RAVENSBRÜCK
FORGOTTEN WOMEN OF THE HOLOCAUST

Teacher’s Guide
Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>THE EXHIBIT</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WRITING AS RESISTANCE</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>READING FOR EVIDENCE</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GENDERED RESPONSES</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDICES</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A – POLITICAL PRISONERS</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B – JEHOVAH’S WITNESSES</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C – ASOCIALS</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix E – RAVENSBURCK POEMS</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix F – RAVENSBURCK PHOTOS &amp; DRAWINGS</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix G – FOOD / HUNGER</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix H – PHYSICAL CONDITIONS</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix I – SLAVE LABOUR</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix J – SOLIDARITY &amp; FRIENDSHIP</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix K – PREGNANCY, ABORTIONS &amp; CHILDBIRTH</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix K – MEDICAL EXPERIMENTS / STERILIZATIONS</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GLOSSARY</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RAVENSBRÜCK: Forgotten Women of the Holocaust

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RAVENSBRÜCK: Forgotten Women of the Holocaust
A Teacher's Guide

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Women's Endowment Fund
RAEVNSBRÜCK: Forgotten Women of the Holocaust explores the treatment, experiences and responses of the women, from diverse backgrounds and nationalities, interned at Ravensbrück.

Ravensbrück was the only concentration camp built specifically for women. It was a profit-making centre, established for the dual purposes of “re-education” and slave labour. The women of Ravensbrück came from 23 different countries. The majority were Polish, German and Russian women, and Jewish women of varying nationalities. In its six years of operation 132,000 women and children passed through its gates. By the time the camp was liberated by the Soviets in 1945, 117,000 had perished. It had the highest mortality rate of any concentration camp located in Germany.

In Ravensbrück, as in other concentration camps, the Nazis imprisoned those whom they considered to be of an inferior race or regarded as enemies of the state. The lesser races were identified by colour, ethnicity, culture and nationality and included Jews, as well as Roma and Sinti (Gypsies). The Nazis also persecuted and imprisoned political opponents such as Communists, Socialists, liberals, trade unionists, and members of the resistance as well as Jehovah’s Witnesses and Poles.

THE TEACHER’S GUIDE
This guide contains lesson ideas, discussion questions, extensions and supporting resources that relate to the exhibit RAVENSBURCK: Forgotten Women of the Holocaust.

The guide features primary documents such as poems and drawings made in secret by the women of Ravensbrück and staged photographs, produced by the Nazis in an effort to deceive a Red Cross delegation about the true conditions of the camp.

It provides opportunities for both individual student and/or small group work. Teachers are invited to photocopy the materials as needed for their students.

PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY
Teachers are encouraged to prepare students for their visit to the exhibit. The pre-visit activity on page 2 introduces students to the range of victim groups imprisoned in Ravensbrück and fosters an historic empathy which students can bring to the exhibit.
Coloured Triangles: Ravensbrück Prisoner Categories

Ravensbrück was the only concentration camp built specifically for women. It was a profit-making centre, established for the dual purposes of “re-education” and slave labour. The women of Ravensbrück came from 23 different countries. The majority were women of Polish, German, and Russian descent; others were from Austria, France, the Netherlands, Hungary, Belgium, Yugoslavia, Norway, Luxembourg, Romania and Ukraine. Only a small minority of the women were Jewish. In its six years of operation, 132,000 women and children passed through its gates. By the time the camp was liberated by the Soviets in 1945, 117,000 had perished. It had the highest mortality rate of any concentration camp located in Germany.

The Nazis targeted and persecuted people whom they considered to be of an inferior race or regarded as enemies of the state. According to the Nazis’ Master Race Theory, the Aryan race, made up of white, blond haired, blue-eyed individuals, was a superior race destined to rule over all other races. The lesser races were identified by colour, ethnicity, culture and nationality and included Jews, as well as the Roma and Sinti (Gypsies). The Nazis also persecuted and imprisoned political opponents such as Communists, Socialists, liberals, trade unionists and members of the resistance. Jehovah’s Witnesses, Poles, homosexuals and the physically or mentally handicapped were also targeted as “inferior” and imprisoned.

The Nazis used triangular badges to identify and classify all concentration camp prisoners, including the women of Ravensbrück. Prisoners were organized into categories; each was marked with a triangle of a specific colour, and by a letter positioned within the triangle. Political prisoners and resistance fighters were marked with red triangles. Jehovah’s Witnesses were marked with purple triangles. "Asocials," which included lesbians, prostitutes, and Roma and Sinti wore black triangles, while Jews wore yellow triangles. The Letters printed on the triangles, such as "P" for Polish, indicated the prisoner’s nationality.
STUDY GROUPS
This pre-visit activity will familiarise students with the variety of groups imprisoned in Ravensbrück and the range of their experiences. Students will develop an historic empathy with one of the victim groups and will use this perspective as a way to understand the exhibit.

Distribute coloured triangles to each student and divide students into four colour groups: red, purple, black & yellow.

All students read Coloured Triangles: Ravensbrück Prisoner Categories. In addition, each group reads the information sheet that corresponds to their coloured triangle.

Red (Appendix A) – Political Prisoners
Purple (Appendix B) – Jehovah’s Witnesses
Black (Appendix C) – Asocials
Yellow (Appendix D) – Jews

DISCUSSION
What have you learned about the use and purpose of the triangular badges?

Share two facts, from your reading with the rest of the class, that you found most interesting or significant and that summarizes the experiences of your victim group.

Why do you think the Nazis wanted to identify and isolate prisoners according to victim groupings?

How do you think the experience of Ravensbrück differed for each victim group and why?

Which experiences were common to most or all groups?

Resistance at Ravensbrück took many forms— from the sabotage of the second gas chamber to spiritual resistance, which included the secret writing and recording of the hardships of life in Ravensbrück. Writing was a punishable offence, yet the women of Ravensbrück wrote over 12,000 poems and kept other written accounts of conditions in the camp. Their poems, written on scraps of stolen paper, were passed from person to person and translated into many languages. Poems were sometimes hidden in the women’s clothing or clogs and smuggled out of the camp.

