

1

The establishment and development of the Ravensbrück camp

The Nazi dictatorship began in January 1933 when Adolf Hitler was appointed Reich Chancellor of Germany. Political opponents were arrested and taken to prisons and hurriedly established camps. But the Nazis also increasingly persecuted people who, according to their racist ideology, were not part of the *Volksge-meinschaft*, the racially pure community of the German people.

The first ‘women’s protective custody camps’ were established as early as 1933, but soon the extant institutions were stretched beyond capacity. In May 1939, the Ravensbrück concentration camp was established near the town of Fürstenberg as the Nazi regime’s central women’s concentration camp.

After the start of the war, larger and larger numbers of women from the occupied territories were deported to Ravensbrück. The SS therefore continuously expanded the camp. From 1942, more than 40 satellite camps were established. Most of them served to provide the German war economy with prisoner labour.



2

The prisoners

In total, around 120,000 women were imprisoned in the Ravensbrück concentration camp. They had been arrested for various reasons and had usually been imprisoned without any legal proceedings. Women from more than 30 countries and from all walks of life were crammed together in the camp’s huts.

Many of them had been involved in resistance activities against the Nazi regime in Germany or against the German occupation of their countries. Jewish, Roma and Sinti women were imprisoned on racist grounds. Social outsiders were branded as ‘anti-social elements’ or ‘criminals’ and imprisoned. Among the prisoners of Ravensbrück were also more than 800 children and teenagers; even babies were taken to the camp along with their mothers.

From April 1941, the Ravensbrück camp complex also included a men’s camp with a total of 20,000 prisoners.



3

Everyday life at the camp: Conditions of imprisonment

The prisoners’ daily routine was marked by slave labour and roll-calls. The SS harassed the prisoners by subjecting them to extreme forms of military discipline, monitoring the women at all times and responding to the slightest offences with brutal punishments.

As the number of prisoners in the women’s camp continued to rise, conditions worsened correspondingly. Soon there was no longer enough housing, food and clothing for the prisoners at the camp. In 1940, around 3,000 women were imprisoned in the Ravensbrück main camp. Towards the end of the war, their number had multiplied almost tenfold and epidemics raged through the camp.

The particular kind of work detail a prisoner was assigned to often determined her chances of survival. Prisoner functionaries were able to influence conditions to their advantage – often at the expense of others. But there were also many among them who helped their fellow prisoners.



4

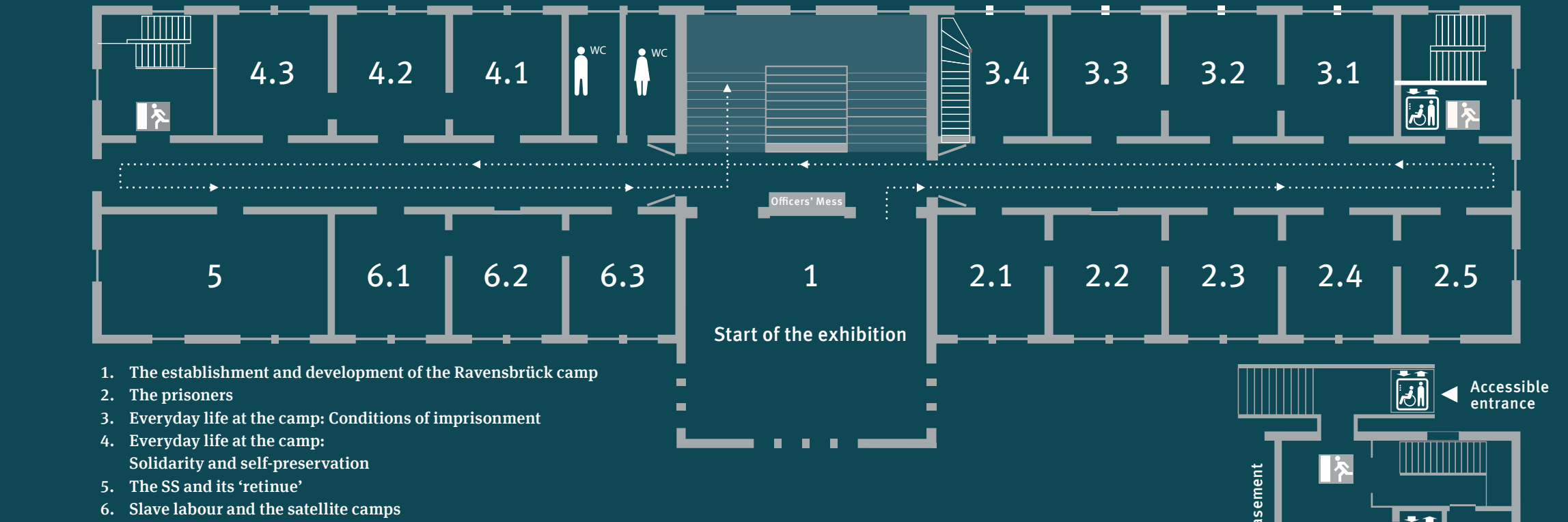
Everyday life at the camp: Solidarity and self-preservation

