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“YOU MUST LIVE, AND SHOW TO THE WORLD WHAT THEY HAVE
BEEN DOING HERE”:

THE SURVIVAL OF THE “RABBITS” OF RAVENSBRÜCK

by

Regina Coffey

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate School,
the College of Arts and Sciences
and the School of Humanities
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

The Polish women who would later come to be known as the *kroliki* or “rabbits” arrived at Ravensbrück with a death sentence. As a result of their work for underground organizations back in Poland, the camp administration planned to execute them within a few years. Because the women were already intended to die, they were chosen as the subjects of experimental operations in which muscles and bones in their legs were mutilated and many of them were injected with various diseases and bacteria. Most of the rabbits survived the experiments, though many were permanently crippled, and several suffered from additional medical issues.

The camp doctors later attempted to claim that the operations were an alternative to the death sentence, but the evidence suggests otherwise. The rabbits fought back by smuggling letters out of the camp, seeking to ensure their survival by making their plight known and asking that outside groups pressure the camp authorities. They also received assistance from other prisoners, who secretly acquired food and medicine for them and helped hide them when the authorities decided to round them up for execution. Between the rabbits’ efforts to ensure their survival and the support of the majority of the camp, most of the rabbits were able to survive and tell their story to the world. This thesis argues that the rabbits’ open defiance inspired large scale support in the camp, a story that is rare in the existing historiography and contributes to scholars’ examination of the meaning of resistance.

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CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

The year was 1945, and the Red Army was quickly approaching Ravensbrück. The majority of the prisoners were preparing to leave the camp, either on a transport going further into Germany or on one of the Red Cross busses that were evacuating groups of prisoners to Sweden. The camp itself was overcrowded with huge numbers of prisoners—women and children who had been brought from Warsaw after the Warsaw Uprising and prisoners from other concentration camps who had been evacuated ahead of those camps' liberation—and there was a great deal of confusion and disorganization. At the same time, the camp administration found itself working to get rid of as much evidence of its crimes as possible. They destroyed many of the camp's records and set out to get rid of the proof of the medical atrocities that had occurred in the camp hospital. The victims of these atrocities, however, proved unexpectedly difficult to eliminate.

The Nazi doctors who worked in a nearby sanatorium had used the camp hospital as the site of a series of horrific medical experiments on the legs of a group of seventy-four Polish women. The majority of these women had survived the experiments themselves, but with the enemy approaching the camp, it suddenly became very important to the administration to ensure that the victims of the experiments, who had come to be known in the camp as the rabbits, did not fall into the hands of the enemy. To ensure this, the administration called for the rabbits to prepare to be transported out of the camp, claiming that they would be taken to the camp of Gross-Rosen by train, as many of them had significant damage to their legs because of the operations and would therefore be unable to leave on foot with the other women.

The rabbits, however, knew that this story about a transport to another camp was a lie—the camp in question had already been liberated. Furthermore, the Ravensbrück administration had made no secret of the fact that the rabbits were never intended to survive the war. Knowing this, the rabbits decided as a group that they would not report as ordered, that they would leave the camp only in the company of the rest of the women. They would do everything in their power to survive the war and bear witness. This, perhaps, was not surprising—they had been brought to Ravensbrück because of their participation in resistance organizations back in Poland, after all, so they were hardly strangers to the idea of defying the Nazis, and they had already proven themselves willing to stand up to the camp administration on numerous occasions. What was surprising was when the guards attempted to round them up by force, every single rabbit was able to get away. They disappeared into the crowd or into hiding places. Despite their impaired mobility, the guards were unable to retrieve them.

This was partially due to the extreme overcrowding and disorder in the camp, which made it nearly impossible for the administration to keep track of every prisoner as efficiently as they had once been able to, but it was also due to the fact that the rabbits had prepared for this occasion. They had hiding places prepared, they had allies among the masses of prisoners who would let them slip into another barrack and pretend they belonged there, and, most remarkably of all, they had the assistance of a group of Red Army women—technically prisoners of war, though not treated as such by the Germans—who managed to temporarily cut the power to the lights illuminating the roll call square on multiple occasions, giving the rabbits a head start when they needed to run.

Miraculously, all of the rabbits who had survived up to this point managed to avoid detection until the camp was liberated. Several were able to smuggle themselves into transports leaving Ravensbrück, while others remained in hiding until Soviet forces arrived to liberate the camp. The rabbits showed extraordinary ingenuity in finding ways to stay alive at this time, but what was particularly remarkable was the fact that almost the entire rest of the camp supported them, determined that the women who had endured so much would survive to the end of the war to tell their story to the world, defying the Nazis by living on.

The rabbits had arrived at Ravensbrück three years before with death sentences. As a result of their work for underground organizations back in Poland, the camp administration had determined that they would, at some point, be executed. Because the women were already intended to die, however, it was decided that before their sentences were carried out, they would be the subjects of experimental operations in which muscles and bones in their legs were mutilated and many of them were injected with various diseases and bacteria. Most of the rabbits survived the experiments, though many were permanently crippled, and several suffered from additional medical issues.

The camp doctors later attempted to claim that the operations were an alternative to the death sentence, but the evidence suggests otherwise—not only did the administration attempt to round up the rabbits as liberation approached, but several of the rabbits were executed shortly after their operations. The rabbits fought back by smuggling letters out of the camp, seeking to ensure their survival by making their plight known and asking that outside groups pressure the camp authorities. They also received assistance from other prisoners, who secretly acquired food and medicine for them and

helped hide them when the authorities decided to round them up for execution. Between the rabbits' efforts to ensure their survival and the support of the majority of the camp, most of the rabbits were able to survive and tell their story to the world. Grounded in research in several US and European archives and in the postwar writings of several Ravensbrück survivors, this thesis argues that the rabbits' open defiance inspired large scale support in the camp, which ultimately enabled them to survive despite the camp administration's attempts to kill them, a story that is rare in the existing historiography and contributes to scholars' examination of the concept of survival as a form of resistance.

The definition of resistance can be difficult to pin down and has been subject to much debate. Numerous scholars have examined different angles of resistance to the Holocaust, from armed rebellion to simple survival. The different dimensions of resistance were examined by James C. Scott in his book *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, which although not specifically discussing the Holocaust, examined ways that certain "everyday" actions and survival strategies could be considered acts of resistance against oppressive authority even when these actions were not intended to be revolutionary.¹ Other scholars have examined the concept of survival as resistance. For example, Tadeusz Debski in his book *A Battlefield of Ideas: Nazi Concentration Camps and their Polish Prisoners* argues that since the Nazis' aim was to turn their prisoners into mindlessly obedient slaves and ultimately exterminate them, struggling to survive and retain one's sense of identity could be considered an act of

¹ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).

resistance against this agenda even in the absence of more overt defiant acts.² In the case of the rabbits, although they were not able to participate in any kind of armed resistance and did not openly fight against the administration, their efforts to preserve their lives or protest against the administration's actions were often perceived as acts of resistance by their fellow prisoners, the administration, and the rabbits themselves. Particularly prevalent in the rabbits' story is the idea that they needed to bear witness to the crimes of the Nazi doctors at Ravensbrück, reflected in their efforts to smuggle information out of the camp as well as the camp's efforts to hide the rabbits in order to prevent the administration from executing them and covering up the evidence of the operations.

Another important angle of analysis in regard to the rabbits is gender. Unlike the majority of victims of Nazi medical experiments, the rabbits were all women, and they were imprisoned in an entirely female concentration camp. Although there was a good deal of overlap between the suffering experienced by male and female concentration camp prisoners—hard labor, inadequate food, dehumanization, etc.—several scholars have argued that there were also significant differences between the experiences of men and women in the concentration camps. Nechama Tec, for example, argues in *Resilience and Courage: Women, Men, and the Holocaust* that women and men reacted to their situations in very different ways due to their differing prewar experiences. For example, male prisoners struggled more with the loss of their social status because they considered their social status to be something they had personally worked for. Women, on the other hand, were less affected by the loss of status, since theirs had depended more on their

² Tadeusz Debski, *A Battlefield of Ideas: Nazi Concentration Camps and their Polish Prisoners* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

husbands and fathers than on their own work, and were instead more affected by having their hair shaved (which they perceived as an attack on their femininity) and being separated from their husbands and children.³ Other studies of the concentration camp system have made similar arguments regarding the experiences of female prisoners. Certain elements of the exclusively female experience in Ravensbrück are discussed in Johanna Bergqvist Rydén's article "When Bereaved of Everything: Objects from the Concentration Camp of Ravensbrück as Expressions of Resistance, Memory, and Identity."⁴ Rydén focuses on the interactions between the women of Ravensbrück and the secret creation and exchange of illegal objects—drawings, carved figures, etc.—as both a means of individual expression and as emblems of close relationships with other prisoners. Many of these observations on the female experience in the concentration camps can be applied to the rabbits as well, although their concentration camp experience was obviously atypical.

The Ravensbrück rabbits make an appearance in most works that have to do with the chronology of the camp. Sometimes they get a chapter or two of focus; more often, they appear from time to time throughout the account, particularly in the later parts of the camp's history when much of the prisoner population worked to hide them from the authorities. Despite their historical significance and their involvement in many aspects of camp life, however, there has been remarkably little scholarship focusing exclusively on the rabbits themselves, and most of that scholarship is focused primarily on the medical

³ Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage: Women, Men, and the Holocaust*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).

⁴ Johanna Bergqvist Rydén, "When Bereaved of Everything: Objects from the Concentration Camp of Ravensbrück as Expressions of Resistance, Memory, and Identity," *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 22, no. 3 (2018): 511-530.

experiments that were conducted on them, rather than on their activities outside of the camp hospital.

Most of the scholarship on Ravensbrück that deals with these women can be divided into two groups: works which deal primarily with the camp itself—usually focusing on some social group or aspect of camp organization—and tell a story that the rabbits happen to feature in to one degree or another, and works that focus on the medical aspect of the rabbits' story. This thesis will fit more into the first category, examining the place of the rabbits in the social structure of the camp and how this ultimately enabled the majority of them to survive, although the camp hospital and particularly its personnel will most certainly play a role as well.

