

Ravensbrück Podcast and Website Translations.

Greeting at the Interreligious Commemoration at Ravensbrück, Sunday 18th. April 2021.

Magdalena Möbius.

I greet you in the name of all those who have worked actively in the 'Workshop for the Future of Interreligious Commemoration', to our digital Memorial Commemoration for the 76th. Anniversary of the Liberation of the Concentration Camp of Ravensbrück. All those participating will appear in this video, with words or music. As Jewish, Christian and Moslem men and women we have come together to prepare this form of Remembrance.

We are working together due to our awareness that we do not live without any context but that we are influenced by our history.

We share the pain and the horror at the dreadful crimes which 'here' – in Ravensbrück – were carried out by people against people.

We are bound by the conviction that this is the very least that we can do to fulfil our sense of duty to the people who were tortured and killed here.

We are bound by the conviction that spreading Knowledge about Ravensbrück is important, that it is important for people to know what human beings are capable of doing to other human beings, and that it is also important so that we can better understand our own Present – and to influence it.

FOOTER / SUBTITLE: Greeting: Magdalena Möbius, Vicar responsible for Women's Affairs in the Protestant Church of Berlin-Brandenburg and the Region 'Silesian-Upper-Lausitz'.

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Thomas Würtz

This year under the title 'Ver-Strickung' – (loosely translated as "How Everything is Knitted Together") – we look especially at the forced labour performed by the prisoners in the production of textiles and clothing. A sock knitted by Batsheva Dagan out of scraps of wool stimulates us to look more closely at the many aspects of this "interweaving",

- as descendants, both of perpetrators and of those who tolerated what was happening,
- as relatives of the prisoners,
- as people who have to deal with unjust regimes today,
- as people who do not wish to keep their eyes closed against their own involvement.

Batsheva Dagan, who was deported in Winter 1944/45 from Auschwitz to Ravensbrück, has recorded her experiences during and following her time in the concentration camps in poetic texts. One of these has now been set to music by Kim Seligsohn and Lukas Storch.

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Excerpts from: „Wegstationen, Autobiografische Aufzeichnungen...“ - "Stations along the Way: Autobiographical Notes" by Wolfgang Stegemann, Metropol-Verlag 2020, Berlin

"In 1939 ... Only one Jewess was still living, shy and withdrawn, in the house at Ostrasse 1. She was called Toni Richter and was a retired, now elderly music teacher, who one day had also disappeared, without anyone being able to recall what had actually happened.

... I can still vaguely remember the old lady with the yellow Jewish Star, how she often hung around outside the Schmidt Bakery at the corner of Friedrich-Wilhelm-Str./Baalensee-Str., until the shop was empty and the baker's wife could secretly gesture to her to come so that she could put her bread or other baked goods into her bag. I must have been nine or ten years old at the time and of course could not comprehend the extent of the tragedy." (p.18)

"The war had brought some changes to the calm waters of our small-town barefoot school. New faces from the big cities with different dialects turned up and joined us on our classroom benches. Sons of SS officers, such as Adolf Bester, Horst Göttinger or Joseph Ketterl.... Adolf Bester with his exact neat proper writing, who lived in the Peetscher Weg; Horst Göttinger from Austria with his especial dialect, whose father had been Construction Supervisor during the initial phase of KZ Ravensbrück; Joseph Ketterl, the short Bavarian, whose father had been transferred from Dachau to Ravensbrück and who boasted during one lesson how he had spat on a woman prisoner inside the camp. This scene has remained in my memory, because it bothered me for a while and made this lad with his boastfulness somehow unsympathetic to me." (p.19).

Text Excerpt 1

"A little further down the Siggelhavel there stood a sign forbidding bathing, and we knew that here a drainage pipe from the KZ sewage works emptied its cloudy contents into the Havel. On the other side at the quay of the 'Faserstoff' factory a magnetic crane loaded large amounts of metal turnings from the shell casing production onto barges. When you looked more closely from a boat you could also see there people in prisoner uniforms. But we were more interested in the big round magnet on the crane onto which a long string of metal spirals clung and which disappeared into the ship's hold. Whatever our parents knew about the KZ and what they thought about it, they remained silent on these matters in front of the children. After all, we could have blabbed.... Silence from Fear – the recipe of both dictatorships of the 20th. century in Germany, that retained its intimidatory effect until each of them finally collapsed." (p.19f).