The prisoners in the concentration camps had little or no opportunity to openly defend themselves against the SS. There were also regular conflicts among the prisoners, who were forced to live at close quarters with each other in the crammed atmosphere of the camp. However, friendships and secret cultural or religious activities often helped them to preserve their will to survive and their human dignity.

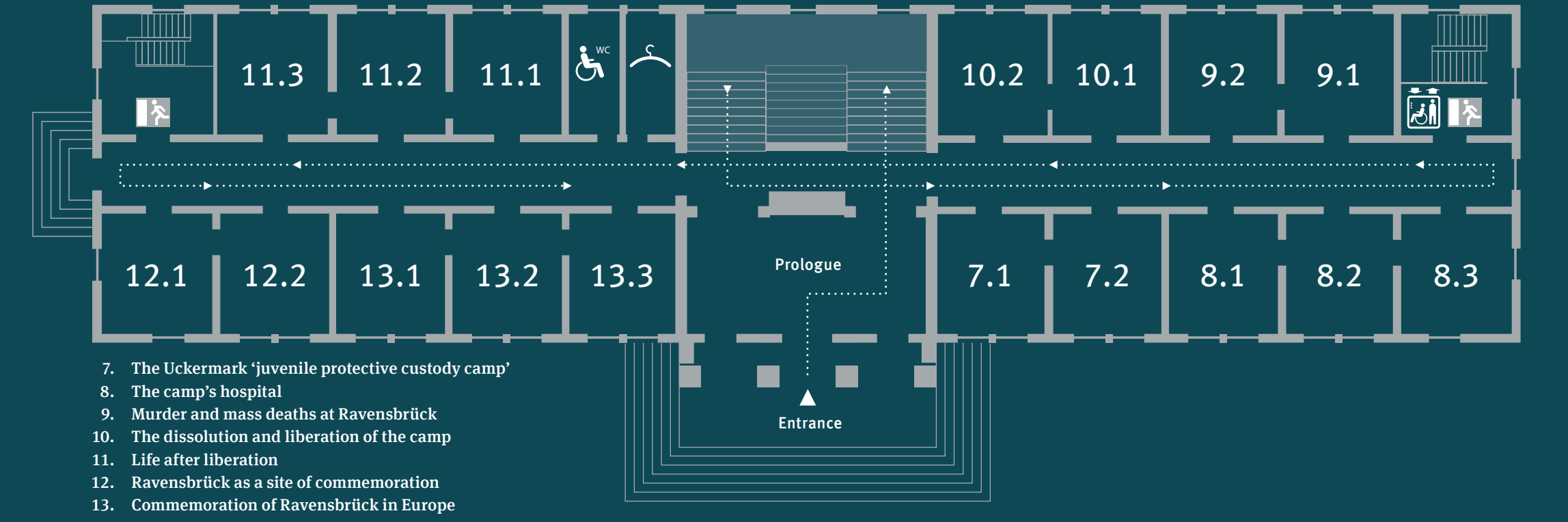
Smaller groups formed networks that provided mutual help. Children in particular were dependent on care and support from other prisoners. Sometimes prisoners managed to protect others who were particularly at risk. Both male and female prisoners resisted their exploitation in armaments production through acts of sabotage, albeit at great risk to themselves.



First floor – Start of the exhibition



Ground floor – Exhibition continued



5

The SS and its ‘retinue’

The Ravensbrück concentration camp was run by the SS. The female guards, who formed part of the SS’s so-called ‘retinue’, were in charge of the female prisoners. The camp was not guarded externally until 1941 when an SS guard squad was formed for the newly established men’s camp.

Between 1939 and 1945, more than 1,000 male SS members and around 3,300 female guards worked at the Ravensbrück concentration camp and its satellite camps. Even though the camp was under the authority of the Concentration Camps Inspectorate and its administration was organised according to a strict hierarchy, the individual members of the camp’s staff had considerable room for manoeuvre in how they treated the prisoners.



6

Slave labour and the satellite camps

There were four SS-run companies at Ravensbrück in which prisoners were forced to work. The largest among them was the textile and leather recycling company Textel. Apart from the SS itself, the German war economy also benefited from the prisoners’ slave labour.