Foremost among the works in the first group is Sarah Helm's *Ravensbrück: Life and Death in Hitler's Concentration Camp for Women*, a comprehensive history of camp.⁵ She covers both the major events in the history of Ravensbrück as well as the details of its social organization. The rabbits come up at several points in the book, and she discusses both their experiences in the camp and their interactions with other groups. However, she is more focused on telling the overall story rather than making a particular argument about the rabbits. Jack J. Morrison's *Ravensbrück: Everyday Life in a Women's Concentration Camp* is similarly focused on the details of camp life, particularly camp culture and the interactions between different groups, while the rabbits only occasionally enter the story.⁶ Meanwhile, in *A Train in Winter: An Extraordinary Story of Women*,

⁵ Sarah Helm, *Ravensbrück: Life and Death in Hitler's Concentration Camp for Women*, (New York: Penguin Random House LLC, 2014).

⁶ Jack J. Morrison, *Ravensbrück: Everyday Life in a Women's Concentration Camp 1939-45*, (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2000).

Friendship, and Resistance in Occupied France, Caroline Moorehead focuses primarily on a different group of prisoners—a transport of Frenchwomen who arrived at the camp in the latter half of its existence.⁷ She discussed the interactions between the Frenchwomen and the rabbits, who the Frenchwomen sometimes assisted and regularly interacted with, a relationship also discussed in the memoir of Wanda Połtawska, one of the rabbits.⁸ Most of these works and others like them are primarily concerned with the structure of the camp rather than the details of any particular group; however, in the process, they frequently demonstrate the point made by Anna Pawełczyńska: concentration camps were deliberately structured to ensure that any one group—be it a national or linguistic group, a particular transport of prisoners, or one of the many additional groups that the prisoners were divided into by the administration—was outnumbered by the remaining mass of prisoners not in their group. This was supposed to make it psychologically more difficult for any one group to stand up to the administration or to work with others because of the differences.⁹ Authors such as Józef Garliński and Herman Langbein, meanwhile, examine how prisoners were sometimes able to overcome this obstacle and form resistance organizations, frequently among prisoners of the same national group but sometimes by prisoners of different nationalities.¹⁰ Though these examples of resistance organizations, as well as less organized resistance like the

⁷ Caroline Moorehead, *A Train in Winter: An Extraordinary Story of Women, Friendship, and Resistance in Occupied France*, (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2011).

⁸ Wanda Połtawska, *And I Am Afraid of my Dreams* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 2013).

⁹ Anna Pawełczyńska, *Values and Violence in Auschwitz: A Sociological Analysis*, trans. Catherine S. Leach (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979).

¹⁰ Józef Garliński, *Fighting Auschwitz: The Resistance Movement in the Concentration Camp* (London: Julian Friedmann Publishers Ltd., 1975); Herman Langbein, *Against All Hope: Resistance in the Nazi Concentration Camps*, (New York: Paragon House, 1994).

majority of Ravensbrück helping hide the rabbits, are still the exception rather than the rule, they seem to be more common than the existing historiography recognizes.

Similarly, Tadeusz Debski's abovementioned work *A Battlefield of Ideas: Nazi Concentration Camps and their Polish Prisoners* does not focus on any one specific camp, but he makes a point of including the perspective of both men and women prisoners across the concentration camp system.¹¹ His focus on the mindset of Polish prisoners, particularly political prisoners, is quite applicable to the case of the rabbits, who were initially arrested for membership in underground organizations. Many of these women conceptualized their situation within the camp as a continuation of the fight against Germany that they had already started back home—a story which the rabbits themselves relay in *Beyond Human Endurance: The Ravensbrück Women Tell Their Stories*, a published collection of testimonies by twenty of the rabbits.¹²

Other sources address the medical aspect of the rabbits' experiences and the hospital staff with whom they regularly interacted—both the Nazi doctors who conducted the experiments and the prisoner doctors and nurses who tried to secretly help the rabbits however they could. There have been numerous works published regarding Nazi doctors and the medical experiments performed in concentration camp hospitals, as well as works dealing with the camp hospitals themselves and the prisoners who worked as doctors, nurses, and other personnel within them. Often, these hospitals were one of the main centers of resistance within the camps due to the comparatively safe work conditions, privileged status of prisoner doctors, and opportunities for both impromptu and organized

¹¹ Tadeusz Debski, *A Battlefield of Ideas*.

¹² Wanda Symonowicz, *Beyond Human Endurance: The Ravensbrück Women Tell Their Stories* (Warsaw: Interpress Publishers, 1970).

acts of resistance. At the same time, however, these hospitals were also often the sites of medical atrocities. Through the testimonies of doctors and nurses in various concentration camp hospitals, Roger A. Ritvo and Diane M. Plotkin's *Sisters in Sorrow: Voices of Care in the Holocaust* examines the difficult position that hospital personnel found themselves in, trying to save as many people as possible (generally with inadequate or nonexistent medical resources) while at the same time being forced to witness and sometimes participate in various atrocities, about which they often could do nothing without getting killed.¹³ Other works examine the Nazi doctors themselves and the atrocities they committed. Paul Julian Weindling's *Nazi Medicine and the Nuremberg Trials: From Medical War Crimes to Informed Consent*, for example, looks at the impact that Nazi medical experiments had on future ideas about medical ethics.¹⁴ Meanwhile, in "The Nadir of Nursing: Nurse-Perpetrators of the Ravensbrück Concentration Camp" Susan Benedict examines the SS nurses who worked in the camp hospital at Ravensbrück, several of whom were involved in the experiments done on the rabbits.¹⁵ Other books such as Mitscherlich and Mielke's *The Death Doctors* and Christian Bernadac's *Devil's Doctors* look at the experiments themselves and the people who performed them.¹⁶

One major commonality among the books dealing with the medical aspect of the rabbits' experience is that these sources tend to focus more on either the details of the

¹³ Roger A. Ritvo and Diane M. Plotkin, *Sisters in Sorrow: Voices of Care in the Holocaust* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1998).

¹⁴ Paul Julian Weindling, *Nazi Medicine and the Nuremberg Trials: From Medical War Crimes to Informed Consent* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

¹⁵ Susan Benedict, "The Nadir of Nursing: Nurse-Perpetrators of the Ravensbrück Concentration Camp," *Nursing History Review* 11 (2003), 129-146.

¹⁶ A. Mitscherlich and F. Mielke, *The Death Doctors*, trans. James Cleugh (London: Elek Books, 1962); Christian Bernadac, *Devil's Doctors: Medical Experiments on Human Subjects in Concentration Camps*, (Geneva: Ferni Publishing House, 1978).

experiments or on the doctors who performed the experiments, rather than on the group of rabbits and their experiences. Likewise, while the rabbits frequently appear in works dealing with Ravensbrück as a whole, these works tend to be focused on the overall history of the camp or on a particular element of the social structure, rather than on the rabbits themselves. The lives of these women outside of the hospital have received little scholarly attention outside of mentions of significant events—mainly their protests against the experiments and their later refusal to report for transport out of the camp—in sources chronicling the history of the camp. The question of how the overwhelming majority of a group which was slated to die from the time they arrived in the camp and which the administration had a vested interest in ensuring would not survive to tell their stories, was able to survive the war despite the camp administration attempting to kill them has been largely overlooked. While the medical experiments done on the rabbits are undeniably important, this thesis will focus primarily on the activities of the rabbits outside of the hospital to examine how their actions and their interactions with the rest of the camp led to unprecedented displays of solidarity from the rest of the camp that allowed the group to survive. Although concentration camp resistance has been studied before, these works have tended to focus on larger-scale resistance organizations, primarily in the more famous men's camps such as Auschwitz. The case of the Ravensbrück rabbits, however, indicates the significance of smaller-scale and non-organized resistance, which in this situation allowed an entire group of prisoners to survive the Nazis' active attempts to exterminate them.

The main primary sources used for this thesis are the *Witnessing Genocide* and *Chronicles of Terror* collections of testimonies and interviews that were collected from

Polish survivors of various concentration camps. The Witnessing Genocide testimonies were collected from concentration camp survivors who were evacuated to Sweden after liberation, including many of the survivors of Ravensbrück. Several of the rabbits were interviewed, as well as numerous Ravensbrück prisoners who interacted with them. The Chronicles of Terror collection, meanwhile, contains statements collected in the years following the war, mostly in connection with trials of those involved with the Gestapo and the concentration camps. A number of these statements come from the rabbits themselves, as well as several people who regularly interacted with them—most notably the nurse Zofia Mączka, who recorded as much data as possible about the rabbits and the experiments that were performed on them while she worked as a nurse and radiologist in the camp hospital. The collection also includes several reports from doctors’ examinations of the rabbits after their liberation. Both the Chronicles of Terror and Witnessing Genocide collections have been digitized and are available online, and although almost all of the statements and reports were originally in Polish, the Polish Research Institute in Lund and the Witold Pilecki Institute of Solidarity and Valor have both begun projects to translate their documents into English.

Another source of details on the experiences of the rabbits is the book *Beyond Human Endurance: the Ravensbrück Women Tell Their Stories*, which contains additional testimonies from twenty of the rabbits, edited and published in one book by Wanda Symonowicz.¹⁷ As these testimonies were not collected for the purpose of gathering details on war crimes but rather to get the story of the rabbits’ experiences out

¹⁷ Wanda Symonowicz, *Beyond Human Endurance: The Ravensbrück Women Tell Their Stories*, (Warsaw: Interpress Publishers, 1970).

to the world, they include more information on the lives of the rabbits outside of the hospital, including the texts of several of the letters smuggled out of the camp by a group of the rabbits. One of this group's members, Wanda Poławska, also published a memoir entitled *And I Am Afraid of My Dreams* which discusses her experiences in the camp.¹⁸ Another useful memoir is *Michelangelo in Ravensbrück: One Woman's War Against the Nazis*, the memoir of Karolina Lanckorońska, a high-ranking member of the Polish resistance who interacted with the rabbits when she was brought to Ravensbrück and smuggled information about their situation to the outside world.¹⁹

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum houses the Caroline Ferriday Collection. The collection includes documents from the project run by Caroline Ferriday to bring the rabbits to the United States for free medical treatment of the lasting complications caused by their operations in the camp. This collection includes Ferriday's correspondence with the rabbits about their postwar experiences as well as the surveys of personal details, medical data, and information regarding their postwar lives and attempts to get financial assistance that many of the rabbits filled out in preparation for their trip. The Helena Piasecka Collection, meanwhile, contains newspaper clippings from various newspapers and magazines regarding this program and the overall situation of the rabbits after the war.