Some of the women wrote textbooks, and dictionaries from memory or drew atlases in order to share their learning with fellow inmates. These handwritten, tiny bound books were hidden and copied by the hundreds. One Polish inmate, Eugenia Kocwa, wrote her own English textbook on 80 sheets of stolen toilet paper, which was then copied by hundreds of other women.

French inmate, Germaine Tillion carved the dates and events of her imprisonment on the walls of her cell with a nail and also wrote in the margins of a small religious book. A Russian woman, Zina M. Kudrjawzewska was sentenced to 15 lashes and a day without food when her poem was discovered by a guard. After her second poem was discovered, her punishment was three days without food, with much of that time spent standing in cold water.

REFLECTIVE WRITING

Students read *Writing as Resistance* (above) and the Ravensbrück Poems in Appendix E. Students keep a log of personal reflections while reading the poems and respond to those aspects of the women’s accounts that they find most compelling or interesting.

Students choose one poem and reflect on its personal impact. They imagine that they could write a letter to the author to express their feelings about the poem. Students share their letters with others who have written letters in response to the same poem.

DRAMATIC READING

Students organize a class presentation, which interweaves dramatic readings of the poems with students’ responses. The presentation may be enhanced by a slide or PowerPoint presentation of Ravensbrück drawings and photographs, found in this guide or from other sources.
FOR DISCUSSION
What do you think motivated the women to write these poems?

Why do you think that more women chose to write poetry as opposed to journals or other texts?

Why do you think the authors risked punishment to write? What would you have done in their place?

Describe some of the central themes in their works. What imagery and metaphors were used to express the feelings of hope, despair, friendship, suffering and thoughts of freedom?

In the past, less attention has been paid to women’s experiences compared to that of men. In what ways do these poems reflect a uniquely women’s perspective?

How do poems differ from other historical source materials? In what way can they contribute to our understanding of the Holocaust?

EXTENSION – Recipes as Resistance
Rebecca Teitelbaum worked as a slave labourer in the office of the Siemens armaments factory in Ravensbrück. In an effort to stave off exhaustion, cold and hunger, Rebecca and the other women in her barrack found comfort in remembering and sharing their favourite recipes from home. At great risk, Rebecca stole paper and a pencil and recorded these recipes. Trading food for a needle and thread, she meticulously stitched and bound the pages into this small volume. Upon completion, the women found solace in reading aloud from its pages. Few of the women whose recipes appear in the book survived.

Imagine that you are an historian who discovers Rebecca’s recipe book. Why would it be of interest?

Do you consider the writing of a recipe book to be an act of resistance? Explain.

In what way does it reflect the unique experiences and responses of women?
READING FOR EVIDENCE

Ravensbrück Photographs & Drawings

What we know about Ravensbrück comes primarily from the testimony and the drawings of the women inmates themselves. The Nazis destroyed the official camp records during the final days of the war by burning them in the crematorium ovens of the camp.

The only known photographs of the women inmates are those produced by the Nazis between 1940-1941 in order to deceive a Red Cross delegation. These staged photographs used healthy, newly arrived inmates to show a clean, orderly camp where the women were well treated.

The Nazi photographs stand in stark contrast to the personal and expressive drawings produced by the women of Ravensbrück. A prisoner caught with a drawing faced a brutal beating or even death. Despite the risk, many of the women produced hundreds of drawings to help them cope with life in the camp and to resist the Nazis, while leaving a record of Ravensbrück for future generations.

Reading for Information / Evidence

Reading historical material for “evidence” is different from reading for “information”. We read a telephone book for information without questioning its accuracy, unless we get a message that “this number is no longer in service”.

When historians read historical documents or other artefacts for evidence, they question -

a. who produced the artefact?
b. in what context?
c. for what purpose?

Sometimes, an artefact can also be read for its “unintended evidence” – that which the producers might never have intended or considered. For example, the Nazis used the black triangular badges to segregate Roma and Sinti from other prisoners at Ravensbrück. However, an historian might judge the black triangles as unintended evidence of the Nazis’ inherent racism.

Form Groups

Have all students read Ravensbrück Photographs & Drawings (above). Explain Reading for Information / Evidence to the class. Form 6 groups and give each group a copy of the worksheet and one photograph or drawing from Appendix E. Each group selects a recorder (to fill-in the worksheet) and a presenter (to share the group’s finding with the class). Have students imagine that they are historians. Have them read the photograph or drawing for evidence by answering the questions on the worksheet. Group findings can be shared with the class.
WORKSHEET
ARTEFACT

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Who produced it?</th>
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<tr>
<td>In what context?</td>
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<tr>
<td>For what purpose?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What evidence does it offer about conditions at Ravensbrück?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What “unintended” evidence does it suggest about the producer?</td>
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DISCUSSION

What have you learned about the producers of the drawings or the photographs?

Under what conditions were they produced and for what purposes?

What evidence does your artefact offer about conditions in the camp? For example, was Ravensbrück 1) a clean, orderly camp where inmates were well treated or 2) a brutal and harsh environment where the women faced hunger, disease, slave labour and death?

In what ways do the drawings provide unintended evidence about the women or their captors?

What unintended evidence do the photographs suggest about the Nazis' belief system?
READING FOR EVIDENCE

Why are photographs often considered to be a more accurate or objective portrayal of reality?

Why are drawings usually thought to be more expressive and personal?

What can “staged” photographs teach us about the Holocaust? (Unintended evidence?)

How can the expressiveness of drawings like these contribute to our understanding of the Holocaust?

What have you learned about the need to evaluate historical evidence?

EXTENSION

Research another historical or contemporary event such as World War I, using photographic images and drawings produced by war artists in the field. Read the photographs or drawings for evidence to support your analysis of the events and conditions.

Compare the style and subject matter of two of the Ravensbrück drawings. How are they similar or different? What do the subject matters reveal about conditions in Ravensbrück? How does each style contribute to the emotionally expressive nature of the work? Consider the quality of line (dark, light, thick, thin, tentative, forceful), shading and composition. Sketch some of the line qualities used by the artist to support your answers. How does each subject matter and style complement artist’s intent?
Suitable for senior secondary students. The readings and images may be disturbing to younger students.

Many believe that men and women experienced and responded to the Holocaust in similar or comparable ways. Both men and women were deported to concentration camps, separated from their families, suffered hunger, cold and disease and subjected to inhumane conditions such as medical experimentation. Moreover, both men and women responded to their imprisonment in ways that ranged from despair and suicide to sabotage, armed and spiritual resistance.

