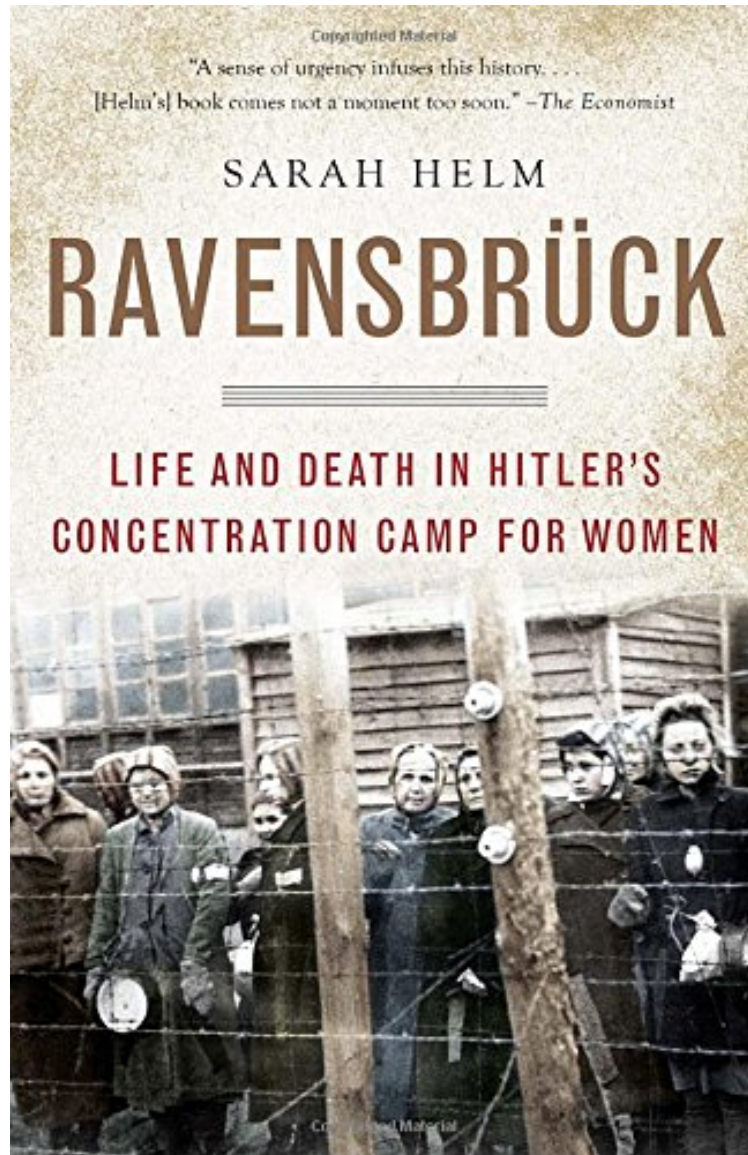


Ravensbruck: Life and Death in Hitler's Concentration Camp for Women

Sarah Helm

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Sarah Helm : Ravensbruck: Life and Death in Hitler's Concentration Camp for Women before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Ravensbruck: Life and Death in Hitler's Concentration Camp for Women:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. This may be the single best description, from beginning to endBy