Finally, the transcripts from the Doctors' Trial contain additional information regarding the experiments themselves as well as details regarding the rabbits' status in the camp and the doctors' attempts to argue that the experiments were done in lieu of the

¹⁸ Wanda Poławska, *And I Am Afraid of My Dreams*, (New York: Hippocrene Books, 2013).

¹⁹ Karolina Lanckorońska, *Michelangelo in Ravensbrück: One Woman's War Against the Nazis*, (Cambridge MA: Da Capo Press, 2007).

death sentence (and that, consequently, the doctors performing the experiments were saving the victims from being executed). These transcripts not only give information about the experiments that were conducted but also show how the rabbits were treated by the doctors and the camp administration.

The second chapter of this thesis will argue that although the rabbits were relatively unpopular at the time of their arrival at Ravensbrück—largely due to the camp administration’s efforts to paint them as either dangerous criminals or willing collaborators, depending on the audience—the experimental operations caused them to start gaining some sympathy from other prisoners. Drawing on Anna Pawełczyńska’s theory of the psychological relativity of numbers and Eugen Kogon’s observations regarding the theories behind the organization of concentration camps, this chapter will discuss how the rabbits were initially treated and how they interacted with other prisoners. This will include general information about group interaction and their position in the camp, rumors spread by the camp administration, and the rabbits’ interactions with privileged prisoners. These initial interactions will be later be contrasted with the widespread support they later received. This chapter will then briefly overview the selection of the rabbits for experimental operations and the roles played by the doctors and prisoner medical personnel. This will draw on Zofia Mączka’s testimony regarding her experiences in the camp and the data she collected regarding the experiments, as well as the reports of the rabbits themselves. This chapter will also address the German claim, discussed at length in the Doctor’s Trial, that the operations were supposed to be a replacement for the death penalty. Finally, this chapter will discuss how other prisoners reacted to the experiments and the help that the rabbits received from other prisoners

immediately following the operations. Most of this initial sympathy came from prisoners who already regularly interacted with them, primarily members of their transport and other Polish prisoners. This was partially because the operations were initially not well-known in the camp and partially because of the rumors the administration spread about the rabbits having undergone the procedures willingly in exchange for better treatment and/or to avoid execution.

The main argument for the third chapter will be that, far from being passive victims, the rabbits actively worked to preserve their own lives by attempting to convince the camp administration to stop its illegal experiments on them (and later attempted, without success, to outright refuse to report for future operations). They also spent a considerable amount of time and effort finding ways to smuggle information about the operations out of the camp, in the form of letters and, later, photographs of the scars from the operations in an effort to prove what was going on, ask for assistance from their families and the Polish Underground State, and request that outside organizations put pressure on the camp administration to stop the operations and not execute the rabbits. This chapter in particular will utilize Tadeusz Debski's argument about the way that Polish prisoners, particularly those who had previously been members of underground organizations, perceived their experiences in the concentration camps as a continuation of the struggle against Germany. Chronologically, this chapter will focus on the later experiments and the time after the experiments ended up to the point where the evacuation of the camp and destruction of as much evidence of atrocities as possible (which would include the execution of the rabbits) was being planned. The activities of the rabbits outside of the hospital, and particularly the instances in which they openly

protest the actions of the camp administration and Nazi doctors, will ultimately be the catalyst for the more widespread support that the rabbits eventually received from the rest of the camp, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

The final chapter will focus on how the rest of the camp grew to sympathize with and support the rabbits, arguing that although the operations gained the rabbits some sympathy from other groups of prisoners, it was their defiance of the camp administration, coupled with the administration's attempts to hide the evidence of the medical experiments toward the end of the war, which caused the majority of the prisoners to choose to actively try to protect the rabbits from execution. Utilizing Pawełczyńska and Debski's arguments as well as Garliński and Langbein's discussions of prisoner resistance, this chapter will discuss how the prevailing opinions of the rest of the camp toward the rabbits changed over time due to the rabbits' protests of the camp administration's actions and, at times, open defiance, both in regard to the experiments themselves as well as to other situations, such as their protest of the attempts to persuade Polish prisoners to volunteer to be sent to brothels in other concentration camps. These changing opinions were initially reflected in the interactions between the rabbits and the rest of the camp and in the various types of support that the rabbits received from other prisoners. Later, as the Soviet army approached and the camp administration began thinking about how to conceal the evidence of the atrocities that had been committed at Ravensbrück, this support took the form of widespread efforts to protect the rabbits from execution, either by hiding them from the administration, assisting them in swapping identities with other prisoners, and sometimes by smuggling them into outgoing transports. These efforts, sparked by the sympathies of the majority of the camp with the

rabbits as well as the desire to ensure that the rest of the world would learn what had happened to them, ultimately enabled the majority of the group to survive to liberation.

CHAPTER II – ARRIVAL AND OPERATIONS

In the weeks leading up to Ravensbrück's liberation, large numbers of prisoners of varying nationalities conspired to hide the rabbits from the camp guards. Even more prisoners, while not actively involved in hiding the rabbits, chose not to turn them over, even to win the favor of the administration. Not a single person betrayed the rabbits to the authorities. The group was well-known and generally well-regarded in the camp, and with liberation approaching, it seemed that most of the camp wanted to see the rabbits survive so that they could tell their story to the world.

When the rabbits had arrived at the camp a little over three and a half years before, it had been a completely different story. They had gotten along well enough with other Polish political prisoners, but they were kept fairly isolated by the camp administration, restricted to certain living blocks and work assignments within the camp. Most of the interactions they reported having with prisoners of other nationalities were unpleasant, a state of affairs that the camp administration did its best to encourage. Though the experimental operations that the group was subjected to had profoundly negative impacts on the women's health, however, these operations were also the catalyst for the improvement of the rabbits' position in the camp by gaining them the sympathy of other prisoners and setting the stage for the protests which would later gain them additional support.

The women who would become known as the rabbits arrived at Ravensbrück on September 23, 1941. Transported from prisons in Lublin and Warsaw, they had initially been arrested for their participation in resistance organizations back in Poland. They had already suffered from brutal conditions while in German custody—several had been sick

with typhus and other diseases while in prison, and most had been tortured by the Gestapo during their interrogations. The train ride itself had not been particularly horrific, at least not in comparison to the overcrowded cattle cars in which many concentration camp prisoners arrived. The women rode in passenger cars, each had her own seat, and most reported that the guards on the train had not treated them too badly. They were hungry, however, and thirsty, having received very little food and water during the two-day journey.²⁰ When they arrived at the train station in Fürstenberg, they were met at the station by SS guards with dogs, who abused the prisoners while loading them into trucks to be taken the rest of the way to Ravensbrück.

Upon arrival at the camp, the women of the Lublin transport went through the usual initiation: after being forced to stand in the roll-call square for much of the day, they were registered with the camp records office, and their clothes and other belongings were taken from them. Most of them had their hair shaved, something which they were particularly affected by, perceiving it as a personal attack against them as women.²¹ After this, they had showers, rough gynecological examinations, and then were given camp uniforms and sent to the quarantine block, where new prisoners stayed for their first few weeks in the camp before being assigned to regular barracks and sent to their new work details.²²

²⁰ “Zofia Sas-Hoszowska,” *Chronicles of Terror*, Witold Pilecki Institute of Solidarity and Valor, accessed August 10, 2019.

https://www.zapisyterroru.pl/dlibra/indexsearch?attId=61&startstr=_all&ipp=60&p=0.

²¹ “Jadwiga Bielska,” *Chronicles of Terror*, Witold Pilecki Institute of Solidarity and Valor, accessed June 20, 2019.

https://www.zapisyterroru.pl/dlibra/indexsearch?attId=61&startstr=_all&ipp=60&p=0.

²² “Zofia Stefaniak,” *Chronicles of Terror*, Witold Pilecki Institute of Solidarity and Valor, accessed August 10, 2019.

https://www.zapisyterroru.pl/dlibra/indexsearch?attId=61&startstr=_all&ipp=60&p=0.

Though Ravensbrück was unique in that it was the only major all-female concentration camp, it shared many characteristics of its organizational system with other camps. Prisoners were divided into various categories based on the reason that they were in the camp, with a colored triangle worn on the uniform as a visual indicator of a person's category. The Lublin transport wore red triangles to indicate their status as political prisoners. This automatically put them at odds with many of the professional criminals (green triangles) and asocials (black triangles, a catch-all category for social undesirables as well as women who did not quite fit neatly into any of the other categories) who tended to dominate the prisoner hierarchy. The administration favored these groups for privileged positions in the camp and encouraged them to abuse their power. As ideological enemies of the Nazi regime, political prisoners had long been a particular target for abuse, both by the administration and by the prisoners they favored. However, the political prisoner category also included women whose crimes that most people would hardly have considered political: women caught participating in the black market, thugs and their relatives, forced laborers who had been caught breaking some rule, and even prostitutes who had infected Germans with venereal disease.²³ In his writings on the organization of concentration camps, Eugen Kogon explained how the categorization of prisoners in such a confusing way was a deliberate move by the administration to keep the groups from becoming too homogenous (and therefore more able and inclined to cooperate) as well as to associate the political enemies of the Nazi

²³ "Krystyna Czyż," *Chronicles of Terror*, Witold Pilecki Institute of Solidarity and Valor, accessed June 20, 2019. https://www.zapisyterroru.pl/dlibra/indexsearch?attId=61&startstr=_all&ipp=60&p=0.

regime with more unsavory characters, lowering the general opinion of their character while also humiliating them personally.²⁴

In addition to these measures, the camp administration was also careful to place prisoners of one nationality in positions of power over prisoners of other nationalities. Prisoners such as the heads of work details or the women placed in charge of the living blocks, known to the Poles as *blokowe* (singular *blokowa*) were given special privileges and better treatment than the average prisoner. However, they were also encouraged and sometimes even required to abuse their power. Those who treated their charges too well and tried to help them could (and sometimes did) lose their privileged positions if the administration found out.²⁵ Policies such as these not only made it difficult for prisoners of one nationality to cooperate to improve their position in the camp but also made international cooperation more difficult, depriving newer prisoners of potential allies among those with more influence with the camp and giving the women a deliberately poor first impression of women of other nationalities, making them more inclined to mistrust and dislike foreigners in general.²⁶ Practices such as these also emphasized what sociologist Anna Pawełczyńska has termed the psychological relativity of numbers: the way that the camp administration mixed groups of prisoners to heighten the perception of differences between them and give each group (and individual) the impression that it was very small compared to the great mass of others. Members of this vague and threatening mass were made inaccessible and difficult to relate to by preexisting linguistic and

²⁴ Eugen Kogon, *The Theory and Practice of Hell: The German Concentration Camps and the System Behind Them*, trans. Heinz Norden (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1950), 37-38.

