

New Nonfiction from Patrick Hicks: “A Woman’s Place”

The following is an excerpt from Patrick Hick’s upcoming novel, *Across the Lake*, due out in 2024.



Ravensbrück Ash Memorial



Ravensbrück did not fall from the sky. It was planned. It was built. It was managed. The only all-female concentration camp in the Third Reich was so large and complex that no single person—whether they were a prisoner or a guard—could possibly know it all. By the end of the war it sprawled deep into the woods, but it all began one day with a simple architectural drawing on a draftsman’s desk. It started with a ruler, a T-square, and a pencil.

In November 1938, boundary markers were staked out next to Lake Schwedt, an idyllic body of water ringed by spruce, pine, and oak trees. The nearby church bells of Fürstenberg echoed across the water and it was common to see storks soaring across the sky. Soon, a massive courtyard was built by prisoners and this was surrounded by a rising wall of concrete. An enormous iron gate was fitted onto hinges. Lime trees were planted to create the Lagerstrasse—the wide avenue that cut through the camp—and this would become the main thoroughfare which funneled women to work. Hammers and crosscut saws were brought out to create barracks. Electrified fencing was fitted into place and a generator hummed to life. Architects stood around, smoking. They consulted blueprints and pointed at what still needed to rise up from imagination. Roads were graded smooth by prisoners, stone stairways were fitted into hills, and homes for the SS were constructed. A

large plaza was laid out before the Administration building and a flagpole was sunk into the soil. A Nazi flag was tied onto snap hooks and it was slowly raised. It fluttered and flapped in crisp wind.

Ravensbrück officially opened in 1939—the same year the war started—and when the Soviets finally liberated the camp on April 30, 1945, it had grown to monstrous size. It had expanded far beyond its original blueprint and it had become a center of gravity for a number of subcamps. Rail lines were laid out in the woods. Huge wooden warehouses with wide platforms were assembled near the tracks and goods were stacked high. These were things the prisoners had been forced to make in the camp—things like socks, blankets, electrical components, shirts, fuses, mats, and servomotors. During its ruthless years of operation, some 132,000 women passed through the gates of Ravensbrück. At least a third of them perished.

Those parts of camp that were most used by the SS and the Aufseherin (the female Nazi guards), were made functional and attractive. There was an art deco gas station near the Administration building along with a row of fine garages that kept a fleet of Mercedes safe during thunderstorms. As for the Administration building itself, it had a large foyer with a huge painted swastika and eagle on the wall. Beyond that were two wide wooden staircases; they rose to mid-floor and then merged to become one set of stairs that lifted up to the second floor. A stained-glass window was on the landing and, when the sun hit it just right, pools of color shimmered on the oak parquet floor. The upstairs corridor was long and clean. Flags stood at attention and plaques were bolted onto the walls. The Commandant's office was in the corner of the upper floor and his desk was positioned so that he sat with the windows at his back. There was the sound of typewriters and the occasional flare of a telephone ringing. There was the frequent smell of cigarettes, brandy, and aftershave. Boots clicked quickly off the wood floor—silenced now and then by

carpets—only to click off wood again. There was a small room for tea and biscuits, as well as a larger room for dinners that required fine china and silverware.

It wasn't just the working spaces of Ravensbrück that had an air of wealth and gentility to them because the men who ran the camp also had luxury at home. The SS had family houses built on a low hill near the Administration building. Stone stairways climbed up to these mountain chalets and, in each one, was a wide fireplace, handsomely carved wooden ceilings, a kitchen, a dining area, and a bathroom with a toilet. A set of stairs curved up to the second floor, which had three bedrooms. Wives and children lived here and made their way into town for shopping and school. At night, as they climbed into their beds, an orange glow came from the chimney of the crematorium. There was the constant smell of burning kielbasa and grapefruit in the air. No one needed to ask what was being put into the ovens.

As for the Aufseherin—the female guards—they had barracks that could hardly be called “barracks” at all. These buildings looked like something out of a mountain scene in Switzerland. White walls. Carved wood. Pretty flower boxes. There was a front porch with seats to enjoy a view of the lake and, inside, was a cozy front room. Down the hall was a kitchen and individual bedrooms. Each room had a fitted cupboard, a wash basin, and a radiator. Newspapers like *Völkischer Beobachter* and *Das Schwarze Korps* were delivered each morning along with the milk. A mirror was next to the front door so that the Aufseherin could check to see if her coifed hair was properly arranged under her cap. They could make sure their capes were neatly arranged and that their truncheons hung just so off their hips.