"I can recall a very early incident from the year 1939, the year in which the Jewish cemetery in Fürstenberg was destroyed. Perhaps this incident even hangs together with the outbreak of the war. We were being visited by a man my father knew, who worked in the 'Faserstoff' munitions factory. Laschinski was his name. On the radio there was the news and the name of the German Foreign Minister must have been mentioned. At any rate the small son, about the same age as me, said with a secretive expressions, 'Ribbentrop has a head full of snot - but one must not say that!'" What did I know, who this Ribbentrop was? But because I did not understand why one was not allowed to say this, this little incident somehow remained fixed in my memory." (p.21f.)

Text Excerpt 2:

"The women in their striped clothing often marched past our school through the town on their way to labour and we heard through the open windows how they sang: 'In my Homeland, the Roses are blooming, in my Homeland, there Happiness blooms!' That two female guards with alsatian dogs went alongside them seemed to us to be quite normal and gave us children no especial cause to ask questions. In general we, unlike our parents, simply did not notice the concentration camp especially." (p.19)

(The entire text appeared initially as 'A Childhood on the Lake of Tears' by Wolfgang Stegemann / Wolfgang Jacobeit (Pub.) Fürstenberg /Havel. 'Ravensbrück, On the Way to the 21st. Century, Essays on Everyday and Social History of the Region between Brandenburg and Mecklenburg.' Vol. 3, pub. Hentrich & Hentrich, pp.21-34.)

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Thoughts on the Concentration Camp Clothing. (By Iman Andrea Reimann).

Just imagine that you are given a striped jacket to pull on, one that has perhaps been worn already by two other people. The jacket's sleeves are frayed, three buttons are missing and the jacket's length does not fit your body. What has this jacket already experienced, what will it experience with you? Fear, Panic, Grief, Resignation, Cold and Violence? 'Clothes make the Person' says a proverb, but in the KZ the clothing served to dehumanize a person. When the State could decide how many items of clothing each person might receive per year, what colours these should have and thus quite deliberately marks off externally the woman wearing it, then the respect for the individual person has been abolished. Through the camp uniforms the wearer lost herself within the grey mass – she became a Nothing. This Nothing had only one right to existence – to work for the German Reich. In the KZ Ravensbrück the women had to work until they were totally exhausted in the industrial establishments, in the associated tailoring and knitting workshops. Their total Nothingness reached its extreme in that they were not permitted to take absolutely anything that could possibly be found an official purpose. Even to take a scrap of cloth to wipe one's nose or as a replacement for a sanitary towel could lead to extreme violence. "In the striped blue and white clothing the Human Being had been expelled from the society that considered them no longer worth keeping and was considered unworthy to receive even the minimum of spiritual nourishment for her spiritual existence. Respect, Trust and Love, without which no person can live. From where should such a person gain an awareness of their own worth, if they are always treated with disgust?" (Isa Vermehren).

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Excerpts from: 'Report of the those Prisoners from the Women's Concentration Camp Ravensbrück who were occupied in the Sewing Factory E. Grahl in Fürstenberg.'

Warsaw, 5th. January 1948. By Waclawa Wójcik und Halina Raczynska. From the Archive of the Ravensbrück Memorial, Buchmann Collection, Vol. 31, Report 580.

"The 'Column' of slave labourers which worked at the E. Grahl Sewing Factory was formed in December 1942 and continued in existence until mid-April 1945. The Sewing Works, which was State-administered, initially prepared mainly 'rationed clothing' for women for Winter and Summer, children's clothing, pyjamas and nightdresses for hospital. Only around the year 1944 did the production of blue blouses for the Women's Formations begin, and also warm underwear for the Wehrmacht, warm flannel stomach warmers for the soldiers on the Eastern Front, as well as, from around the beginning of 1945, brown shirts for the Wehrmacht.