²⁵ "Natalia Chodkiewicz," Voices from Ravensbrück, Polish Research Institute in Lund, accessed June 20, 2019. <http://www.alvin-portal.org/alvin/view.jsf?dswid=-8035&pid=alvin-record%3A103736>.

²⁶ Pawełczyńska, *Values and Violence in Auschwitz*, 65.

cultural differences as well as the system of categorization, relative positions of privilege in the camp, and countless other factors that made each group distinct. This, in turn, made it more difficult for prisoners to organize and fight back.²⁷

The rabbits were chosen out of a transport exclusively composed of political prisoners. They came from various backgrounds in civilian life and ranged in age from teenagers (the youngest was fifteen) to a few in their thirties. What they had in common was their shared history of involvement in the Polish resistance, and, of course, their status as victims of horrific experimental medical operations done on their legs. The fact that they survived the war at all was remarkable in itself, but it becomes even more noteworthy when one looks at the particularly unfriendly welcome they received upon their arrival, as they were the targets of a concerted campaign by the administration to ensure that they were mistreated and unable to gain power in the camp. Though some prisoners outside their group, particularly other political Poles, did warm up to them, it was not until they were subjected to cruel medical experiments against their will that the general opinion began to shift from negative or, at best, neutral, to something more positive or at least deserving of sympathy.

Within the larger category of prisoners, the women of the Lublin transport were part of multiple groups, all of which placed them in unfavorable positions in the camp: they were Poles, they were political prisoners, and for a while, they were *new* prisoners (and therefore objects of scorn to those who had been in the camp longer). The Lublin transport also comprised a distinct group in the camp from the start. Unlike most Polish political prisoners, these women all had death sentences from the moment they arrived in

²⁷ Pawełczyńska, *Values and Violence in Auschwitz*, 84, 86.

the camp. The administration intended to execute the entire group over time after having them work in the camp for a while. To minimize the risk that some of these condemned prisoners would be able to escape before their sentences were carried out, the administration ruled that no member of this group could be assigned to any of the work details that went outside the camp complex, such as the groups that built roads or unloaded trains. After being shuffled around between assignments in the camp complex for a while, the majority of the transport eventually ended up in the camp's workshops, making uniforms or weaving straw to make boots for the German army on the Russian front. This work was less physically demanding than most of the assignments that took place outside the camp, and it had the advantage of taking place indoors where the prisoners would be sheltered from the weather, but it came with downsides: long hours, having to switch every two weeks between day shifts and the particularly hated night shifts, and most importantly, being under the constant, close supervision of cruel guards who would beat prisoners for every possible perceived infraction. Even something as minor as putting a sewing pin in one's collar to keep from losing it during the short lunch break was enough to earn a beating if it was noticed.²⁸ Polish prisoners were particularly singled out for special torment. For example, Eugenia Biega—a member of the Lublin transport, though not one of the ones chosen for the medical experiments—described how the German prisoners in the workshop helped the overseers arrange the bathroom breaks of the Polish women in the workshop in such a way that some of the women were not allowed to go all day. This torment was reserved exclusively for Poles; prisoners of other

²⁸ “Bogumiła Bąbińska-Dobrowolska,” *Chronicles of Terror*, Witold Pilecki Institute of Solidarity and Valor, accessed June 20, 2019. https://www.zapisyterroru.pl/dlibra/indexsearch?attId=61&startstr=_all&ipp=60&p=0.

nationalities in the workshop, though they still faced plenty of danger from the guards, were not singled out in this way.²⁹

In addition to restricting their movements to minimize the possibility of escape, the camp administration, in an effort to keep the Lublin transport isolated, also told the German prisoners and civilian workers in the area that the Lublin transport women were “criminals who murdered German soldiers, took out their eyes, etc.” to discourage them from getting too close.³⁰ They also regularly used insults to further vilify them, calling them “Polish bandits” and referring to the block they lived in as the “pirate block” or “bandit block” to further the impression that they were dangerous criminals rather than anti-Nazi political activists.³¹ Every so often, new rumors and waves of anti-Polish sentiment would spread through the camp after the administration received propaganda films and pamphlets from the German government that encouraged this sort of treatment.³²

The administration’s smear campaign against the Lublin transport almost certainly contributed to the less-than-warm welcome the women received in the camp. They did have support from some of the other political Poles in the camp, who tried to assist new arrivals. However, while some Poles had managed to get into privileged

²⁹ “Eugenia Biega,” *Chronicles of Terror*, Witold Pilecki Institute of Solidarity and Valor, accessed June 20, 2019.

https://www.zapisyterroru.pl/dlibra/indexsearch?attId=61&startstr=_all&ipp=60&p=0.

³⁰ “Władysława Dąbrowska,” *Chronicles of Terror*, Witold Pilecki Institute of Solidarity and Valor, accessed July 30, 2019.

https://www.zapisyterroru.pl/dlibra/indexsearch?attId=61&startstr=_all&ipp=60&p=0.

³¹ These references to Polish resistance members as “bandits” were not unique to Ravensbrück; German propaganda back in Poland also commonly reported actions of the resistance as having been carried out by “Polish bandits.” “Halina Piotrowska,” *Chronicles of Terror*, Witold Pilecki Institute of Solidarity and Valor, accessed June 27, 2019.

https://www.zapisyterroru.pl/dlibra/indexsearch?attId=61&startstr=_all&ipp=60&p=0.

³² “Bogumiła Bąbińska-Dobrowolska,” *Chronicles of Terror*.

positions by this point—former political organizers may have lacked the viciousness demonstrated by many of the criminals that the administration favored, but their backgrounds did make them better qualified for jobs which involved organizing groups of people—the administration’s divide and conquer policies and particular dislike for the Lublin transport kept these women from being able to benefit much from this, as they were placed in living blocks and work assignments with primarily German authorities.³³

Though not all Germans in the camp mistreated the Lublin women, the rabbits record few positive interactions with German prisoners before the operations. Most of the interactions they described were unpleasant. The German prisoners often went out of their way to torment them, with or without the endorsement of the guards and overseers. For example, Wanda Wojtasik described how the German *blokowa* of the quarantine block forced the women to keep the windows open at night, letting cold air and snow in. (The *blokowa* herself slept in a private room, presumably with the window closed.)³⁴ Several women also described being mistreated by groups of German criminal and asocial prisoners, who tended to look down on political prisoners, particularly those who were seen (correctly or not) as members of the intelligentsia, who were stereotyped in the camp as being physically weaker and less capable than other prisoners. Students Wanda Wojtasik and her friend Krystyna Czyż, for example, were transferred to a block populated largely by German asocial prisoners, and described how these women

³³ “Maria Moldenhawer,” Voices from Ravensbrück, Polish Research Institute in Lund, accessed June 20, 2019. <https://www.ub.lu.se/en/voices-from-ravensbruck-3>.

³⁴ Póltawska. *And I Am Afraid of My Dreams*, 39. Although this memoir was published under the name Wanda Póltawska, the author was unmarried during her time at Ravensbrück and was known by her maiden name, Wanda Wojtasik, in the camp. This is also the name under which her postwar testimony, included in the Chronicles of Terror collection, was given, and the name by which several of the other rabbits referred to her in their testimonies. To avoid confusion, this thesis will refer to her as Wanda Wojtasik.

constantly tormented them because of their status as intellectuals, stealing their possessions and much of their food, refusing to allow them into the washroom, and subjecting them to near-constant verbal abuse.³⁵ The fact that the majority of the interactions with German prisoners that the rabbits later reported were with criminals or asocials, the groups who were particularly encouraged and sometimes even required to act this way to gain the favor of the camp administration, likely had something to do with these unpleasant interactions. Krystyna Czyż discussed how work group leaders were deliberately chosen from “the worst riffraff—criminals, informers...” who tormented the Poles.³⁶ Another prisoner, Maria Moldenhawer, claimed that so many German prisoners acted as informers for the camp authorities that one would have thought that this was “an integral part of their character.”³⁷

Many of the early interactions that the Lublin transport had with non-German prisoners were also distinctly negative. Their postwar writings and testimonies tended to focus more on the German prisoners who mistreated them, but even their relations with other Polish prisoners were not always positive: they encountered several women from Poland who had registered as *Volksdeutsche* (people of German ethnicity who lived in non-German territories; those in Poland who registered with the German authorities during the occupation received additional rations and other privileges) and now acted as spies and informers for the camp authorities. There were even some unpleasant interactions with particular Polish women who had managed to get into privileged positions in the camp hierarchy and now abused their power, such as the Polish *blokowa*

³⁵ Póltawska, *And I Am Afraid of My Dreams*, 57.

³⁶ “Krystyna Czyż,” *Chronicles of Terror*.

³⁷ “Maria Moldenhawer,” *Voices from Ravensbrück*.

who had members of the intelligentsia moved to a block dominated by German criminals and asocials (the one where Wojtasik and Czyż were tormented) and “found it sensational” when women from the Lublin transport were taken for execution.³⁸ While most of the Lublin women did think that overall, the majority of Polish prisoners were good and patriotic people, they did note that there were some of very poor character. They also sometimes mentioned having negative experiences with Czech *blokowe* and *stubowe* (an assistant to a *blokowa*, in charge of one room of a block)—again, it was the privileged prisoners who were most inclined to mistreat the rabbits in order to avoid losing the favor of the camp administration.