hudunit333 This is a horrific tale so make sure you're prepared. Since there is very little physical documentary evidence left from the camp the story has to be told by patching together memories and small bits of information from many sources. As a consequence the book seems quite choppy at first. By midpoint you start to see the big picture and the characters (prisoners and guards) start to develop. Obviously a lot of research and effort went into it. This may be the single best description, from beginning to end, of a single concentration camp that has ever been written. What is also interesting is that it was a women's camp. I highly recommend this book either for knowledge about the Third Reich or even Women's Studies. You won't soon forget this one. 2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Informative and intense. A must read for schools. By Ginger Miller Helm does an amazing job researching and interviewing these incredibly brave and courageous women and those behind the intense inhumanity they suffered. I knew of the camp and much of the history but not the personal stories behind them. She did not overwhelm readers with mind numbing statistics as Martin Gilbert's Holocaust did time and again. I regret the picture painted of the French Resisters shipped from Birkenau, with only a couple of exceptions. Perhaps Helm should have read "Auschwitz and After" by Charlotte Delbo. Not one mention of the woman who refused to allow the world to forget the horror of Auschwitz. A book so descriptive and done so beautifully with words that leave no room for misinterpretation. She also speaks of near misses of death in Ravensbruck after her transfer there in 1944. I deeply regret Delbo was completely left out of this book. In ending many scholars of the Holocaust and Nazi Germany do indeed refer to Ravensbruck as an extermination camp and in my opinion justly so. Congratulations to Sarah Helm. With one noted exception she did a wonderful job and wrote an incredible book. Charlotte Delbo deserved better. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Outstanding read - Should be in history classes By Georgie This book was an outstanding read and very insightful into the Nazi mindset as well as a microcosm of what a world can become under certain conditions. Whether it's the concept of "group think" under Nazi influence or "group think" under the survivors' needs, the psychological horror is gathered masterfully. Helm takes us into the all women's camp at Ravenbruck, designed by Himmler who was Hitler's main man in determining exactly what to do about all these people.....he wanted gone. The atrocities, courage, belief in the human spirit and the absolute will to survive deter Himmler's initiatives. Though initially a slave labor camp, it later became part of the overall extermination project as the war closed in around the Nazi's. Some readers become confused as the story does bounce a bit back to when each ethnic group was brought in but by the accounts of the Nazi's by 1944, there were 22 ethnic groups in the camps. What the average reader doesn't understand is how the cultural differences and interplay are absolutely necessary to the explanation of how this camp operated. Too many people out here complain of a disjointed story but they don't understand they each new emerging or engaged group impacted the camp as a whole. I absolutely recommend this book for anyone who wants to understand Nazi history. Yes, there were Jewish people who were murdered but this book goes further to show just how many people were murdered and not all Jewish. Eye opening, horrific, disgusting, heartbreaking and soul surviving, this book delivers!

Months before the outbreak of World War II, Heinrich Himmler prime architect of the Holocaust designed a special concentration camp for women, located fifty miles north of Berlin. Only a small number of the prisoners were Jewish. Ravensbrck was primarily a place for the Nazis to hold other inferior beings: Jehovahs Witnesses, Resistance fighters, lesbians, prostitutes, and aristocratseven the sister of New Yorks Mayor LaGuardia. Over six years the prisoners endured forced labor, torture, starvation, and random execution. In the final months of the war, Ravensbrck became an extermination camp. Estimates of the final death toll have ranged from 30,000 to 90,000. For decades the story of Ravensbrck was hidden behind the Iron Curtain. Now, using testimony unearthed since the end of the Cold War and interviews with survivors who have never talked before, Sarah Helm takes us into the heart of the camp. The result is a landmark achievement that weaves together many accounts, following figures on both sides of the prisoner/guard divide. Chilling, compelling, and deeply necessary, Ravensbrck is essential reading for anyone concerned with Nazi history.

Brilliantly presented. . . . Elegantly crafted. . . . Under Helms sympathetic hand, the women of Ravensbrck come alive once again. The Washington Post Moving. . . . Absorbing. . . . When acts of resistance are described, inspirational. The New York of Books Fascinating. . . . Achieves just the right balance of judgment, fearlessness and restraint. San Francisco Chronicle A sense of urgency infuses this history. . . . [Helms] book comes not a moment too soon. The Economist A profoundly moving chronicle. The Guardian (London) Ravensbrck helps us understand how thoroughgoing an onslaught on humanity Nazi Germany perpetrated, and how central to its identity was its implacable urge to enslave and kill those it considered undesirable. . . . Ravensbrck gives us an agonizing sense of the dark heart of the Nazi ethos. The New York Times Book Illuminates the attempted escapes, executions, and impossible courage of women history conspired to forget. O, The Oprah Magazine A remarkable and riveting narrative. Minneapolis Star Tribune A groundbreaking, detailed biography. . . . Theres much to absorb here, from talks of inhumanely cruel punishment to examples of camaraderie, resilience and courage. The Jewish Week Compelling. . . . Powerful. . . . Devastating. . . . What one is left with at the end of this momentous book is a sense of the power of human nature, both for good and for evil. The Irish Independent Using material once locked behind the Iron Curtain, Sarah Helm has