Construction at Ravensbrück was relentless. Ever since the first boundary marker was hammered into the sandy ground, there was a need for more buildings, more roads, more housing, more rail tracks, more barracks. Just a few years after

opening, Ravensbrück had factories full of sewing machines, it had villas, gardens, kitchens, huge laundry facilities, kennels, storage depots, a shoe repair shop, a furniture repair shop, a painters' shed, and a water treatment plant. It had potato cellars, a mat weaving factory, a thread spinning workshop, huge hutches full of Angora rabbits, a telephone exchange, an electrical substation, and a furrier shop that made winter hats out of Angora wool. It had gasoline tanks, a massive sand pit, a coal bunker, chicken coops, and medical facilities that killed more women than it ever cured. There was an SS canteen that served gourmet food, a two-story prison known as the Bunker for those women who required special punishment, and there was a crematorium that had three coal-fired ovens.

After only a few years, Ravensbrück was so big that it began to gather subcamps around it like a planet collecting moons. Soon the subcamp of Uckermark was created on the southeast perimeter and teenage girls were forced into it where they had to sew and stitch. If they spoke, they were beaten, and when they turned eighteen they were sent up the sandy path to the main camp. To the south was a subcamp run by the Siemens Corporation. It was here that women were forced to build electronic components for secret wonder weapons that might change the course of the war. As with other camps like Auschwitz, Buchenwald, and Sachsenhausen, the SS at Ravensbrück rented out their prisoners to corporations for a fee. When it was suggested that the Siemens Corporation could build a factory to their exact specifications outside of the main camp—and that they could have labor at an unspeakably cheap rate—it wasn't long before high technology came to Ravensbrück. These facilities were kept sanitary in order to protect the electronic parts that had to be built. Prisoners assigned to the Siemens Camp felt as if they had entered a different world because they were rarely beaten as long as they kept up with their daily quotas. Here, they were reasonably well fed. Here, they got their own bed and a

blanket. Here, they worked long hours in clean clothes and, although the work was fast-paced, the Siemens Corporation had a vested interest in taking better care of their prisoners. All these women had to do was put electronic parts together quickly and efficiently. It was precision work. They built servomotors that were then transported to the secret underground concentration camp of Dora-Mittelbau where prisoners fitted them into V-2 rockets. The women who built these rocket parts had little idea what they were creating, but it hardly mattered because these bits of technology—whatever they were—gave them a better life. Perhaps not surprisingly, when word got out about the Siemens Camp, those in the sock factory and mat weaving factory began to look upon it with envy. To build rocket parts was to find yourself in the aristocracy of the camp. To build weapons of death meant that you might live.



Aufseherin barracks today

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Because Germany was supposed to win the war and make a colony of the Soviet Union, the realities of Ravensbrück were never supposed to appear in history books. After victory, the camp was meant to be repurposed, buried, forgotten. But the past often has an unexpected future. We know that Ravensbrück was a training ground for violence and we know that over 4,000 Aufseherin passed through its gates and went on to terrorize other camps, including Stutthof, Majdanek, Vaivara, Mauthausen, Bergen-Belsen, and Auschwitz. In many ways, Ravensbrück was a finishing school of brutality. And when the time was right, female guards would pack their suitcases, hug their friends, and get onto a train that would take them elsewhere in the Reich.

The women who wore the dark grey uniform of the Aufseherin had little use for school and most of them had dropped out early. They believed in the bold future that Hitler had mapped out for Germany and they signed up knowing they would be working in a concentration camp. Most of these young women were nervous and fidgety at first, but when they were given truncheons, and when they were allowed to beat others, they quickly warmed to violence. Many of them grew to like it, especially the power. Yet the idea of women enjoying violence is taboo in most societies. We like to assume that violence is a male trait and that any woman who embraces savagery has somehow crossed a border. Women who act with fury and spill blood are often seen as entering a land that does not belong to them, that they have somehow trespassed onto foreign soil and entered territory that is instinctively alien. And because of this, violent women seem far more monstrous than men who commit the very same crimes. We want to imagine that women are nurturing, caring, and motherly. We want to believe that bloodshed does not come naturally to women, and we do not want to imagine our mothers, daughters, or wives as being agents of destruction. And yet, all across the world, mythology is full of women who are at home in the dark landscape of butchery. The Furies. Medusa. Circe. The Sirens. Amazons. Banshees. Soucouyants. Manananggals. Kumiho. Succubus. Lamia. Our stories say much about our fears.