It was normal for new prisoners to be almost universally looked down on by the rest of the camp simply because of their inexperience for their first few months in the camp. Most Holocaust narratives describe an initial period of mocking and mistreatment of new prisoners for their gullibility and ignorance of how to get by in a concentration camp. The women of the Lublin transport were no different, and after an initial period of disorientation, they became more familiar with the workings of Ravensbrück, began to learn the language of the camp, and came to be accepted into the informal social groups of some of the other Polish prisoners.³⁹ However, they were still treated as a distinct group, confined within the boundaries of the camp and segregated in two living blocks rather than being allowed to spread throughout the camp. They were unable to gain much in the way of status due to the administration’s policies and prejudices against them, and without influence or particularly powerful protectors among the privileged prisoners, they

³⁸ “Maria Tomczukowa,” Voices from Ravensbrück, Polish Research Institute in Lund, accessed June 20, 2019, <https://www.ub.lu.se/en/voices-from-ravensbruck-3>.

³⁹ Póltawska, *And I Am Afraid of My Dreams*, 40.

remained easy victims for cruel *blokowe* and other prisoners. To further demoralize them, small groups of women from their transport began to be taken away for execution every so often.

In July of 1942, the situation of the rabbits worsened as a group of eighty women from the Lublin transport was called to the administrative office, where a group of physicians quickly looked them over—paying particular attention to their legs—and then sent them away. Twice more, this group was called up and had their legs briefly examined before six of the younger members were summoned to the camp hospital. They were given baths, their legs were shaved, and they were sent to beds in the hospital (as they had just come from working a twelve-hour night shift in the straw-weaving workshop). When the doctor arrived from the nearby Hohenlychen Sanatorium, the women were given injections which made them nauseous and weak, then were brought one by one to the operating room, where they were given another injection to knock them out for the duration of their operations.⁴⁰

After the operations were completed, the women were left to wake up on their own in a recovery room, where they found that their right legs had been put in casts, with the wounds underneath causing them great pain. The room was kept locked, with only a German SS nurse and her assistant allowed to enter.⁴¹ The women were given injections of morphine, but too little to lessen the pain enough for them to sleep. Over the next few days, they were watched over by various doctors who came to examine their legs, which began to swell up in their casts and ooze foul-smelling pus. Nothing was done to alleviate

⁴⁰ Póltawska, *And I Am Afraid of My Dreams*, 80.

⁴¹ “Zofia Mączka” Voices from Ravensbrück, Polish Research Institute in Lund, accessed June 20, 2019. <https://www.ub.lu.se/en/voices-from-ravensbruck-3>.

these symptoms, however, nor were the women given any medicine for the fevers that the entire group developed, which hovered around 39-40° Celsius (103-104° Fahrenheit) for most of two weeks.⁴² Dr. Gebhardt, the head doctor, and his assistants applied dressings to the wounds every other day, an extremely painful procedure in which Wanda Wojtasik described feeling something being pulled out of a hole in her leg (though she could not say what was removed, as her face was covered with a sheet for the procedure.)⁴³ Two weeks after the first round of operations, a group of nine new women was called to the hospital to be operated on. A week later, Wojtasik, still with an open wound in her leg, was sent from the hospital to a new block, returning regularly to the hospital for new dressings. It was several more months before she regained the ability to walk, albeit with a severe limp.⁴⁴ Of the first group of women operated on, Wojtasik was one of the lucky ones who survived to the end of the war. Three of the women— Maria Gnaś, Rozalia Gutek, and Maria Zielonka—were executed a year later.⁴⁵

Similar sets of operations took place in various forms and on groups of varying sizes until August of 1943. Some women were comparatively fortunate and were operated on only once; others had as many as five or six operations. The forms of operations varied: some women were injected with different types of bacteria, others had their leg bones broken and foreign objects such as dirty rags or ground-up glass inserted into the wounds, and still others had pieces of bone or muscle removed from their legs.

⁴² Półtawska, *And I Am Afraid of My Dreams*, 84.

⁴³ “Wanda Wojtasik” *Chronicles of Terror*, Witold Pilecki Institute of Solidarity and Valor, accessed July 26, 2019.

https://www.zapisyterroru.pl/dlibra/indexsearch?attId=61&startstr=_all&ipp=60&p=0.

⁴⁴ “Wanda Wojtasik” *Chronicles of Terror*.

⁴⁵ “Zofia Mączka” *Voices from Ravensbrück*.

Surprisingly, given the overwhelming lack of postoperative care—in most cases, the women were simply left locked in a sickroom, with the least injured among them doing her best to care for the others—only five of the women died as a result of the operations during their time in the camp. Each of the five had been infected with particularly virulent types of bacteria, a set of experiments which only one woman, Maria Kuśmierczuk, survived.⁴⁶

The operations were done in secret, especially at first, but word quickly got out. The women were usually summoned at roll call and, to keep them from resisting or making a fuss, were told that they were to be transported to another camp or assigned to a different work detail.⁴⁷ During the initial set of operations, the prisoners who worked in the camp hospital were locked in the staffroom for the duration and were not allowed anywhere near the victims after the operations had been completed. The victims' sickroom was kept locked at all times. For the first set of operations, only the German SS nurse and her assistant were allowed in at night. For later operations, there were no medical personnel available overnight at all (though prisoner nurses were sometimes able to sneak in to help where they could), and only certain German medical staff were allowed in during the day. During the first operations, guards were also posted outside of the hospital to ensure that nobody came close enough to peek through the window, though this measure was apparently less than effective, as the women soon managed to inform their comrades of the situation by tossing notes through the window for others to

⁴⁶ “Zofia Mączka” Chronicles of Terror, Witold Pilecki Institute of Solidarity and Valor, accessed June 20, 2019. https://www.zapisyterroru.pl/dlibra/indexsearch?attId=61&startstr=_all&ipp=60&p=0.

⁴⁷ “Bogumiła Bąbińska-Dobrowolska,” Chronicles of Terror.

retrieve.⁴⁸ In this way, word soon spread through the Lublin transport and, from them, to most of the rest of the camp. It was not long before the operations became common knowledge in Ravensbrück, and the group of women who were subjected to them became known throughout the camp as the rabbits (a term used in the same sense as “guinea pig” to indicate that they were used as experimental subjects.)⁴⁹ Despite the widespread knowledge of the situation and its own occasional involvement, however, when confronted about the operations by the rabbits themselves, the camp administration claimed that it had never heard of any medical experiments being conducted in Ravensbrück.⁵⁰

Even without the notes tossed out the hospital window, the rabbits’ situation could not have been kept secret for long. There were only so many available beds in the hospital, and with new groups of women being called in for experiments on a regular basis, the victims of previous operations had to be sent out of the hospital eventually to make room, usually well before they were able to walk. Many, like Wanda Wojtasik, had to return to the hospital regularly for the dressings on their wounds to be changed. Several described having to be carried back and forth by friends, leaving trails of blood or pus from their injured legs.⁵¹ The rest of the camp could hardly have failed to notice this.

When they left the hospital, the rabbits were given bed cards, special passes that temporarily exempted them from work and allowed them to remain in their beds during the day. These passes eventually expired, however, and the rabbits were required to

⁴⁸ “Zofia Mączka” *Chronicles of Terror*.

⁴⁹ Depending on the source, the rabbits may alternatively be called *lapins*, *kroliki*, *kaninchen* (“rabbits” in French, Polish, and German, respectively) or sometimes simply guinea pigs.

⁵⁰ Symonowicz, *Beyond Human Endurance*, 91.

⁵¹ Symonowicz, *Beyond Human Endurance*, 84.

return to work. Jadwiga Bielska noted that one doctor, Schiedlausky, offered to give some of the rabbits work disability cards that would have exempted them from work entirely, but they refused to accept them because the administration considered anyone with this kind of pass to be useless, and therefore would have been particularly likely to have them killed. Instead, the rabbits returned to work, often before they were fully healed. Several rabbits reported being sent back to their jobs from before the operations, where they suffered particular hardships due to their physical disabilities and incomplete recoveries.⁵² Most eventually ended up in the knitting work detail, where old, sick, or in this case, badly injured prisoners were required to knit socks. This was generally considered the least physically demanding work detail and was, therefore, an assignment reserved for those too weak for other types of work. It was not always the safest position, since it was often viewed as the place where the least useful workers were sent, but it was at least more protection than a work disability card.⁵³ With many of the rabbits suffering not only from their injured legs—some limped badly, some were on crutches, and some were almost entirely unable to walk—but also from the lingering effects of the diseases they had been infected with or from recurring instances of fever and heart problems brought about by the trauma of what they had endured, the suffering of the rabbits would have been hard for any prisoner who encountered them to miss. Now that the rabbits were no longer sequestered away in the hospital or stuck in bed, they were also able to talk with other prisoners and share what had happened to them.

⁵² “Jadwiga Bielska,” *Chronicles of Terror*.

⁵³ “Leokadja Bukalak,” *Voices from Ravensbrück*, Polish Research Institute in Lund, accessed June 20, 2019. <https://www.ub.lu.se/en/voices-from-ravensbruck-3>.

As word of the rabbits' plight got around the camp, it was inevitable that they would gain the sympathy of other prisoners, particularly those from their own national group. Within the first few days of the initial operations, the women from the Lublin transport had learned what had happened to their friends and devised ways to sneak stolen food into the hospital (usually through the window in the middle of the night), although many of the victims were unable to eat anything at first.⁵⁴ Wojtasik described how throughout her time in the hospital, her friends regularly appeared at the hospital window at night to offer food and medicinal herbs which they were somehow able to acquire (probably through Polish prisoners who worked in the kitchens) as well as moral support and occasionally even small handmade gifts—one of Wojtasik's friends, for example, made her a tiny sailboat carved from the handle of a toothbrush.⁵⁵ As the women were released from the hospital, several described how their friends assisted them in the camp, as many of them were unable to walk on their own for several months after the operations. The extremely limited amounts of food allotted to each prisoner was not nearly enough to support the women's recovery (a few of the rabbits reported being given slightly more food than usual while they were in the hospital, particularly those whose recovery the doctors seemed interested in, but the majority received the same quality and quantity of food as the rest of the camp, regardless of their medical condition.)⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Wanda Symonowicz, *Beyond Human Endurance*, 90.

⁵⁵ Półtawska, *And I Am Afraid of My Dreams*, 86.

⁵⁶ Despite the experimental operations having been ostensibly done for scientific purposes, to examine the regeneration of tissue and/or the process of recovery from battlefield wounds and the illnesses and infections likely to result from them, the majority of the women's recoveries, particularly in later experiments, were not closely monitored by medical personnel. Zofia Mączka's testimonies indicate that the results of several basic procedures that were assigned to Dr. Gebhardt's medical students, such as examining the women's blood samples after the operations, were never even looked at by the doctors. "Zofia Mączka," *Chronicles of Terror*.