performed a tremendous feat of historical rescue. This book at last gives full voice to the women of Ravensbrück, the only Nazi concentration camp for women, for the very first time. Anne Applebaum, author of *Gulag*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize. An important cautionary tale. . . . A revelation. . . . Helm describes an amazing social structure that, despite all, arose in that encapsulated place, run for and mostly by women. The courage of the prisoners in the face of overwhelming cruelty was extraordinary. Lynn H. Nicholas, author of *The Rape of Europa*, winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award. Ravensbrück is a book everyone should read. . . . Beautifully written. . . . Helm has done an amazing job with an enormous and enormously painful topic. *PopMatters*. A beautifully written history of events that offers additional insight into Nazism and those caught in its path. . . . This book deserves significant attention. *Publishers Weekly* (starred). Chronicles the history of this much-ignored site for women. . . . Helm delivers a gripping story of the women who outlasted them and had the strength to share with the author and us sixty years later. *Kirkus*. About the Author. Sarah Helm is the author of *A Life in Secrets: Vera Atkins and the Missing Agents of WWII* and the play *Loyalty*, about the 2003 Iraq War. She was a staff journalist on the *Sunday Times* (London) and a foreign correspondent on the *Independent*, and now writes for several publications. She lives in London with her husband and two daughters. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Chapter 1. Langefeld. The year is 1957. The doorbell of my flat is ringing, writes Grete Buber-Neumann, a former Ravensbrück prisoner. I open the door. An old woman is standing before me, breathing heavily and missing teeth in the lower jaw. She babbles: Don't you know me any more? I am Johanna Langefeld, the former head guard at Ravensbrück. The last time I had seen her was fourteen years ago in her office at the camp. I worked as her prisoner secretary ... She would pray to God for strength to stop the evil happening, but if a Jewish woman came into her office her face would fill with hatred ... So she sits at the table with me. She tells me she wishes she'd been born a man. She talks of Himmler, whom she sometimes still calls Reichsführer. She talks for many hours, she gets lost in the different years and tries to explain her behaviour. * * * Early in May 1939 a small convoy of trucks emerged from trees into a clearing near the tiny village of Ravensbrück, deep in the Mecklenburg forest. The trucks drove on past a lake, where their wheels started spinning and axles sank into waterlogged sand. People jumped down to dig out the vehicles while others unloaded boxes. A woman in uniform grey jacket and skirt also jumped down. Her feet sank into the sand, but she pulled herself free, walked a little way up the slope and looked around. Felled trees lay beside the shimmering lake. The air smelt of sawdust. It was hot and there was no shade. To her right, on the far shore, lay the small town of Frstenberg. Boathouses sprawled by the shore. A church spire was visible. At the opposite end of the lake, to her left, a vast grey wall about sixteen feet high loomed up. The forest track led towards towering iron-barred gates to the left of the compound. There were signs saying *Trespassers Keep Out*. The woman medium height, stocky, brown wavy hair strode purposefully towards the gates. Johanna Langefeld had come with a small advance party of guards and prisoners to bring equipment and look around the new women's concentration camp; the camp was due to open in a few days time and Langefeld was to be the *Oberaufseherin* chief woman guard. She had seen inside many women's penal institutions in her time, but never a place like this. For the past year Langefeld had worked as a senior guard at Lichtenburg, a medieval fortress near Torgau, on the River Elbe. Converted into a temporary women's camp while Ravensbrück was built, Lichtenburg's crumbling chambers and wet dungeons were cramped and unhealthy; unsuitable for women prisoners. Ravensbrück was new and purpose-built. The compound comprised about six acres, big enough for the first 1000 or so women expected here, with space to spare. Langefeld stepped through the iron gates and strode around the sandy Appellplatz, the camp square. The size of a football pitch, it had room enough to drill the entire camp at once. Loudspeakers hung on poles above Langefeld's head, though the only sound for now was the banging of nails. The walls blocked everything outside from view, except the sky. Unlike male camps, Ravensbrück had no watchtowers along the walls and no gun emplacements. But an electric fence was fixed to the interior of the perimeter wall, and placards along the fence showed a skull and crossbones warning of high voltage. Only beyond the walls to the south, to Langefeld's right, did the ground rise high enough for treetops to be visible on a hill. Hulking grey barrack blocks dominated the compound. The wooden blocks, arranged in a grid, were single-storey with small windows; they sat squat around the camp square. Two lines of identical blocks though somewhat larger were laid out each side of the Lagerstrasse, the main street. Langefeld inspected the blocks one by one. Immediately inside the gate, the first block on the left was the SS canteen, fitted out with freshly scrubbed chairs and tables. Also to the left of the Appellplatz was the camp Revier, a German military term meaning sickbay or infirmary. Across the square, she entered the bathhouse, fitted with dozens of showerheads. Boxes containing striped cotton clothes were stacked at one end and at a table a handful of women were laying out piles of coloured felt triangles. Next to the bathhouse, under the same roof, was the camp kitchen, which glistened with huge steel pots and kettles. The next building was the prisoners' clothes store, or *Effektenkammer*, where large brown paper bags were piled on a table, and then came the *Wscherei*, laundry, with its six centrifugal washing machines Langefeld would have liked more. Nearby an aviary was being constructed. Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS, which ran the concentration camps and much else in Nazi Germany, wanted his camps to be self-sufficient as far as possible. There was to be a rabbit hutch, chicken coop and vegetable garden, as well as an orchard and flower garden. Gooseberry bushes, dug up from the Lichtenburg gardens and transported in the trucks, were already being replanted here. The contents of the Lichtenburg latrines had been brought to Ravensbrück too, to be