In 1942, the Siemens & Halske company established a production facility at Ravensbrück. Other armaments manufacturers also established camps for slave labourers at their production facilities from 1943. The Ravensbrück camp complex included 44 such satellite camps. The Work Deployment department organised the transfer of prisoners to and from these camps. Exhausted prisoners who could no longer work were regularly exchanged for others.

The SS established prisoner brothels at ten concentration camps as an incentive for male prisoners. The women who were forced into prostitution at these brothels were recruited from Ravensbrück.



7

The Uckermark ‘juvenile protective custody camp’

In 1942, the Reich Criminal Investigation Department (*Reichs-polizeikriminalamt*) established a ‘juvenile protective custody camp’, as the Nazis euphemistically called it, not far from the Ravensbrück concentration camp. Around 1,200 girls and young women aged between 16 and 21 were kept there in ‘preventive police detention’. Many had been transferred to the Uckermark camp from state care institutions, where their non-conformist or rebellious behaviour had attracted the attention of the authorities. Within the public care system, they were considered ‘uneducable’.

The young prisoners in the camp were examined for a supposed ‘criminal character’. Military drill, slave labour and maltreatment marked the daily routine at the Uckermark camp. Former prisoners say there were several deaths.

The ‘juvenile protective custody camp’ was under the administration of the Ravensbrück SS headquarters. The camp’s commander was CID Inspector Lotte Toberentz.



Comments from survivors

This exhibition is a revolution.

Batsheva Dagan

There are many exhibits on display which have been donated to the Ravensbrück Memorial by survivors.

Dr. Annette Chalut

Soon there will no longer be any survivors to tell their stories ‘first hand’. This is why their memories must be preserved for future generations.

Selma van de Perre

This new exhibition on the Ravensbrück concentration camp will remind subsequent generations of the tragic events and how important it is to preserve the constitutional state, freedom, respect for others and tolerance. Excellent museum work.

Roger Bordage

As a survivor, I find this exhibition very moving.

Josefine Oswald

8

The camp’s hospital

The hard labour, malnutrition and bad hygienic conditions at the Ravensbrück camp made many prisoners sick. The camp’s hospital staff was in charge of treating sick prisoners, but medical care at Ravensbrück was insufficient from the outset.

As the camp became more and more overcrowded, the number of sick prisoners also increased. There were barely any drugs for the patients. The SS doctors merely tried to contain epidemics and ensure that a certain number of prisoners remained able to work. They also selected seriously ill prisoners to be murdered. In addition, the SS doctors carried out forced sterilisations and abortions on prisoners and they conducted human experiments.

Some children were born at the hospital, but only few of them survived.



The Ravensbrück Women’s Concentration Camp

History and Memory

An exhibition by the Ravensbrück Memorial and the Brandenburg Memorials Foundation

9

Murder and mass deaths at Ravensbrück

The most common causes of death at Ravensbrück and its satellite camps were starvation, disease and exhaustion. In addition to these deaths, thousands of prisoners were deliberately murdered.

Starting in 1941, around 500 women were executed at the camp. In 1942, the SS selected more than 1,600 women and 300 men to be killed in the ‘14 f 13’ murder campaign. They were taken to the Bernburg and Hartheim ‘euthanasia’ facilities, where they were killed with poison gas. In early 1945, the SS murdered between 5,000 and 6,000 prisoners, most of them women, in a provisional gas chamber at Ravensbrück.

In total, more than 25,000 women and 2,500 men lost their lives in the camp. Around half of them died during the final four months before the camp’s liberation.



The Ravensbrück Women’s Concentration Camp History and Memory

Between 1939 and 1945, Ravensbrück was the Nazi regime’s central concentration camp for women. More than 120,000 women and children from over 30 countries, 20,000 men and 1,200 teenage girls and young women were deported to Ravensbrück. Apart from the women’s camp, the Ravensbrück complex also comprised a smaller men’s camp, numerous satellite camps, the Siemens camp and the Uckermark ‘juvenile protective custody camp’. Around 28,000 Ravensbrück prisoners lost their lives.

Following the liberation in April 1945, the site was used by the Soviet Army until 1994. In 1959, a memorial was set up by the shores of Lake Schwedt. Its collections grew from a core compiled by the International Ravensbrück Committee.

This exhibition is based on an extensive collection of objects, accounts, documents and drawings by prisoners. The memories of former prisoners and their different perspectives are of central importance here. But the exhibition also shows that, even today, many questions about Ravensbrück do not have a definitive answer.