The Lublin transport was the primary source of aid and assistance to the rabbits, but other Polish prisoners often assisted as well. Polish kitchen workers, for example, seemed to regard it as their special duty to smuggle as much food as possible (from the food designated for the overseers and guards, to ensure that the quantity of food distributed to the prisoners was not diminished) to assist those in need: women suffering from typhus, starving transports from Auschwitz, and, of course, the rabbits.⁵⁷ Other Polish prisoners who did not work in the kitchens also assisted where they could, albeit in a less organized manner and on a smaller scale. Those who worked on farms outside the camp smuggled food inside, while other prisoners shared some of the food they received in parcels from home.⁵⁸ One of the rabbits, Leokadia Kwiecińska, later expressed the opinion that if not for the help that they received from their fellow prisoners who risked their lives to smuggle additional food to them, most of the group would not have survived the experiments.⁵⁹

These acts of sympathy and solidarity were significant not only for the vital support that they provided the rabbits but also because the simple act of assisting this group could be dangerous. Concentration camp authorities tended to enforce the mistreatment of particular groups not only by placing them in the path of those inclined (or required) to treat them badly but also by punishing anyone who supported them too openly. Several concentration camps, for example, had policies where prisoners could be harshly punished just for showing kindness to Jewish or Polish prisoners. Supporting a

⁵⁷ “Elzbieta Gemzer,” Voices from Ravensbrück, Polish Research Institute in Lund, accessed June 20, 2019. <https://www.ub.lu.se/en/voices-from-ravensbruck-3>.

⁵⁸ “Rozalia Witasek,” Voices from Ravensbrück, Polish Research Institute in Lund, accessed June 20, 2019. <https://www.ub.lu.se/en/voices-from-ravensbruck-3>.

⁵⁹ Wanda Symonowicz, *Beyond Human Endurance*, 91.

group of prisoners that the administration wanted to be mistreated could be a life-threatening action even without factoring in the risks inherent in smuggling food or illegally acquiring medicine, as well as the simple fact that anyone who shared supplies from her rations or parcels was giving up resources that could keep her alive—as Leokadia Kwiecińska later said, to women in a concentration camp, “a bowl of soup was everything.”⁶⁰ Yet despite their previous unpopularity, the plight of the rabbits elicited enough sympathy that some were willing to give up their food.

Polish prisoners helped in other ways too. There were several Polish prisoner doctors in the camp hospital, for example, who did their best to secretly assist the rabbits after their operations. In the infection experiments, it was these doctors who figured out specifically what each woman had been infected with to determine how best to help her. The nurse Zofia Mączka was particularly notable, even confronting the German doctor Oberhäuser for details about the experiments.⁶¹ Prisoner doctors secretly acquired (or *organized*, in the language of the camp) medicine, did their best to make the women as comfortable as possible after the operations and gave general medical advice. Several, including Mączka, also kept secret records of the experiments to one day use as evidence when the perpetrators of these crimes were finally prosecuted.

The fact that Polish prisoners supported the rabbits was not particularly surprising. National groups in Ravensbrück tended to support each other, at least for the most part, although other group divisions like triangle colors sometimes got in the way.

⁶⁰ "Leokadia Kwiecińska," *Chronicles of Terror*, Witold Pilecki Institute of Solidarity and Valor, accessed July 18, 2019.

https://www.zapisyterroru.pl/dlibra/indexsearch?attId=61&startstr=_all&ipp=60&p=0.

⁶¹ "Zofia Mączka," *Chronicles of Terror*.

The fact that very visible and particularly horrifying atrocities were being committed against the youngest of the Polish resistance members, some of whom were still teenagers, by the German SS doctors all but guaranteed that the Poles in the camp would rally around the rabbits. The support of the rest of the camp, however, was not quite so assured.

The camp administration claimed several times throughout the period of the operations that it was completely unaware of any medical experiments being conducted in the camp hospital. However, it was also the administration that spread rumors among the prisoners and to the civilian workers in the area, claiming that the women of the Lublin transport were not only criminals but were also collaborators who had willingly agreed and even actively sought to be the subjects of medical experiments in order to avoid the death penalty, and/or in return for large amounts of money being paid to their families back in Poland.⁶² By extension, these rumors painted the operations themselves in an almost positive light, making them seem like an exclusive opportunity that was being unfairly reserved only for the women of the Lublin transport. Of course, in these rumored scenarios, the rabbits also received much better treatment in the hospital than the women in the rest of the camp did, with adequate food (and presumably also competent medical treatment) as well as the opportunity to lie in bed all day instead of having to go to work.

The rabbits, of course, had not agreed to the experiments. Several of them expressed the opinion that, as Leokadia Kwiecińska later wrote, “the thought that we were being used by the enemy as a helpless and defenseless instrument of crime... was

⁶² “Władysława Dąbrowska,” *Chronicles of Terror*.

such moral torment to use that death seemed to be a blessed release.” In one of their protests to the administration, they even explicitly requested that they be executed instead of used as experimental subjects.⁶³ Most of the rabbits expected to be killed at any moment once they were no longer needed for the operations, although some of them were temporarily under the impression that the operations were being conducted in place of the death penalty. This impression was strengthened when one of the rabbits, Aniela Okoniewska, was called to the administrative office to be formally pardoned, and two others were taken for execution only to be returned to the camp when it was discovered that they had been operated on.⁶⁴ It eventually became clear that the operations provided no real protection, however, as six rabbits, including the two who had previously been spared, were executed during the spring of 1943.

During the Doctors’ Trial after the end of the war, the doctors responsible for the experiments tried to argue that they had carried out the experiments believing that, by doing so, they were ultimately saving the lives of the victims. The circumstances of the experiments make this a questionable enough claim—the women received little to no postoperative treatment after being injected with potentially deadly diseases and having foreign objects placed inside their wounds to encourage infection, and several accounts indicate that the operations (particularly the last set, which will be discussed further in the next two chapters) were done in unhygienic settings. Additionally, although the rabbits were spared from execution while they were still potentially useful as experimental subjects, the executions of six of their number after their usefulness ended indicate that

⁶³ Wanda Symonowicz, *Beyond Human Endurance*, 90-91, 99. “Bogumiła Bąbińska-Dobrowolska,” *Chronicles of Terror*; “Wanda Wojtasik,” *Chronicles of Terror*.

⁶⁴ “Leokadia Kwiecińska,” *Chronicles of Terror*.

this relative safety was only a temporary state of affairs, and later efforts to round up and execute the remaining members of the group as the Red Army approached the camp prove this. Not surprisingly, the court was not convinced by the doctors' claims to have experimented on the rabbits for their own good.⁶⁵

The return of some of the rabbits to their previous work details while they were still injured allowed the rest of the camp, as well as civilian workers who encountered them at or on the way to their jobs, to see the effects of the operations and to talk with the rabbits. The camp administration was enraged when one of the rabbits took an opportunity to secretly speak with a civilian laborer she encountered after sneaking into a work column going out of the camp. She informed him of what had really happened to her and her comrades. This information soon got around to many of the civilian workers in the area—both German farmers and foreign forced laborers—and helped to counteract the administration's rumors.⁶⁶ Once they learned of the rabbits' plight, some of the civilians were sympathetic enough to try and bring food to the camp for them. Others, particularly Polish forced laborers working on nearby farms, later helped in smuggling messages containing information about the rabbits' situation out of the camp.⁶⁷ The other prisoners, or at least the majority of them, were also understandably disturbed by the sight of these young women with shattered leg bones and dripping wounds who had to move around the camp on crutches or be carried by their friends. The rabbits' protests

⁶⁵ "Doctors' Trial Transcripts." Microfilm Publication M887. National Archives and Records Administration. Accessed September 2019. <https://archive.org/details/DoctorsTrialTranscripts/page/n7>.

⁶⁶ "Alicja Jurkowska-Serafinowa" Voices from Ravensbrück, Polish Research Institute in Lund, accessed June 20, 2019. <https://www.ub.lu.se/en/voices-from-ravensbruck-3>.

⁶⁷ "Maria Broel-Plater," Chronicles of Terror, Witold Pilecki Institute of Solidarity and Valor, accessed June 20, 2019. https://www.zapisyterroru.pl/dlibra/indexsearch?attId=61&startstr=_all&ipp=60&p=0.

against the operations, which will be discussed more thoroughly in the next chapter, also did a lot to convince the rest of the camp that they had been operated on unwillingly.

After the operations, it was the German prisoners who the rabbits mentioned as having been particularly fooled by the rumors that they had undergone the operations willingly and even sought them out for their own benefit. Kwiecińska did note that, with all of the prisoners struggling to survive, the idea that one group—especially the “Polish bandits” that the camp administration had previously encouraged everyone to hate—had been given an exclusive opportunity to receive special treatment would have seemed particularly unfair to anyone.⁶⁸ However, those who initially believed the rumors quickly learned the truth after seeing how the rabbits protested and fought back.⁶⁹ The rabbits and the German prisoners never quite became friends (though they did seem to get along with the German political prisoners better than the other categories), but the hostility the rabbits faced after the initial operations quickly faded when it became clear that they were victims, not collaborators, and that they were not benefitting at all.

While the population of Ravensbrück came from a wide variety of nationalities, the rabbits’ postwar recollections tended to focus on their interactions with the largest groups in the camp, primarily Germans, Poles, and sometimes Czechs, with French and Russian women joining the narrative later. (Unusually, the rabbits rarely mention Jewish women as a separate category.) The most notable of the Czechs was Marzena Svedikowa, *blokowa* of the “rabbit block” that the group was transferred to. Wojtasik described her as “shrewd, brave, and very kind,” and the transfer to this block as their “first real change

⁶⁸ Symonowicz, *Beyond Human Endurance*, 91.

⁶⁹ “Alicja Jurkowska-Serafinowa” Voices from Ravensbrück.

for the better.”⁷⁰ Svedikowa made a very positive impression on the rabbits, assisting them wherever she could and even encouraging them to hide from later attempts to take them for execution, something that could have caused her to be killed if the administration had decided to hold her responsible for their inability to round up the rabbits.