Despite these similarities, many think it useful to consider the differences between men and women’s responses. The memoirs and testimonies, left by the women of Ravensbrück, suggest that differences in women’s biology, socialization and physical strength affected how women experienced and responded to the circumstances of their imprisonment. For instance, many believe that women, socialized to be more supportive of one another, formed more family groupings than men did. Women’s homemaking skills of cooking, sewing, and the knowledge of herbal remedies would have also helped them cope differently from men. However, the greatest gender differences were biological. The dangers and distress associated with pregnancies, forced abortions and childbirth were, of course, unique to women.

CHART OPINIONS
All students read Gendered Responses above. Students are divided into six study groups and each group is given one of the following readings about women’s experiences at Ravensbrück.

Appendix G - Food / hunger
Appendix H - Physical conditions
Appendix I - Slave labour
Appendix J - Solidarity / friendship
Appendix K - Pregnancy / childbirth
Appendix L - Medical experiments / sterilizations

From their readings, students form opinions as to whether the women’s responses were likely 1) unique and specific to women, 2) more prevalent among women than men or 3) similar to how men would have responded under similar circumstances. Each group writes a statement to explain or support their reasoning.

Students use the chart on page 10 to summarize their opinions. Groups share and compare their findings by compiling a composite class chart.
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<th>Unique to women</th>
<th>More prevalent among women</th>
<th>Similar to men's responses</th>
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<td>Physical conditions</td>
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<td>Pregnancy / childbirth</td>
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<tr>
<td>Medical experiments / Sterilizations</td>
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DISCUSSION

Why might men and women have responded differently to similar circumstances or treatment? For instance, upon arrival at the concentration camps, both men and women were stripped of their clothing, issued camp clothes and had their heads shaved. Why might this procedure have resulted in a gender-specific response? What other examples of gender-specific responses did you find in your readings?

In the past, historians and researchers who have interviewed survivors have rarely asked gender specific questions. As a result, we do not have that gender-specific information available to us today. What questions specific to women do you think should have been asked?

EXTENSION

Ravensbrück, the “sister camp”, is less known than the three other neighbouring camps of Dachau, Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen which housed only male inmates. Research and discuss some of the gender-specific experiences of men at one of these camps. Consider the food, physical conditions, slave labour, solidarity, friendship and medical experiments. The rating scale above can be adapted to chart men’s responses and compare them to women’s by adding the categories of 4. more prevalent among men and 5. unique to men.

Alternatively, research the gender-specific experiences of women, victimized during a contemporary genocide such as Rwanda or the former Yugoslavia.
Political prisoners were marked with red triangles. They were the largest group at Ravensbrück and included German dissidents, Communists and women active in the resistance. The latter were arrested for various offences such as concealing Jews in their homes, distributing anti-Nazi leaflets, making illegal identity cards for the underground, or running underground presses.

The NN prisoners were politicals, who were singled out for harsher treatment than other prisoners. NN stood for the German words Nacht und Nebel – Night and Fog. The intent was to have them disappear without a trace into “the night & fog”. NN prisoners were prohibited from working outside the camp walls and were not allowed to receive packages or mail.

The triangles of Polish Catholic women were marked with the letter “P” for Polish. By 1942, they made up the largest national group in the camp. Many were rural women without strong political views, some were devout Catholics and others were active Communists. A few were highly educated students, professors, writers and intellectuals – even aristocrats, who organized many educational activities in the camp. 17,000 Polish Catholic women died at Ravensbrück. Many of them were victims of medical experiments.

On February 3, 1944, a convoy of 958 French women arrived from France, and were accused of being in the resistance. They were known as the “twenty-seven thousands” because their registration numbers fell somewhere between 27,000 and 28,000. Of the 10,000 French women sent to Ravensbrück over 8,000 perished.
Appendix B – JEHovah’S WITNESSES

Jehovah’s Witnesses at Ravensbrück were marked with purple triangles. They were among the first victims targeted by the Nazi regime and referred to as Bifos, short for Bibelforscher or Bible students. They were conscientious objectors who believed that Hitler was the anti-Christ. Many were interned for violating the Nazi ban on their religious activities. As citizens of Jehovah’s Kingdom they refused to raise their arms in the “Heil, Hitler,” to bear arms for any nation or to work at jobs that supported the war effort.

Jehovah’s Witnesses practiced their faith in secret. They prayed, sang hymns, read the Bible and carried out missionary work within the camp – winning many converts. Witnesses were given the opportunity to go free if they renounced their beliefs. Few did so, even when tortured.

In January 1942, Witnesses mounted the first passive revolt that occurred in Ravensbrück. They refused to sew buttons on SS uniforms, to load straw for SS horses or to stand at attention during roll call. They were beaten, placed in the bunker without food and were forced to stand in the cold for long hours. Although many died, they held fast to their resistance.

Witness women were, for the most part, model prisoners; they made no attempt at escape and could be trusted unescorted outside the confines of the camp. For that reason, and that they spoke German, they were often given responsible jobs in administration, finances or caring for SS children.

Purple triangle with prisoner number 1989 issued to Luise Jahndorf, Ravensbrück, 1940 - 1945

USHMM Photo Archives
Appendix C – ASOCIALS

"Asocials" at Ravensbrück were marked with black triangles. This group included lesbians, prostitutes and Roma and Sinti (Gypsies).

Roma and Sinti were marked with the black triangle for Asocials because the Nazis considered them to be racially "inferior" and "a threat to the biological purity of the Aryan race". The first transport of Roma and Sinti women and children arrived from Austria on June 29, 1939. By 1945, nearly 5,000 had passed through Ravensbrück. Both the women and children were subjected to the forced sterilization program and various medical experiments at Ravensbrück.

In February 1941, Weiss, a Roma woman, was the first to try to escape from Ravensbrück. She wrapped herself in a blanket as protection from the high voltage wires surrounding the camp and hid in the nearby woods. She was found after a three-day search, brought back to the camp, and beaten to death.

Appendix D – JEWS

Jewish women at Ravensbrück were marked with yellow triangles. They comprised 15 - 20% of the camp’s population. At first they came from Germany and Austria and later from other Nazi-occupied countries. Those who were also considered political prisoners were marked with either a yellow stripe on top of a red triangle or a red triangle and a yellow triangle that formed a Star of David.