The work began at 07.00 and ended at 18.00 with a midday break of some 45 minutes, which was however very often shortened "as a punishment" to 30 minutes or less. On Saturdays work continued till 14.00. From 1944 onwards all holidays – apart from Sundays – were cancelled, so that we also had to work at Christmas, at Easter and on other major festivals. During the work it was a duty to remain absolutely silent – incidentally, with the noise of the machines and with our backs turned to each other it was in any case hard to make oneself understood.

Around midday and again before the end of the work we were allowed to go singly to the toilet, which was in the same room, naturally only after first reporting for permission to the supervisor. There was however no possibility for washing one's hands or stilling one's thirst.

The supervisors were changed only seldom – mostly the same guard escorted the Column.... The following women among the guards have remained deeply embedded in our memories:

Schwarzkopf (who was later killed by a bomb); Ebert; Kolasinski. They all beat us frequently and thoroughly and also made individual or group 'Reports' to the Camp HQ which meant for us additional punishments in the camp as a form of vengeance – periods of standing, withdrawal of Sunday lunch, etc.

The make-up of the column was different at different times. In the beginning the Polish Political women prisoners formed the majority. Later some withdrew to other Columns; some were executed by shooting (some 10%) and into the Column there came German, Czech and Yugoslav women,

The midday meal was brought to us from the camp in large cooking boilers, as it was for other columns who were working outside the camp. We had to unload the boiler from the lorry and carry it up to the second floor – after the work was complete we had to carry the empty boiler back to the camp, 4km.

We received no additional and no different food than those in the camp itself. Indeed the turnips were often cold and bitter, for they had stood in the closed boilers since the previous evening. Very seldom, once in a week or even less, we would get the leftover soup from the canteen of the civilian workers in the firm. It amounted to approximately one-quarter litre per person, however there was not always enough for everybody. Over a period of over two years we got maybe just three or four times during heavy frosts early in the morning a half-litre of hot black unsweetened coffee, because we were totally frozen stiff after the hours-long Appell counting."

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From the Archive of the Warning and Memorial Institute Ravensbrück, NMG 19-178d

Protokoll / Minutes.

Present:

Judge: Wiktor Hoffmann / Minute Secretary: Janina Godzimirska, 10th. December 1946

The Local Court in Mogielnica heard on this day testimony of the citizen Helena Tyrankiewicz in accordance with the Order of the Regional Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes (-6d-) of 19th. November 1946. She made the following statement:

(...) S. 71f.

"However on the Sundays, which in 1941 were still free of labour, there was a lively amount of conversation. People exchanged information as to which form of work it was the best to try to go for, in which workshops people were beaten, where very high demands were made in terms of regular productivity, where the supervisors were relatively good and where they were absolute bastards, where does the so-called 'Terror of the Workshops', the SS executioner Bündler often go, where does he never seem to appear, etc. It was said the workshops seemed so overfilled that a night shift was to be introduced so that all the prisoners could be kept busy in the workshops.

At first those women who could not find a place in the so numerous 'Businesses' in the camp kept busy with the knitting of stockings. After the Sand Column was dissolved, for they had completed their work, Teresa found herself once more amongst the Knitters. It was already December and so this hand-work in the warm canteen room was considered very attractive, especially as there was no German supervisor present, so that one could talk with each other and tell each other things. But this idyllic situation was soon over. One day all the knitters were ordered to assemble on the camp road. There an SS-man and one of the supervisors selected ca. 100 women and ordered them to come back for work at 18.00 "in Strohn" (?). So the night shift was indeed now a reality.

The remaining Knitters did not however have long to feel happy about being passed over for the night shift. After around a week they also got the order to appear for the night shift. They had in fact got the worst of it, for the 'Straw' women would work alternately in day or night shifts, whereas they had constantly to work nights! That was a hard fate. One went in the darkness to work and one came back and never saw any daylight. To sleep during the day was not possible, for the dormitories had to be scrubbed each day and the windows cleaned...