Overall, most of the interactions that the rabbits describe having with other prisoners when they first arrived at Ravensbrück tended to be quite negative. Though it was common for there to be a certain adjustment period in which new prisoners were looked down on by the more experienced women, the rabbits’ initial negative experiences went beyond the normal level of harassment, spurred by a conscious effort on the part of the administration to influence the way that the other prisoners and civilian workers in the area treated the women of their transport. The Lublin transport women were placed into specific blocks with particularly unpleasant *blokowe* where they were vilified with nicknames like “bandit block” and false rumors about why they were in the camp. They were surrounded by women who, whether because of their personalities or the administration’s policies, were already inclined to mistreat Poles and political prisoners. Similarly, they were singled out for particular abuse at their work assignments, not only by the overseers and guards but also by other prisoners.

The operations changed this. The fact that the camp administration sought to keep the operations secret and, when it became clear that this would be impossible, to spread rumors to prejudice the other prisoners against the victims, shows that the administration was concerned about the opinions of the other prisoners shifting to favor the rabbits. The

⁷⁰ Póltawska, *And I Am Afraid of My Dreams*, 103.

reactions of the prisoners show that they were right to be concerned. Some prisoners were temporarily fooled by the rumors that painted the rabbits as willing collaborators and invited jealousy over the exclusive opportunity for this one, previously despised, group of prisoners to get better treatment than the rest of the camp. However, the visibly disturbing effects that the operations had on the victims, the way that many of the rabbits were forced to return to work before recovering completely, and most importantly the actions of the rabbits themselves to protest the operations soon proved these rumors false. There were certainly still some prisoners who mistreated them even after the truth came out; after all the camp administration still had its various collaborators and privileged prisoners whose comparatively safe positions in the camp depended on their behaving as the administration wanted. After the operations, however, the rabbits' postwar writings indicate that their interactions with other prisoners became, for the most part, much more positive. Most of the rabbits at least mentioned receiving some kind of sympathy from the majority of the rest of the camp, and many also discussed specific instances in which other prisoners shared what little food they had and even risked their lives organizing additional food and medical supplies to help with the rabbits' recovery.

Part of the reason for this was the simple horror of the rabbits' condition—visually disturbing open wounds dripping blood and pus, shattered bones with unsanitary foreign objects stuffed inside the wounds—but another part of the reason that the rabbits quickly began to gain not only the pity but also the active support of much of the population of the camp was the way that they fought back, openly defying the camp administration on several occasions as well as working secretly to ensure that, whatever happened to them in the end, the world would know what the Nazi doctors had done.

CHAPTER III - RESISTANCE

As the experimental operations in Ravensbrück continued and the number of women with crippled or severely injured legs increased, the rest of the camp became increasingly aware of the rabbits' plight. Despite the efforts of the camp administration to turn popular opinion against the rabbits, the truth of the situation gradually came out as the rabbits were released from the hospital to make room for new victims, allowing others to see their horrific injuries and giving them the opportunity to share their side of the story. Initially, however, not everyone was willing to immediately take the rabbits' word about the experiments. This changed when the rabbits began protesting. Those who had remained unconvinced by the rabbits' insistence that they had not willingly participated in the experiments quickly changed their minds when they saw the rabbits risking punishment and even death to fight back against the operations. As the rabbits came to see themselves as having nothing to lose, they became more inclined to fight back, primarily to preserve their own lives, but also, at times, to object to other outrages. These protests, in turn, led to increased support from the rest of the camp.

The rabbits began protesting the operations almost immediately, but initially, their protests were limited to individual objections voiced to doctors or other hospital personnel. Over time, the ever-growing population of women who had been operated on came to be seen—and to see themselves—as a distinct group within the camp, rather than as members of the Lublin transport that they had initially been identified with. As a result, they began to speak out as a group, and quickly gained a reputation in the camp for their outspokenness and defiance. Their most notable actions against the operations included marching as a group to deliver a letter of protest to the commandant of the camp

and, later, openly refusing to give up the women who had been chosen for a new set of experiments. Though neither of these protests was fully successful, both were visible displays of defiance that allowed the rest of the camp to see how the rabbits were fighting back against what was being done to them. In addition, the rabbits also stood up to the administration on several other issues, earning them a reputation for rebelliousness as well as the support of much of the camp. Finally, several of the rabbits engaged in less visible, though still important, acts of resistance by smuggling letters out of the camp to make their situation known to the outside world. As a result of these letters, several organizations sent aid packages addressed to the rabbits by name, a sign to both the prisoners and the administration that the group's plight was known outside of the camp.

The rabbits' resistance to the camp administration was not necessarily surprising. They had been members of the Polish resistance before they were arrested, so the idea of resisting the Germans was certainly not a foreign concept to them. In fact, historian Tadeusz Debski, himself a survivor of the concentration camps, argued that Polish prisoners in particular tended to view the concentration camps as a continuation of the historical enmity between Poland and Germany, and, by extension, viewed their own experiences in the camp as very much a part of the war, a battle between the administration's efforts to mold them into a faceless mass of mindless slaves and their own efforts to resist the administration's will and retain their sense of identity.⁷¹ For the rabbits, however, just retaining their identity was not enough. For them, their experiences in Ravensbrück were very much a part of the war—they had, after all, been arrested and even tortured for their resistance activities—and the fact that they, as participants in the

⁷¹ Debski, *A Battlefield of Ideas*, 196.

war (perhaps not combatants in the legal sense, but still active participants working toward their country's war efforts) were being illegally experimented on for the benefit of the enemy's military was a particularly unbearable idea.

Initial protests against the operations were spontaneous, small-scale actions that had limited, if any, effect. Many of the rabbits, when taken to the hospital, made a point of informing the doctors and nurses that they did not give their consent to be operated on—statements which were perhaps significant in a legal sense, as international law forbade performing experimental operations on prisoners without their consent, but which accomplished nothing in Ravensbrück. Others shouted insults at the perpetrators or made defiant or patriotic declarations. This also did nothing to dissuade the doctors from carrying out the operations, although it evidently bothered at least some of the medical personnel enough that the administration, in an effort to protect the doctors from having to hear protests and insults in a language they could understand, questioned one group of women slated for operations and removed two women from this group who stated that they could speak German.⁷² Additionally, some of the rabbits, after being operated on, did their best to falsify the information that the doctors recorded—manipulating temperature data, for example, or lying about the amount of pain they were experiencing—in order to make the results of the experiment as useless to the German military as possible.⁷³

These initial acts of defiance had little effect. While they may have made the doctors uncomfortable enough to (temporarily) exclude German-speaking women from

⁷² The two women who had been removed from the group were only spared temporarily; they were operated on in a later set of experiments. Symonowicz, *Beyond Human Endurance*, 111.

⁷³ "Alicja Jurkowska-Serafinowa," *Voices from Ravensbrück*.

the subject pool and had minor effects on the data recorded (although nurse Zofia Mączka noted that this data was not monitored closely anyway), they did nothing to change the fact that women from the Lublin transport continued to be routinely summoned to the hospital, subjected to horrific experimental operations for the benefit of the enemy, and left to suffer from the aftereffects without adequate medical care. Eventually, however, the rabbits began to make more organized and visible protests, objecting to their treatment in a way that would be impossible for almost anyone in the camp to fail to notice.

Many of the rabbits, as members of the Polish resistance, were particularly distressed by the fact that they were being used in medical research which was ultimately for the benefit of the German military. They had frequent, heated arguments over how to respond to the situation and whether death or the operations (which, although benefitting the Germans, at least offered a chance at survival) was the better option.⁷⁴ This argument became a moot point in early 1943, when two of the women who had previously been operated on, Maria Gnaś and Maria Pajączkowska, were taken for execution. This had happened before, but unlike the last time, the women's crippled legs did not cause them to be sent back to the camp at the last minute. Before this point, opinions had been split among the rabbits as to whether their status as experimental subjects would spare them from being executed. Some had been optimistic that the operations, as horrible as they were, would at least protect them from the death sentences they had arrived with, either by serving as an alternative to execution or by making them too useful to kill. Others of

⁷⁴ "Kazimiera Pomorska," *Voices from Ravensbrück*, Polish Research Institute in Lund, accessed August 19, 2019. <https://www.ub.lu.se/en/voices-from-ravensbruck-3>.

the group were less optimistic, believing that they would be spared only until they outlived their usefulness, as the Germans would eventually want to destroy the evidence of what they had done. The execution of the two rabbits proved the latter group right. In the process, it also encouraged the rabbits to become bolder in their protests. “If they are going to shoot us anyway,” one of the women, Eugenia Mikulska, later wrote of the rabbits’ attitude after the execution, “why should we let ourselves be cut up first.”⁷⁵

Shortly after the first two rabbits were executed, another group was called to the hospital for operations, including several who had been operated on already. One of these women, Zofia Stefaniak, managed to sneak out of the hospital window and escape back to her block, where she hid for several days. Two others did not report at all.⁷⁶ When five more women were called shortly after, the rabbits decided that they should make a group protest. The camp administration had claimed on previous occasions not to know of any experimental operations being carried out, so the rabbits now chose to confront them with undeniable proof. With the support of the rest of their block, the rabbits wrote up a letter of protest against the operations. They described what had been done to them without their consent, pointing to their being commonly referred to as “rabbits” (used in the same sense as “guinea pigs”) by fellow prisoners and doctors alike as evidence that the operations were widely known to be experimental, explained that the conducting of experimental operations on prisoners who had not given consent was illegal under international law, and demanded an explanation from the commandant.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Symonowicz, *Beyond Human Endurance*, 133; Póltawska, *And I Am Afraid of My Dreams*, 112.

⁷⁶ Symonowicz, *Beyond Human Endurance*, 177.

⁷⁷ Władysława Dąbrowska, “Chronicles of Terror.”

The rabbits—those who had already been operated on as well as a few who had just been summoned to the hospital for the first time—marched as a group to the commandant’s office to deliver their letter. Notably, several of the rabbits described the event in later recollections using wording with military connotations—“we marched in a close column,” for example, or described their “parade” in rows of four—or discussed the unifying effects that this procession had, making them feel like a united group for the first time.⁷⁸ The march itself was quite a spectacle. It occurred just as columns of prisoners were returning from work, ensuring that a large portion of the camp population would see this group of more than sixty women march to the commandant’s office despite their injuries—many of the rabbits required crutches to walk, and some of the worst injured had to be carried by their healthier friends. Onlookers did not yet know what was happening (word of the rabbits’ purpose did not get around until later) but just the sight of such a large procession of injured and sickly women was quite shocking. This was the first time the rabbits had been out of the barracks as a group, since at this point, many of them still had bed cards, and their procession to the commandant’s office showed both their number as well as their injuries.