The systematic murder of Jewish women in Ravensbrück began in 1942 when Jewish politicals were gassed at Bernburg, a nearby "euthanasia" facility. In October 1942, many Jewish women were deported to Auschwitz in an attempt to make Ravensbrück judenfrei - "free of Jews".

In 1944-45 the situation changed again and many Jewish women arrived in Ravensbrück from other concentration camps, including Auschwitz. This increase was a result of the "death marches" as the Nazis moved women from camps in the east to Ravensbrück.
April 1942

On the cardboard roofs fall heavy raindrops,
blind is the grass trampled solid by the feet of thousands
and gone the sun behind the black moving clouds.
I feel the hearts of comrades beating so close by,
thread the months on a ring,
restless the spring in the blood of the whole world.
The grey evening awakes in the echo of shots,
glances seek each other, gaze unto the heart
and the heart cries.
Woman, you were brave,
pale as a sheet,
a sheet, fastened under the chin of the dead.
In the weeping wind death is peering and searching,
the beating of a thousand hearts is the knell.
You died alone,
only the surrounding pines and the dried grass,
to whom you gave your blood, were singing.
I do not know what you lived for,
however your death was close to me,
that its cruelty was a blow to the senses.

Vera Hozáková, was born October 28, 1917 in the Czech Republic. She joined the Communist Party in 1938. The Nazis arrested her for contacting a well-known, Communist member of the Resistance and deported her to Ravensbrück in January 1942.

To My Brothers at the Concentration Camps

O brother, one day a morning will come, where no role call can hold us,
where wide open the gates, and the big wide,
the free world lies before us,
and then we concentration camp prisoners will wander the wide streets.
outside are the liberators, awaiting us yet the others,
and whoever sees us, sees the furrows
that suffering has written on our faces.
Sees torture to body and soul which has left its traces.
And whoever sees us, sees the anger flashing in our eyes brightly,
sees the exultant freedom’s jubilation that owns our hearts completely,
and then we’ll line up in the last long column,
then it’s “Forward, march” for the very last time,
for the way leads to the light and to the sun.
Brother, can you see this day as I have done,
you must think it’s coming soon, and then we’ll pull out
I of Ravensbrück, you of Sachsenhausen, Buchenwald or Dachau.

Käthe Leichter, Austrian, Political Socialist interned at Ravensbrück – gassed at Bernburg 1942.
Vous qui savez
Oh you who know
Did you know that hunger lets the eyes shine
that thirst makes them dull
Oh you who know
that one can see one's mother dead
and can remain without tears
did you know that in the morning one wants to die
that in the evening one is afraid
Oh you who know
did you know that a day more than a year
a minute more than a lifetime
Oh you who know
did you know that the legs are more vulnerable than the eyes
the nerves harder than bones
the heart more durable than steel
did you know that the stones of they way do not cry
that there is only one word for the terror
just one word for the fear
did you know that suffering has no limits
terror no end
Did you know that
Oh you who know.

Charlotte Delbo, Delbo was a non-Jewish member of the French Resistance, deported Auschwitz in 1943 and liberated from Ravensbrück by the Red Cross in 1946.

Moment of Farewell
Take not my hands, gaze not into my eyes
seek no comfort and tell me not, I should have faith! -
I am affected by something horrible, surrounded by an evil circle.
All alone I must carry this burden ...

I alone - no one's words can help me. -
Alone I will live through the awful waiting.
And before the moment arrives to kill me,
I will run to meet it alone...

Farewell and go ... leave me alone, as I wanted to be ...
No, I won't cry, even if the tears well up.
It is already waiting for me with open gates the Mount of Olives.

Zofia Görąka, Polish survivor of Ravensbrück.
**Untitled**

Sometimes a train travels far outside of here,  
far outside, where people live free,  
the birds part the sky with their flight,  
treetops you see blowing in the wind.

Far outside, behind wires and walls—  
wires and walls, and you are dead.  
Don’t you feel it? It’s enormous,  
and the soon-to-be sunrise is far away.

I know everything that you want to say:  
"Hold on! Keep your chin up, all this will pass!  
Do you want to give up so shortly before it ends?  
Sometime after the night, we will be free."

You are so brave, your courage is great,  
but I have blood on my hands;  
today I hauled stones at the SS estate,  
I’m hungry and I see no end to it.

My husband has been shot, you know that for sure.  
To be free without him makes no sense to me.  
Then the most beautiful sky would not be blue.  
You see how disheartened I am.

In this battle, I have done my part,  
but I have had it with this waiting!—  
One would like to tell her many, yes many things,  
but her corpse lay too soon on the electric fence.

*Prisoner poets frequently dedicated their work to a dead comrade, as in this untitled poem by Antonia Bruha.*
RAVENSBÜCK POEMS

The Desolate Day
It's a desolate day when the grey clouds
slide deeply by in the heavens,
when the trees cry and the birds fly slowly by.

The lake breathes disconsolately, and the little town
on the other side lies vaulted in grey
over pale reeds. Where have the colours gone?

I look out over the camp and its walls.
Desolately the roofs stretch out over the barracks,
and the distant voices of inmates drift away.

Where are we in the world?
Or has it already gone under?
How am I to know that this is really my life?

The camouflaged factories lie like old ruins.
The streets glimmer black and desolately,
and the windows look out mutely like empty eye sockets.
Desolately the machines hum and growl.
The pale faces of the inmates in the halls
look fixedly at the clock – when will it be over?

Everything is desolate, this world of our lives.
Only your quiet hands,
which protectively surround my heart,
are warm like red blossoms.