The Knitters formed a supernumary, an additional group; since they could perform no more valuable work apart from knitting stockings, there was no specific space allocated to them in the workshop; they had to crouch down here or there in the darker corners, at the edges, some distance from the lighting which was set in a long row down the centre of the ceiling. The workshop is a Sewing Room in which Wehrmacht uniforms and incidentally also Prisoner uniforms are sewn and altered. Knitters are not required here! Everywhere they are simply in the way of the other workers who complain about them and push them from one corner to another; often they had to remain standing while they worked, often they had to sit just on the floor.

Women worked at some 200 sewing machines; these were mainly Germans, who considered themselves naturally somewhat better than the Polish women and felt it necessary to show openly their disdain for them and their unwillingness to share the space. At some few machines Austrian women were sitting; these were much friendlier to the Poles and attempted to help the poor, beaten stocking-knitters. But what can one really do here to help? With the best will in the world one cannot expand the walls of the Barrack, one cannot offer a stool with a back-rest to someone with a sore and tired back, one cannot replace the bright glaring lights with milky-glass light bulbs; one could perhaps have a word with the slightly-older German women who are amongst the Knitters and suggest to them that they should not work quite so fast, because they establish in this way productivity levels that the Polish women cannot possibly attain. "Then they shouldn't be lazy, they should learn to work as we do!" is the reply of these old bags, who were probably born with knitting needles in their hands and even knit in their dreams, not to mention in the "free hours".... they would surely become ill if they ever stopped knitting!

(Teresa recalled the German women whom she had seen in various attractive places in Europe, and always they had some Knitting with them! Between occasional cries of pleasure at the view they were also hurriedly counting the stitches. "A German would surely knit a stocking in less time than a machine would! Since, however, there is barely any other form of work quite so monotonous and tedious and which demands so little own initiative than knitting stockings, this must explain why the Germans are so stubborn and boring, without any own opinions, suppressed and enslaved, because for the whole of their lives, from the cradle to the grave – and perhaps even longer – they keep knitting these damned socks!" Teresa said to a neighbour whom she preferred to sit next to during the work.)

As for the poor Poles, almost all of them had had their first training in Knitting only in the camp. They were unable to perform their work in the dark, without being able to see what they were doing. In the dim half-light they had to take great care with their stitches and soon developed eye problems in consequence. They had red eyes, just like rabbits. In addition, due to the uncomfortable way they had to sit or for other reasons, that is not wholly clear, their legs became severely swollen. Now they began to report to the Hospital; neither the doctors nor the nurses however concerned themselves with the swollen legs. The zinc drops which were used for healing eye problems were considered too valuable for "the idiotic Polish women"; On the other hand, one did not wish to permit the Knitters to reduce their pace of work. For this reason – Oh Joy! - it was decided that the Knitters would work alternately one week in the Day shift and one week in the Night shift. "

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Rabbinerin Dr. Ulrike Offenberg. "VERSTRICKUNG".

[Translator's Note: This word "*Verstricken*" means "Being implicated in something unpleasant or illegal" but it is close to the word "*Stricken*" for "Knitting"; To retain the effect one could say: "All the aspects are closely knit together".]

In 1940 the SS formed the 'Company for Processing Textiles and Leather' (the so-called 'Texled' company – 'Textil- und Lederverwertung') which maintained numerous workshops especially in the KZ Ravensbrück – including those for Tailoring, Lacemaking, work with Furs and various Weaving workshops. Here the women prisoners, inmates, had to produce items of clothing for the Waffen-SS and the Wehrmacht: Uniforms, shirts, winter underwear, gloves, coats and many other items. The 'Texled' was one of the most profitable enterprises of the SS; in 1943 it had a turnover of 15.5 Million Reichsmark.

The 'Texled' complex also included a Knitting Detachment. Older women and Poles were sent to this and in 12-hour day and night shifts they were forced to knit and to produce hundreds of thousands of socks or stockings for the Wehrmacht.

Picture I: Women Knitting.

Picture II: Women Knitting.