While the Aufseherin may have controlled the barracks and factories of Ravensbrück, they existed in a society that saw their gender as a limitation. The Third Reich was a thoroughly patriarchal nation and it was believed that women should stay home in order to raise children. And yet, during the war, women were allowed into male spaces that would normally be shut off to them. The Aufseherin did their hair and they used perfume. They were also given heavy boots and truncheons. Notably, they wore a culotte-style skirt, which is both a dress and also a type of short trousers, depending upon how one moves. When standing around and chatting, a culotte looks

like a dress, but when marching across a factory floor to beat a prisoner, it looks more like baggy pants. Put another way, a culotte is sometimes a skirt and sometimes wide-flared trousers. These uniformed women in culottes were at peace with what they were doing in the concentration camps because it was legal and acceptable. The state, after all, had hired them to commit acts of violence. At Ravensbrück, killing became normal, beating became normal, sexual abuse and prostitution and infanticide—they all became normal. What was once forbidden was now permitted. And of course, although Ravensbrück was a place for women, it is good to remember that it was run by men. The freedom to commit violence like a man did not mean that women were trusted with governing themselves. That power rested solely with the men in the Administration building. It was only the men of Ravensbrück, the SS, that were allowed to carry a gun. Pistols were for men. Truncheons and whips were for women.

Ravensbrück was a place not just of forced labor, disease, and hunger, it was also home to unrelenting executions. Women were shot near the crematorium. Medical experiments also happened at Ravensbrück. Between July 1942 and September 1943, Professor Karl Gebhardt, a leading orthopedic surgeon who taught at the University of Berlin, had wood shavings, dirt, cloth, and bits of glass inserted into prisoners' legs to mimic battlefield conditions. Often, anesthesia was not used. Some victims were given sulfanilamides to see if this might slow down rates of infection. In later experiments, bones were transplanted, muscles were severed, and nerves were resected to see if they might regenerate and grow back. More than eighty women were experimented upon in this way. They called themselves "Rabbits" because they felt like laboratory animals and the wounds in their legs made it very difficult to walk—many of them had to hop.

Also around this time—between February and April 1942—approximately 1,500 prisoners were taken to nearby

Bernberg and murdered in a euthanasia center that masqueraded as a sanatorium. This was done under a secret program called 14f13. Nearly half of these victims were Jewish. By the early months of 1942, at least 1,500 Jewish prisoners were rounded up and sent to Auschwitz. This was an attempt to clear all Jews from Ravensbrück and make the camp *Judenrein*—cleansed of Jews—but within a matter of weeks new prisoners were standing for morning roll call and new prisoners were marching into the sock factory.

At least one gas chamber was at Ravensbrück and the guards called it the “New Laundry”. Built in early 1945, it was given its euphemistic name, of course, to hide its lethal purpose. This secret concrete room could hold 150 women and, according to camp survivors, it was dynamited by the SS on April 23, 1945 in order to pretend that it had never been built in the first place. There are rumors that several rail cars were hidden in the woods near Ravensbrück and that they were used as mobile gas chambers. While this is certainly within the realm of possibility, there is no definitive proof beyond the adamant testimony of camp survivors. This, however, is the nature of mobile gas chambers. They are meant to be moved and, in that moving, the reality of their existence is taken with them—they disappear into fog, dragging facts with them.

As the decades have moved on, the facts about Ravensbrück are dissolving away in memory. We may live in a post-Holocaust world, but that doesn’t mean we have come to understand the Holocaust. Not really. It is easier to look away. It is easier to let the facts disappear into the woods of places like Ravensbrück. It is easier to tell ourselves that it all happened so very long ago. But as Auschwitz survivor and memoirist, Primo Levi, warns us, “It happened, therefore it can happen again.”



Ravensbrück crematorium today