Clara Rupp wrote this poem for her friend, Yvonne Useldinger, while she recovered from illness. The poem was smuggled to Yvonne in the infirmary.
"Groundbreaking"
Drawing by France Audoul
French prisoner

Prisoners digging trenches, photograph taken by the SS, for a propaganda album produced for the Red Cross, 1940/41
"Pulling the street paving roller"
Drawing by an unknown inmate artist

Street paving roller in front of prisoner barracks
“Flogging”, Unknown artist

Reichführer of the SS and Head of the Gestapo, Heinrich Himmler, photograph taken in January 1941 at the Ravensbrück Women’s Concentration Camp - part of the SS Propaganda Album produced by the SS for the Red Cross in 1940-1941
"Weaving Straw shoes"
Drawing by Nina Jirskova
Czech prisoner

Herzog, Monika: Ravensbrücker Zeichnungen

Prisoners weaving straw shoes, photograph taken by the SS for the propaganda album produced for the Red Cross 1940/41
"Plundered and Shorn"
Drawing by France Audouil
French prisoner

Audol, France
50 000 femmes en enfer-
Paris : Le Déporté, 1966

Prisoners working in the SS Textile factory; photograph taken by the SS, for propaganda album produced for the Red Cross 1940/41
Every morning at 5 a.m. we had to line up for inspection, five in a row. That is when they gave us our food. The Nazis called it soup. I called it a different thing – it was like a dishwashing liquid. Sometimes they filled up the cup, other times it was only half full. Sometimes we got a little more at night after work. I always hooked the cup onto my belt and carried it everywhere with me.

- Irene Fleischer Klein, Hungarian Survivor, deported from Budapest to Ravensbrück, December 22, 1944 at age 19.

The women in the camp were constantly hungry. Lunch and dinner consisted of a thin cabbage and turnip soup. Inmates were allowed one 200 gram piece of bread a day and ersatz coffee in the morning. Women kept their eating utensils tied to their skirts at all times, losing them meant they would not be able to eat. Block seniors distributed the soup. The Nazis used food strategically, as a way to pit groups against one another. Some groups were given better food, while others received food of a poorer quality. Women who were given a portion drawn from the more nutritious bottom of the pot, while others received watery portions from the top. Poor and inadequate food left the women susceptible to disease and starvation.

Food, or more precisely the lack of food, dominated the consciousness of the women. They developed a way of coping called 'cooking with the mouth' where they tried to assuage their hunger by talking about food, menus and recipes. Many compiled 'cookbooks', combining recipes from personal memory with those remembered and shared by other inmates. Many deprived themselves of a half-ration of bread in order to 'buy' a stub of a pencil or a scrap of paper in order to create these tiny recipe books that were passed from hand to hand.
Appendix H — PHYSICAL CONDITIONS

When the women arrived at the Fürstenberg station, they had to walk the 3 km to Ravensbrück before waiting for hours to be processed. Those who arrived at night were forced to stand outside until the next morning. When they were finally processed, the first assault on their dignity was the shaving of their heads. For women, this was a traumatic experience. A humiliating medical exam soon followed, preceded by long periods of waiting naked while enduring the leers and taunts of Nazi guards.

The new arrivals were issued uniforms, consisting of a sack-like striped dress with a number and coloured triangle patch that corresponded to their nationality, ethnic, social or religious category. They were placed in quarantine for a short time before they were integrated into the camp. The process was designed to be as demeaning as possible. Camp footwear consisted of wooden clogs that rarely fit; and many women went barefoot in Ravensbrück. After 1943, new prisoners were given civilian clothing with large crosses painted on the front and back. The clothing did not protect women from the cold.

Inadequate medical attention meant the women quickly became skilled in preserving the lives of fellow inmates. In addition to nursing, they refashioned clothing from discarded items and stretched limited food supplies. Traditional homemaking skills helped them overcome the overcrowded and unsanitary conditions and helped reduce their vulnerability to disease and death.

The SS carried out executions near the crematorium. The women were shot naked, as in other camps. An extra ration of alcohol for the SS and the return of the women's clothing were signs that an execution had taken place. The shock of the executions was sometimes fatal to the women who witnessed them. Some collapsed and died a few days later from what they had seen.
Appendix I – SLAVE LABOUR

The women of Ravensbrück constructed buildings and roads, dug ditches, cleared forests, did the plumbing, made general repairs and worked on surrounding farms. One of the more difficult jobs was pulling a huge roller to pave the streets. The lack of protective clothing, especially in the winter, made conditions unbearable. Frostbite and death from exposure were frequent occurrences. Workdays were usually eleven hours or more, with few or no breaks, six days a week. The combination of long workdays and inadequate food left the women exhausted. Women frequently received beatings or were executed for even the most minor infractions. Solidarity among the women of a work detail was crucial to survival.

After September 1942, the Nazis established the policy of extermination through work, literally working them to death. The women provided slave labour for armaments factories like Krupp and Daimler-Benz and manufacturers like the Siemens Electrical Company. The SS calculated that one inmate, with an estimated lifespan of nine months, could produce a profit of 1,631 Reichmarks for the war effort.

Work in these factories offered better food and working conditions for those women who were selected based on aptitude, vision and finger dexterity tests. However, conditions in SS-owned textile workshops were harsh, making them one of the most disliked work details. Food was reduced over time and daily production quotas were repeatedly raised to the point of impossibility. Failure to meet a daily quota meant that a prisoner, or sometimes an entire team, would be beaten severely.

The administrative jobs in the camp offices were the most sought-after work assignment. Because the Nazis did not want to risk working near filthy, lice-infested and diseased prisoners, office workers lived in cleaner barracks and were given better food. These positions were filled mostly by Jehovah's Witnesses or other German-speaking inmates.

As a form of resistance, Ravensbrück inmates slowed production, pretended to make mistakes, and intentionally removed parts from machines. Women sewing buttons on uniforms left the threads un-knotted so they would fall off. French women working in factories routinely grabbed handfuls of parts and threw them into the forest as they marched back to camp. Although the penalty for sabotage was death and guards were trained to detect sabotage and work slowdowns, women still carried out defiant acts in almost every work detail.
Appendix J – SOLIDARITY & FRIENDSHIP

The Nazi’s uneven treatment of the different groups bred resentment and created antagonism. In addition, pre-existing national and religious prejudices aggravated the animosity and mistreatment at the hands of other inmates. Prisoners rarely stole from members of their own group but justified their thefts from others, especially from the German inmates. Despite these prejudices, some solidarity and mutual aid did occur.

The women could not survive long without friendships; yet friendships alone could not ensure survival. They formed family units that nurtured, protected, shared provisions and provided feelings of belonging. Often an older woman acted as a camp mother or Lagermutter, a protector and teacher of the younger women.