10

The dissolution and liberation of the camp

In the spring of 1945, with the Red Army approaching, the SS began to evacuate the Ravensbrück camp. They started by murdering prisoners who were sick or no longer able to walk. Around the same time, the Swedish and International Red Cross managed to gain permission from the SS to evacuate prisoners to neutral countries. Several thousand women were able to leave the Ravensbrück concentration camp on these Red Cross rescue transports.

On 24 April, the SS began to drive the prisoners from the camp, starting with the men. Many of the weakened prisoners died on these death marches.

The first Red Army unit arrived at the Ravensbrück camp on 30 April 1945. The Soviet troops found around 2,000 seriously sick prisoners at the camp whom the SS had left behind.



The exhibition site

The exhibition that opened in 2013 is located in the former SS headquarters building, which was constructed in 1940 and served as the administrative centre of the Ravensbrück concentration camp. This is where the SS planned and issued orders for the crimes that were committed in the camp.

The offices of the commandant, the adjutant and the camp administration were located on the first floor. The prestigiously furnished hall at the centre of the first floor probably served as the SS officers’ mess. On the ground floor were the offices of the Political Department and the mail censorship office as well as the SS garrison physician’s treatment rooms, where SS personnel were treated.

From 1945 to 1977, Soviet forces used the building. After they had moved out, it was transformed into the Memorial’s main museum. Between 2011 and 2013, the building was renovated according to accepted conservation practices by the Kannenberg architectural firm. The design focussed on preserving and revealing the remaining original structure of the building. The original room layout was made visible again, while the later changes to the building’s structure can also still be seen.



11

Life after liberation

After the liberation, the former prisoners returned home or emigrated. Many had not only lost their property due to Nazi persecution, but also their families. In addition, most of them were in very bad health as a consequence of their imprisonment.

The survivors often encountered a great deal of indifference towards their fate from other people. Some kept silent about what they had been through for the rest of their lives. Others tried to process their experience through art.

For many former prisoners, being politically active and bearing witness about what happened at the camps played an important role in their lives after the liberation. They lobbied their own governments for reparation payments or they sent applications to Germany. Many also supported the prosecution of the perpetrators by collecting evidence and appearing in court as witnesses.



12

Ravensbrück as a site of commemoration

Between 1945 and 1994, the Soviet Army used large parts of the former camp. The first commemoration ceremonies were held outside the camp’s wall on the banks of Lake Schwedt. In 1959, the Ravensbrück Memorial was opened in this location as an East German ‘National Memorial’. During this period and in the decades that followed, the public commemoration of Ravensbrück in East Germany revolved almost exclusively around anti-fascist resistance and focussed on the women who were imprisoned on political grounds.

In the mid-1980s, the Memorial gradually became more open and started to include the history of other prisoner groups. In 1993, after German reunification, the Ravensbrück Memorial became part of the Brandenburg Memorials Foundation. Since then, additional sections of the historical site have been made accessible. The Memorial has increasingly taken over the tasks of a historical museum.



13

Commemoration of Ravensbrück in Europe

Many survivors from all over Europe made it their task to transmit the history of the women’s concentration camp to the public and to commemorate its victims. For a long time, however, the experiences of women in the camps were regarded as less important in many countries. The dominant narratives in many places were those of resistance against the Nazi regime by men.

Today, however, a number of memoirs of former Ravensbrück prisoners have been published. Joining together in national associations allowed the survivors to become politically active as a group. These national associations of former prisoners were often the driving force behind monuments to the victims of Ravensbrück or commemoration ceremonies. Over the years, these activities by survivors created a multi-layered, Europe-wide public memory of Ravensbrück.



Ravensbrück Memorial | Brandenburg Memorials Foundation

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Exhibition opening hours
October to April: Tue.-Sun. 9 a.m.-5 p.m.
May to September: Tue.-Sun. 9 a.m.-6 p.m.

Memorial grounds opening hours
October to April: Tue.-Sun. 9 a.m.-5 p.m.
May to September: Tue.-Sun. 9 a.m.-8 p.m.

Registration for group visits
Tel +49 (0)33093 603-85
Fax +49 (0)33093 603-86
Email paedagogik@ravensbrueck.de

Directions
By train:
Regional train (RE) 5 from Berlin to Stralsund/Rostock stops at Fürstenberg and runs every hour. The Memorial is a 25-minute walk from Fürstenberg station, where taxis are also available.

By car:
Fürstenberg is located 80 kilometres north of Berlin on Bundesstraße (Federal Highway) 96, which runs from Berlin to Stralsund; the way to the Memorial from Fürstenberg is signposted.

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