Amongst those who were knitting the stockings in the Blocks were also some women who were being used as 'guinea pigs' for medical experiments. Under the supervision of the Chief Doctor of the Heilanstalt (Clinic) Hohenlychen, Prof. Dr. Karl Gebhardt, who was at the same time a Professor at the Berlin University, the camp doctors carried out experiments on Polish women prisoners. Their lower and upper thighs were cut open to the bone and the wounds were then infected with different bacteria cultures. Others had muscles cut out, or nerves removed, bones broken or transplanted. Since it was intended to observe the continuing progress of the sickness, the victims were then not treated further. Many died under the most dreadful agonies or remained crippled for life. In order to be kept occupied with labour even during these research projects, some of these women were sent to do Knitting.

Picture. Knitting Women. III.

Whilst the Wehrmacht and the Waffen-SS were being provided with winter clothing and warm socks, the women who did the knitting suffered from the cold and from foot problems. Once more a witness report from Helena Tyrankiewiczowa:

"The prisoners suffered especially with their feet. The women were not accustomed to walking around in hard wooden clogs or even to walk so much. Peeling skin and injuries caused many pains, also blisters, for in summer the wooden shoes had to be worn without stockings on bare feet."

"On the 1st. May (1942) the order was given to hand in all clogs and stockings. (...) In Ravensbrück in May there were still strong night frosts, the roofs were covered in a thick rime of frost each morning; During the hours of standing at the morning Appell one froze dreadfully. The prisoners performed miracles in finding ways to acquire a piece of cardboard or an old newspaper with which they could protect their bare cold feet from the frost-covered ground." (...)

(Helena T. In Original pp.103-104).

The Camp Police however tore mercilessly any scrap from under the feet that were swollen with the cold and they kicked and shouted at the women.

But the women fought back too. As in other Work Details in the camp the women in the Knitting Detachment performed acts of sabotage. They tried to produce useless items by working various mistakes into their knitting. Some deliberately knitted the heels too small or in a damaged form, so that the soldiers at the Front would get blisters on their feet. In addition it was sometimes possible to save bits of wool to make socks for oneself, as this pair of socks made by Batsheva Dagan illustrates:

(Picture)

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POEM by Batsheva Dagan.

Blessed is Fantasy,
but also Cursed!
It drives me almost mad,
It provokes, threatens and angers
It makes me tense and afraid.

Yet often
I was enabled to escape
Into another, a better, more beautiful world.

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CONCLUSION OF THE INTERRELIGIOUS COMMEMORATION AT RAVENSBRÜCK,
Sunday 18th. April 2021.

We want to hear together the messages of our religions, we wish to pray together and to plead for Blessing.

Rabbinerin Ulrike Offenberg:

(Taken from the Jewish Daily Morning Service)

"Help us, O God and God of our ancestors
so that Your teachings may influence our decisions and so that we can live according to Your
commandments.

Help us, so that weaknesses and temptations may never gain power over us,

Protect us from situations for which we must then be ashamed.

Keep evil people and false friends far away from us....

Let us find goodness, love and mercy in Your eyes and in the eyes of all those whom we meet
today,

Today, and every day, let us experience the warmth of Your friendship."

Iman Andrea Reiman, German Moslem Centre, Berlin:

(from '*La tahzan*' : 'Do not be sad!')

"Do you see how the black clouds are dissipating,
how the dark night is disappearing?

How the strong winds and the heavy storm are returning to calm once again?

In this way too will your difficulties also be lightened,

Your life and your future will return to a state of goodness, to happiness, grace and mercy."

"Our God, we praise You for the fullness of the Heavens and the Earth
and all that lies between them, and the fullness which You wish to be placed between them.
Oh You, who are worthy of praise and glory.
O God, we believe,
So forgive us and be merciful to us, for You are the best of all the Merciful Ones."

PfarrerIn Magdalena Möbius.

We go now onward and we are happy that we have each other.
We go now onward, in order to take a stand against everything
that enslaves the lives of children, women and men.
We go onward, strengthened by God's Blessing.

May God, the Beginning and the End of our journeys,
Living Presence,
Bless and protect you,
Cover you gently with Goodness
and give you Peace.
Go forward in Peace, Go forward and bring Peace,
Go forward in Blessing.
Go forward and be a Blessing.
Amen.