Family units took many risks and precautions to stay together. They protected each other against outsiders and nursed each other when ill. Many camp families were closed units that did not share resources or favours with outsiders. They held birthday parties, made handmade cards, gave gifts to each other and mourned the death of their members. For many, the love of those in their family became the reason and the means to survive. Some were units of only two, if one perished the other lost the will to live.

The inmates tried to relieve suffering and compensate for a lack of medical treatment by organizing an underground trade of medicines and making their own drugs. Women collected roots and herbs to make teas and used homemade remedies to treat illness and to alleviate suffering.

“Looking for Lice”
Drawing by Maria Hiszpanska-Neumann, Polish prisoner
Appendix K – PREGNANCY, ABORTIONS & CHILDBIRTH

From 1941-1943, the Nazis murdered most of the children born in Ravensbrück. One camp nurse, Gerda Quernheim, strangled the newborns with her own hands and delivered the child's remains in a small box to the furnace. Almost all of the 850 children born in Ravensbrück died. According to one survivor, some babies lived for a time because the women hid them in mattresses or carefully moved them from one barrack to another.

Some women were pregnant upon arrival at Ravensbrück; others, who were coerced into prostitution with the promise of freedom, became pregnant while at Ravensbrück. At first, all pregnant women were forced to have abortions, even those in the last months of their pregnancies. Later, they were sent away to deliver their babies, and returned to the camp without their infants.

Between September 1944 and April 1945, the policy changed and women, especially Polish political prisoners, were allowed to give birth. 551 babies were born but most died after only a few days due either to the unsanitary conditions or to starvation because their mothers were forced to return to work and could not feed them.

"Pregnant woman"
Drawing by Helen Ernst
German prisoner

Herzog, Monika: Ravensbrücker Zeichnungen
Appendix K - MEDICAL EXPERIMENTS / STERILIZATIONS

The medical experiments conducted in Ravensbrück on young, healthy Polish women as well as on Roma and Sinti children were among the worst carried out anywhere during the Holocaust. Prisoners were considered expendable and could be used for medical experiments without regard to the outcomes or the degree of suffering inflicted. This policy was a license for doctors and nurses to commit some of the most sadistic crimes of the Holocaust. Some were later tried for their crimes at Nuremberg, others returned to their medical practices after the war.

The secret NN block 17 held the Night and Fog prisoners who were also used in some of the medical experiments. Experiments carried out against the will of prisoners, without anaesthetic and after inflicting indescribable pain, were often fatal. Dr. Fritz Fischer and Dr. Karl Gebhardt selected mostly Polish women and girls in good health with very straight legs. Their limbs were amputated and attempts were made to transplant them onto other victims. Victims called ‘rabbits’ by other prisoners suffered excruciating pain, mutilation and permanent disability.

Nazi doctors performed sterilization experiments at Ravensbrück to find an effective means of sterilizing large numbers of women with the minimum amount of time and effort. Caustic chemicals were injected into the wombs of thousands of Jewish, Roma and Sinti women and girls. This procedure caused horrible pain, bleeding, and destroyed the reproductive organs of the victims. Clauberg determined that one doctor with ten assistants could sterilize 1,000 women a day. Many of the women sterilized in these experiments died from infections. All suffered untold mental and physical anguish.
GLOSSARY

Asocial
People considered socially unfit including, criminals, juvenile delinquents, homosexuals, prostitutes, vagrants, “work shy people,” drug addicts, Roma and Sinti (Gypsies). The Nazis believed asocial behavior was biologically determined and the result of intermarriage between different races. In the concentration camps asocials were identified by a black triangle on their clothing.

Bernadotte, Count Folke (1895-1948)
Vice-president of the Swedish Red Cross. Near the end of the war he negotiated with Heinrich Himmler, securing the release of tens of thousands of inmates from German concentration camps; particularly women from Ravensbrück.

Bloková
Each building in the Ravensbrück concentration camp consisted of two barracks, which were administered by a chief prisoner or “Blocková”. This was a position of advantage. Blockovas helped control inmates for the Nazis in exchange for better treatment.

Communism
A concept or system of society in which the collective community shares ownership in resources and the means of production. In theory, such societies provide for equal sharing of all work, according to ability, and all benefits, according to need. In 1848, Karl Marx, in collaboration with Friedrich Engels, published the Communist Manifesto, which provided the theoretical impetus for the Russian Bolshevik Revolution in 1917.

Concentration Camp
The Nazis established prison camps shortly after assuming power in 1933 to hold and isolate political opponents and those considered to be “racially” undesirable such as Jews and Gypsies. Most of the approximately 1800 camps were transit or labour camps. The first were Dachau, Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen. After the occupation of Poland, extermination camps were established for mass murder at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka, Sobibor, Belzec, Chelmno and Majdanek.

Crematorium / crematoria
Building at concentration camps that housed the ovens that burned murdered inmates.

Daimler-Benz
German automobile company that exploited concentration camp labour.

Death March
In retreating from Allied soldiers at the end of the war, Nazis forced large numbers of prisoners to march long distances under heavy guard and under intolerable conditions. Approximately a quarter of a million prisoners were murdered or otherwise died on these marches between the summer of 1944 and the end of the war.
Himmler, Heinrich (1900-1945)
As head of the SS and the secret police, Himmler had control over the vast network of Nazi concentration and extermination camps, the Einsatzgruppen, and the Gestapo. Himmler committed suicide in 1945, after his arrest.

Hitler, Adolf (1889-1945)

Holocaust
The mass murder of nearly 6 million European Jews by the Nazis and their collaborators during World War II. Many individuals and groups were persecuted and suffered during the Holocaust, but only the Jews were targeted for total "extermination". The term literally means a burnt sacrifice, or sacred burning. The biblical word "Shoah," meaning catastrophe, is the Hebrew equivalent.

Jehovah's Witnesses (Bibelforscher)
A religious sect, originating in the United States, organized by Charles Taze Russell. The Witnesses base their beliefs on the Bible and have no official ministers. Recognizing only the kingdom of God, the Witnesses refuse to salute the flag, to bear arms in war, and to participate in the affairs of government. This doctrine brought them into conflict with National Socialism. They were considered enemies of the state and were relentlessly persecuted.

Krupp Works
Primary armaments manufacturer for the German military. Krupp profited from the war, using slave labour from concentration camps in their factories and through the expropriation of Jewish businesses.