spread as fertiliser. Himmler also required his camps to pool resources. As Ravensbrück had no baking ovens of its own, bread was to be brought here daily from Sachsenhausen, the mens camp, fifty miles to the south. The Oberaufseherin strode on down the Lagerstrasse, which started at the far side of the Appellplatz and led towards the back of the camp. The living blocks were laid out, end-on to the Lagerstrasse, in perfect formation so that the windows of one block looked out onto the back wall of the next. They were to be the prisoners living quarters, eight on each side of the street. Red flowers salvias had been planted outside the first block; linden tree saplings stood at regular intervals in between the rest. As in all concentration camps, the grid layout was used at Ravensbrück mainly to ensure that prisoners could always be seen, which meant fewer guards. A complement of thirty women guards were assigned here and a troop of twelve SS men, all under overall command of Sturmbannführer Max Koegel. Johanna Langefeld believed she could run a womens concentration camp better than any man, and certainly better than Max Koegel, whose methods she despised. Himmler, however, was clear that Ravensbrück should be run, in general, on the same lines as the mens camps, which meant Langefeld and her women guards must be answerable to an SS commandant. On paper neither she nor any of her guards had any official standing. The women were not merely subordinate to the men, they had no badge or rank and were merely SS auxiliaries. Most of them were unarmed, though some guarding outside work parties carried a pistol and many had dogs. Himmler believed that women were more frightened than men of dogs. Nevertheless, Koegels authority here would not be absolute. He was only commandant-designate for now, and he had been refused certain powers. For example there was to be no camp prison or bunker in which to lock up troublemakers, as there was at every male camp. Nor was he to have authority for official beatings. Angered by these omissions, he wrote to his SS superiors requesting greater powers to punish prisoners, but his request was refused. Langefeld, however, who believed in drill and discipline rather than beating, was content with the arrangements, especially as she had secured significant concessions on day-to-day management. It had been written into the camps comprehensive rule book, the Lagerordnung, that the chief woman guard would advise the Schutzhaftlagerführer (deputy commandant) on feminine matters, though what these were was not defined. Stepping inside one of the accommodation barracks, Langefeld looked around. Like so much else here, the sleeping arrangements were new to her; instead of shared cells, or dormitories, as she was used to, more than 150 women were to sleep in each block. Their interiors were identically set out, with two large sleeping rooms A and B on either side of a washing area, with a row of twelve basins and twelve lavatories, as well as a communal day room where the women would eat. The sleeping areas were filled with scores of three-tiered bunks, made of wooden planks. Every prisoner had a mattress filled with wood shavings and a pillow, as well as a sheet and a blue and white check blanket folded at the foot of the bed. The value of drill and discipline had been instilled in Langefeld from her earliest years. The daughter of a blacksmith, she was born Johanna May, in the Ruhr town of Kupferdreh, in March 1900. She and her older sister were raised as strict Lutherans; their parents drummed into them the importance of thrift, obedience and daily prayer. Like any good Protestant girl Johanna already knew that her role in life would be that of dutiful wife and mother: Kinder, Kche, Kirche children, kitchen, church was a familiar creed in the May family home. Yet from her childhood Johanna yearned for more. Her parents also talked to her of Germanys past. After church on Sundays they would hark back to the humiliation of the French occupation of their beloved Ruhr under Napoleon and the family would kneel and pray for Gods help in making Germany great again. She idolised her namesake, Johanna Prohaska, a heroine of the liberation wars, who had disguised herself as a man to fight the French. All this Johanna Langefeld told Grete Buber-Neumann, the former prisoner, at whose Frankfurt door she appeared years later, seeking to try to explain her behaviour. Grete, an inmate of Ravensbrück for four years, was startled by the reappearance in 1957 of her chief former guard; she was also gripped by Langefelds account of her odyssey and wrote it down. In 1914, as the First World War broke out, Johanna, then fourteen, cheered with the rest as the young men of Kupferdreh marched off to pursue the dream of making Germany great again, only to find that she and all German women had little part to play. Two years later, when it was clear the war would not end soon, German women were suddenly told to get out to work in mines, factories and offices; there on the home front, women had a chance to prove themselves doing the jobs of men, only to be expelled from those same jobs again when the men came home. Two million Germans did not return from the trenches, but six million did, and Johanna now watched as Kupferdrehs soldiers came back, many mutilated and all humiliated. Under the terms of surrender, Germany was to pay reparations, which would cripple the economy, fuelling hyperinflation; in 1924 Langefelds beloved Ruhr was reoccupied yet again by the French, who stole German coal, in punishment for reparations unpaid. Her parents lost their savings and she was penniless and looking for a job. In 1924 she found a husband, a miner called Wilhelm Langefeld, who died two years later of lung disease. Johannas odyssey then faltered; she got lost in the years, wrote Grete. The mid-1920s were a dark period that she could not account for other than to say there was a liaison with another man, which left her pregnant, dependent on Protestant aid groups. While Langefeld and millions like her struggled, other German women found liberation in the 1920s. With American financial support, the socialist-led Weimar Republic stabilised the country and set out on a new liberal path. Women had the vote, and for the first time German women joined political parties, particularly on the left. Inspired by Rosa Luxemburg, leader of the communist Spartacus movement, middle-class girls, Grete Buber-Neumann among them, chopped off their hair, watched plays by Bertolt Brecht and tramped through forests with comrades of the

