforts make her volume a memorial in and of itself. Thanks to Saidel, the 26,000 targets of "fascist racial-madness" (p. 220) at Ravensbrück can never again be forgotten.

Notes

[1]. Anyone interested in additional information on the camp itself should consult Jack G. Morrison, *Ravensbrück: Everyday Life in a Women's Concentration Camp 1935-45* (Princeton: Marcus Weiner, 2000); Genevieve de Gaulle Anthonioz, *The Dawn of Hope: A Memoir of Ravensbrück* (New York: Arcade, 1999); Nanda Herbermann, *The Blessed Abyss: Inmate #6582 in Ravensbrück Concentration Camp for Women* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000); Wanda Poltawska, *And I am Afraid of My Dreams* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1987); Wanda Machlejd, ed., *Experimental Operations on Prisoners of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp* (Poznan: Zachodnie, 1960).

[2]. For accounts of similar female experiences in another camp, see Lucie Adelsberger, *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Story* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995); Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys: A Woman Survivor's True Story of Auschwitz* (Chicago: Ziff-Davis, 1997); Ana Novac, *The Beautiful Days of My Youth: My Six Months in Auschwitz and Plaszow* (New York: Henry Holt, 1992); Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, *Auschwitz: True Tales From A Grotesque Land* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

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