Lagermutter (Camp mothers)
At Ravensbrück, members of a distinct language group or nationality formed family units. Most had an older woman, however this woman was sometimes as young as thirty, that served as the camp mother, a protector and teacher to the younger women.

Mischlinge
German word meaning "half breed". Persons born of intermarriage, partly Jewish or Roma, as defined by German law.

Mittwerda
A fictional Nazi concentration camp. At Ravensbrück, female inmates selected by the Nazis to be gassed were told that they were going to be transferred to Mittwerda. This deception was an conscientious effort by the Nazis to avoid the possibility of prisoner resistance.
GLOSSARY

Nacht und Nebel (Night and Fog)
Secret order issued by Hitler on December 7, 1941, to seize "persons endangering German security" who were to then, supposedly, vanish without a trace, into the night and fog. NN prisoners often received the worst treatment within the concentration camp system.

Nazi
Name for the National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP)

Nazism
The ideology of the National Socialist German Workers Party and the party's system of rule from 1933 to 1945. Also a form of fascism. The ideology included: 1) anti-liberalism and anti-parliamentarianism, 2) anti-communism and anti-socialism; 3) the Fuhrer principle which replaced parliament with a hierarchical, dictatorship based on the concepts of leader and follower, command and obedience; 4) nationalism, 5) racism and anti-Semitism, 6) imperialism and 7) militarism.

Political
“Reds” or political inmates identified by a red triangle. These were often the most powerful and privileged inmates in the concentration camps due to their political solidarity, for example, communists, socialists and other political opponents of the Nazis. This group also included captured resistance fighters from various nations.

“Rabbits”
Term used in the Ravensbrück camp, which has two possible origins. Some historians believe it to be a generic term similar to “Guinea pig” used to label those inmates subjected by the Nazis to medical experimentation. Other historians attribute the term’s origin as being a label for those inmates who suffered particular medical experiments. Painful bone regeneration and transplantation experiments that resulted in the inmate hobbling, like a rabbit, while they walked.

Ravensbrück Concentration Camp
Ravensbrück was the only Nazi concentration camp built specifically for women and was the sister camp to Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen and Dachau. It was a profit-making centre, established for the dual purposes of “re-education” and slave labour. In the six years of Ravensbrück’s operation, 132,000 women and children passed through its gates. 117,000 had perished by the time the camp was liberated by the Soviets in 1945. It had the highest mortality rate of any concentration camp located in Germany. The women of Ravensbrück came from 23 different countries.

Red Cross
International organization, founded in 1863 according to the terms of the Geneva Convention to care for the wounded, sick and homeless during wartime. Its mandate later expanded to include the monitoring of humanitari-
an international law. The Red Cross attempted to assess conditions in prison and concentration camps during the war but was refused entry by the Nazis. After the war the Red Cross assisted in tracing survivors, in family unification and resettlement.

**Resistance**

Opposition to the Nazis in Germany and occupied countries. Included partisan groups, French resistance groups, the Jewish Fighting Organization in Poland and exiled governments of defeated nations. Some attacked Nazi troops, communication and transportation or helped persecuted peoples hide or escape. Spiritual resistance was expressed in the practice of religion, art, music and literature. Jewish armed resistance occurred in some ghettos and concentration camps.

**Revier**

Term used in concentration camps to identify the infirmary or hospital. Located in a separate section of the camp, surrounded by barbed wire, it lacked medicine, hygiene and sanitation.

**Roma and Sinti (Gypsy)**

A nomadic people, believed to have come originally from northwest India, from where they immigrated to Persia by the fourteenth century. Roma and Sinti, referring to two distinct groups, first appeared in Western Europe in the 15th century. By the 16th century, they had spread throughout Europe, where they were persecuted. The Roma and Sinti occupied a special place in Nazi racist theories. It is believed that approximately 500,000 perished during the Holocaust.

**Sachsenhausen**

Concentration camp outside of Berlin opened in 1936. Male inmates from Sachsenhausen were forced to build the Ravensbrück camp. Sachsenhausen was liberated by the Soviets on April 22, 1945.

**Schmucksücke**

German term meaning “piece of jewelry”. The Nazis labeled male inmates “stucke” or “pieces”. This term indicated German contempt for the humanity of their prisoners, part of a Nazi policy of dehumanization directed at inmates. Female inmates were identified as a “piece of jewelry”, a feminized version of the original labeling.

**Selection / Selektion**

The process of choosing victims to be killed in the concentration camps. These “selections” targeted women, children, the elderly and those physically unfit for slave labour. Medical personnel often carried out the selections.

**Siemens Electric Company**

German electrical company that used concentration camp labour and assumed an industry leadership role with the SS. Siemens established a factory adjoining the Ravensbrück concentration camp, using female inmates as slave labour.
GLOSSARY

Slavs
Largest ethnic-linguistic group of peoples inhabiting mainly eastern, southeastern and east central Europe. Religiously, they belong to either the Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox Church. The Nazis considered them as subhuman and worthy only of domination by the German state and people.

SS
Abbreviation for Schutzstaffel (Defense Protective Units), usually written with two lightning symbols. Initially established as Hitler’s personal bodyguard, the SS was transformed into a terrorist organization by Heinrich Himmler. The organization is best known for its role in the destruction of European Jewry.

Sterilization
A surgical procedure that prevents reproduction by the total or partial removal of the reproductive organs.

Stubova
An inmate supervisor who was in charge of one of the barracks in a concentration camp. As a position of advantage this inmate received special treatment in exchange for their role in the administration of inmates.

“The Bunker”
Building in the Ravensbrück concentration camp designated as the punishment block. Prisoners sent there were cruelly beaten by wardens, confined to extremely small cells and forced to go for long periods without food. The majority of prisoners who were sent there did not survive.

Third Reich
Term given by Hitler to his regime (1933-1945), which was to last “a thousand years” but lasted only twelve. The first Reich was the Holy Roman Empire; the second was the Kaiser Reich.

Toilet Radio
Term used by the inmates of Ravensbrück for a communication network, which spread news and information. Women shared information and news about the camp and outside world while in the latrine, the one place in the camp free from Nazi supervision.

Tuberculosis
An infectious disease, usually attacking the lungs.

Typhus
An infectious fever often spread by lice and fleas, that thrives under unsanitary, crowded conditions. It was very common in concentration camps and a common cause of death.