Wandervogel, a communist youth movement, talking of revolution. Meanwhile, across the country working-class women raised money for Red Help, joined trade unions and stood at factory gates handing out strike leaflets. In 1922 in Munich, where Adolf Hitler was blaming Germany's strife on the bloated Jew, a precocious Jewish girl called Olga Benario ran away from home to join a communist cell, disowning her prosperous middle-class parents. She was fourteen. Within months the dark-eyed schoolgirl was leading comrades on walks through the Bavarian Alps, diving into mountain streams, then reading Marx around the campfire and planning Germany's communist revolution. In 1928 she shot to fame after holding up a Berlin courthouse and snatching a leading German communist to freedom as he faced the guillotine. By 1929 Olga had left Germany for Moscow to train with Stalin's elite, before heading to Brazil to start a revolution. Back in the stricken Ruhr valley, Johanna Langefeld was by this time a single mother without a future. The 1929 Wall Street Crash triggered world depression, plunging Germany into a new and deeper economic crisis that threw millions out of work and created widespread unrest. Langefeld's deepest fear was that her son, Herbert, would be taken from her if she fell into destitution. Instead of joining the destitute, however, she chose to help them, turning to God. It was religious conviction that drew her to work with the poorest of the poor, so she told Grete all those years later at the Frankfurt kitchen table. She found work with the welfare service, teaching housekeeping skills to unemployed women and re-educating prostitutes. In 1933, Johanna Langefeld found a new saviour in Adolf Hitler. Hitler's programme for women could not have been clearer: German women were to stay at home, rear as many Aryan children as they were able, and obey their husbands. Women were not fit for public life; most jobs would be barred to women and access to university curtailed. Such attitudes could easily be found in any European country in the 1930s, but Nazi language on women was uniquely toxic; not only did Hitler's entourage openly scorn the stupid, inferior female sex, they repeatedly demanded separation of women from men, as if men didn't see the point of women at all except as occasional adornments and, of course, as childbearers.*# The Jews were not Hitler's only scapegoats for Germany's ills: women who had been emancipated during the Weimar years were blamed for taking men's jobs and corrupting the country's morals. Yet Hitler had the power to seduce the millions of German women who yearned for a steel-hardened man to restore pride and order to the Reich. Such female admirers, many deeply religious, and all inflamed by Joseph Goebbels's anti-Semitic propaganda, packed the 1933 Nuremberg victory rally where the American reporter William Shirer mingled with the mob. Hitler rode into this medieval town at sundown today past solid phalanxes of wildly cheering Nazis ... Tens of thousands of Swastika flags blot out the Gothic beauties of the place ... Later that night, outside Hitler's hotel: I was a little shocked at the faces, especially those of the women ... They looked up at him as if he were a Messiah ...