Uckermark
Youth concentration camp at Ravensbrück. In December 1944, this camp was converted to a killing centre for women who were no longer able to work.
RAVENSBURK: A Bibliography

BOOKS

Memoir of Romanian born Holocaust survivor Seren Tuvel. Tells a story of the destruction of ordinary life, the terror of casual inhumanity, and the dignity of persevering courage and endurance, as anti-Semitism infested central and Eastern Europe. Because of her expertise in dressmaking, Seren gained entry into the highest reaches of Romanian society. However, on a visit to her family in Transylvania, Seren was arrested and sent to Ravensbrück.

Milena Jesenska was a politically committed journalist who was imprisoned in Ravensbrück for her open opposition to Hitler. Recalls her friendship at Ravensbrück with Margarete Buber-Neumann, a fellow political prisoner. The author interweaves images of Ravensbrück with episodes from Milena’s life.

When the Germans occupied Paris in the summer of 1940, Genevieve de Gaulle immediately joined the Underground. Three years later, she was arrested and sent to Ravensbrück. She was liberated in 1945 after a year-and-a-half imprisonment. This memoir of her experience tells the story of her endurance and the test of her faith.

Reconstructs the everyday life of the only all-women’s labour concentration camp in the Nazi system. A study of the social dynamics of the women prisoners, their relationships with one another, and, to a lesser extent, with their SS masters. Also examines the experience of children and the women’s attempts to shield them from the worst of camp life.

The first book in English that tells the stories of the Jewish female victims of Ravensbrück, placing them in the context of the camp’s general background, a discussion of gender, and memorialization of the camp’s victims. Based on the author’s 22 years of research on the camp, interviews with an unpublished memoirs by survivors, and visits to the camp memorial and archives in Europe, Israel, and the United States.

The author is the daughter of a Jewish Holocaust survivor, who while exploring her family's history, discovered the similarities between the fate of the Jewish people and the Gypsies. The Nazis selected both peoples for extermination on racial grounds. The story of a Gypsy family is set against the backdrop of a Jewish one, detailing and examining their shared sufferings under the Nazis.

An eyewitness account of the only all-women’s concentration camp in the Third Reich. Through her own notes that she secretly kept, and an examination of camp documents, Tillion reconstructs exactly how Ravensbrück operated and the ends, political and pathological, that it served. Describes how the camp differed from the men’s and why the women were better able to survive.

**OTHER WOMEN’S MEMOIRS**


This trilogy is a unique and moving memoir of life in the concentration camps, written by a French female resistance leader. Delbo has distilled her memories in taut and gripping prose. Includes vignettes, poems and prose that speak of the horror and the heroism, and stands as a testament and a powerful evocation of the Holocaust.


A classic of Holocaust literature, *All But My Life* tells the moving story of a young woman’s three horrendous years as a slave labourer under the Nazis. Explores some wonderful acts of decency and normalcy and stands as an ultimate lesson in humanity, hope, and friendship.


Memoir of the life of a young Hungarian Jew and her sisters interned in Auschwitz, their struggle to survive, and their daring escape from a death march on route to Bergen Belsen. In 1944, Isabella and her family were arrested and deported to Auschwitz where they encountered Dr. Josef Mengele. A recurring theme is the triumph of love over hate.


One of the most powerful testimonies to come from the women’s lager at Auschwitz-Birkenau. It consists of six narratives, each revolving around the specifically feminine aspects of the prisoners’ miserable existence in the camp. The astonishing stories tell of the women who lived and suffered alongside Millu. Examines the violence and tragedy, but also the resistance and the endurance of the human spirit.

**CATALOGUES / CURRICULA**


Curriculum examines the representation of women in Holocaust literature.
Three novellas and a short story, whose main characters are women. The four works *Crossing the Red Sea* by Zofia Romanowiczowa, *Eugenia* by Ida Fink, *Tzili and Katerina* by Aharon Apelfeld were written by survivors who were children or teenagers during the war. Includes extended literary analysis and questions for further study. VHEC Library.


**VIDEOS**

*Ravensbrück*. Black & White. 17.30 minutes. VHEC Library. This video is an edited version of a documentary provided by the Ravensbrück Museum and was used as research for the VHEC’s exhibit *Ravensbrück: Forgotten Women of the Holocaust*. Provides a history of the women’s camp and the 34 satellite camps. From 1939 to 1942, the number of inmates grew from 2,000 to 10,800. In 1944, another 70,000 inmates were brought there.

*Sisters in Resistance*. Colour, 60 Minutes. VHEC Library. This compelling documentary shares the story of four French women of uncommon courage who, in their teens and twenties, risked their lives to fight the Nazi occupation of their country. Neither Jews nor Communists, they were in no danger of arrest before they joined the Resistance. Within two years all four were arrested by the Gestapo and deported as political prisoners to Ravensbrück, where they helped one another survive. The film captures their amazing lives, and reveals an uncommon, intense bond of friendship that survives to this day.

**WEBSITES**

*The Ravensbrück Memorial Museum*  
http://www.ravensbrueck.de  
The official site of the Ravensbrück Memorial Museum. Information in German, English, French, Italian and Polish, about the history of the camp and the different exhibits and memorials on site at Ravensbrück.

*Voices from Ravensbrück*  
http://pat-binder.de/ravensbrueck  
This site an art project created by Pat Binder, displays a selection of poems and sketches produced by the female inmates of Ravensbrück. It also contains interpretive text on the meaning behind the poems and short biographies on the authors, where available. German and English.

*Lund University Library – Voices from Ravensbrück*  
http://www.lub.lu.se/handskrift/projekt-ravensbruck  
Sweden’s Lund University’s extensive collection of Ravensbrück survivor testimony and artefacts. Includes interviews taken from Ravensbrück survivors rescued by the Swedish Red Cross after their arrival in Sweden. Swedish and English.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Women of Ravensbrück
An online exhibit folio produced by the Florida Holocaust Museum to accompany their exhibit by the same name. Presents historical information, images and brief biographies of Ravensbrück survivors.

Women and the Holocaust
http://www.interlog.com/~mighty/
Explores the varying and unique experiences of women during the Holocaust. Examines the poetry and personal reflections of survivors, the thoughts of the second and third generation of women survivors, biographical sketches and book reviews.