When the rabbits arrived at the office, they demanded to be allowed to talk to *Oberaufseherin* Langefeld, the female head of the camp, who they hoped would convey their letter to the commandant. Langefeld summoned Dr. Oberhauser, one of the doctors involved in the operations, and the two conferred in Langefeld’s office for a while before Langefeld came out to address the rabbits. She told them that they were hysterical and

⁷⁸ Póltawska, *And I Am Afraid of My Dreams*, 113-114; Symonowicz, *Beyond Human Endurance*, 42, 122.

that there were no experiments happening in the camp, then promised that there would be no operations conducted in the future, and sent them back to their block.⁷⁹ After this incident, however, the camp administration evidently felt the need to provide an explanation to the prisoners who had witnessed the march before rumors (or worse, the truth) could spread too far and generate too much support for the rabbits' cause. An announcement was made, informing the camp that the rabbits were only called to the camp hospital to have their temperatures taken. As proof that the entire situation was harmless, the administration invited any interested prisoner to report to the hospital to have her temperature checked. Whether in support of the rabbits or out of the general mistrust most prisoners had of the camp hospital, nobody took advantage of this opportunity.⁸⁰

The fact that the rabbits had dared to protest, particularly in such a visible way, meant that the administration had to issue some form of punishment. As a consequence of the march, therefore, the rabbits who still had bed cards lost them (though later, their *blokowa* sometimes lied to the authorities, claiming that at least some of the group had been given bed cards).⁸¹ All of the rabbits, save for a few who were entirely bedridden from recent operations, were now forced to stand at roll call and to return to work, despite most of the group being crippled and some still having open wounds. The majority were sent to work details performing hard labor, particularly the one responsible for unloading

⁷⁹ Póltawska, *And I Am Afraid of My Dreams*, 114; Symonowicz, *Beyond Human Endurance*, 91, 159.

⁸⁰ Symonowicz, *Beyond Human Endurance*, 134.

⁸¹ Póltawska, *And I Am Afraid of My Dreams*, 102.

heavy stones outside the camp (the policy of keeping the rabbits inside the camp having been suspended).⁸²

While the punishment was certainly a blow to the rabbits' physical well-being, it did have the unanticipated result of further highlighting the effects of the operations. The entire camp witnessed the rabbits struggling to stand for long stretches of time at daily roll calls and to travel to and from work. The rabbits also took advantage of the situation as an opportunity to use their injuries to their benefit. As they had no stockings, the injuries, bandages, and scars covering their legs were easily visible. Many required crutches or walking sticks to move around, making their physical conditions even more obvious. Additionally, because they were still considerably weakened from their operations, they had particular difficulty with the hard manual labor that they were being forced to perform, with several of the women literally collapsing from exhaustion as they worked. The rabbits took the opportunity to make sure that the people around them—not just other prisoners but civilian laborers as well—knew exactly what had happened to put them in such a state. The camp administration quickly caught on and reinstated their previous policy forbidding the rabbits from leaving the camp, but the damage had been done. The rabbits had spoken directly to civilians in the area of the camp, had explained that they were political prisoners instead of violent criminals, had shown off the physical evidence of the horrors that had been done to them against their will. The people they spoke to were appropriately disturbed and responded with considerable sympathy and support.⁸³

⁸² Póltawska, *And I Am Afraid of My Dreams*, 115-116.

⁸³ Póltawska, *And I Am Afraid of My Dreams*, 115-116.

The women who had been summoned for the operations that had prompted the protest in the first place were spared, at least for a time, as operations were halted for the next several months. There was some disagreement among the rabbits and their allies in the camp as to just how much impact their protest had on this decision. Most seem to have thought that the protest was responsible for the extended pause in operations, as it had made their objections to the situation clear to the rest of the camp while also highlighting their injuries for all to see, turning the general opinion in the camp against the operations. Trying to carry out further operations at this point, when the rabbits had just gained far more support for their cause, would have been particularly troublesome and could have caused further protests.⁸⁴ Others, particularly Krystyna Czyż, argued that while the protest did raise the issue of the operations with most of the camp and gain the rabbits more support than they had previously had, it was not responsible for the temporary stoppage of operations. After all, the administration was not afraid to carry out the next round of experiments a few months later and was not even deterred when the rabbits and others from their block actively resisted the chosen women being taken away. While the rabbits' cooperation may have been convenient, the administration was willing to perform the operations by force if necessary, making it unlikely that a simple letter and protest march would have had any significant impact on the situation.⁸⁵

Whatever the reason for the stoppage of operations, it turned out to be a temporary state of affairs. In August of 1943, ten more women were called to the

⁸⁴ Zofia Mączka,” *Chronicles of Terror*; “Wojciecha Buraczyńska,” *Chronicles of Terror*, Witold Pilecki Institute of Solidarity and Valor, accessed June 20, 2019. https://www.zapisyterroru.pl/dlibra/indexsearch?attId=61&startstr=_all&ipp=60&p=0.

⁸⁵ “Krystyna Czyż,” *Chronicles of Terror*.

hospital, including some who had not yet been operated on. To prevent another protest, they were told that they were going to be examined to determine whether they were healthy enough to be sent to work in a factory, but they saw through the ruse—the factories in question were located outside of the main camp complex, and the rabbits were not allowed to leave the camp. The group refused to report as ordered, and eventually, *Oberaufseherin* Binz (who had replaced Langefeld) ordered the entire block to stand in formation so that the women chosen for the operations could be called out of the lines. The women, however, declared that they would not report to the hospital and requested that if they had been sentenced to death, their sentences be carried out immediately instead. After the women repeatedly refused to accept Binz’s assurances that they were not going to be operated on, she asked that they instead go with her to her office, where she would show them a document that would prove that the situation was just a misunderstanding. The women agreed, but while they waited outside the office for Binz to retrieve the document, the camp police attempted to take the women by force. They fled, returning to their block, where the rest of the women—their fellow rabbits as well as other political Poles who supported them—promised to hide them. When Binz returned with the camp police, however, the entire block was made to line up outside again and the camp police took the chosen women by force. They were brought not to the hospital but to the Bunker, the prison within the prison where troublemakers were sent for punishment, while the rest of their block was locked inside the barracks.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ “Bogumiła Bąbińska-Dobrowolska,” *Chronicles of Terror*; “Eugenia Biega,” *Chronicles of Terror*.

The women who were taken to the Bunker were imprisoned five to a cell for two days. Then five of them were brought one by one to be operated on. Several kicked and fought enough on the way that multiple guards were required to transport them to the makeshift operating room that had been set up in another cell, and at least one woman cooperated only when her friends were threatened.⁸⁷ The operations that were performed on these women were done in hygienic conditions that were extremely poor, even by the standards of the experimental operations. The women were still wearing dirty camp uniforms when they were operated on, and their legs were not washed beforehand. After the operation, one of the women even discovered that cockroaches had managed to get underneath the cast that was put on her leg.⁸⁸ When the operations were complete, the victims were returned to their previous filthy cells and received no medicine or any further care beyond what the five women who had not been operated on were able to provide, although at least some of them had their temperatures monitored. Ostensibly, they were supposed to have their wounds dressed, but the doctors kept finding trivial reasons to put this off. According to Zofia Mączka, these operations were done by different doctors than usual and were performed in order to gather research data for the doctoral thesis of one of Dr. Gebhardt's assistants.⁸⁹

After two weeks, the women in the Bunker who had not been operated on were allowed to return to their block, while those who had been operated on were brought to the hospital during the night, when they would not be seen by the rest of the camp (and

⁸⁷ "Eugenia Biega," *Chronicles of Terror*; "Halina Piotrowska," *Chronicles of Terror*; Póltawska, *And I Am Afraid of My Dreams*, 127.

⁸⁸ "Wojciecha Buraczyńska," *Chronicles of Terror*.

⁸⁹ "Zofia Mączka," *Chronicles of Terror*.

therefore could not cause any disruption). There, each woman was subjected to two additional operations. Miraculously, all five women survived, in large part because of injections of medicine stolen from the hospital and secretly administered by prisoner doctors, but they remained bedridden for up to a full year afterward.⁹⁰

While the women who had refused to report to the operations were being taken to the Bunker, the commandant of the camp addressed the remaining women, accusing them of mutiny. The women argued that this was not true; all they had done was refuse to cooperate with experimental operations which were illegal under international law. The commandant, however, responded that he did not care about this; his only concern was keeping order in the camp. He threatened to have the women shot. Meanwhile, the camp police was sent to search the barracks. Most of the women's personal possessions were confiscated, including items that they were allowed to have, such as food from parcels they had received from home. This done, the commandant had the women locked in their block for three days as punishment for supporting the rebellion. They received no food, and the windows were shut, leaving the building dark and suffocating during the extremely hot days.⁹¹

Both the rabbits' refusal to report for the operations and the subsequent consequences had a significant impact on the camp. Block 15 was noticeably absent from several consecutive roll calls, getting the attention of many of the other prisoners. They then returned so badly weakened that many of the women collapsed when they were

⁹⁰ "Halina Piotrowska," *Chronicles of Terror*; Eugenia Biega," *Chronicles of Terror*.

⁹¹ Póltawska, *And I Am Afraid of My Dreams*, 122-123; "Stanisława Michalik," *Voices from Ravensbrück*, Polish Research Institute in Lund, accessed June 20, 2019. <https://www.ub.lu.se/en/voices-from-ravensbruck-3>.

forced to stand for roll call and go to work immediately after being released. News of their situation quickly spread throughout the camp and even outside its borders. While the rabbits' protest had not prevented them from being operated on, it had provoked a brutal enough response that almost the entire rest of the camp now supported them. During their confinement, some prisoners managed to slip a few packets of food through the barracks window, and even civilian workers who had heard about the protest from Ravensbrück prisoners tried to send food to the imprisoned women.⁹² The *blokowa* of Block 15 at the time, Marzena Svedikowa, also expressed her solidarity and support for her charges by sending back the food that the administration sent for her.⁹³

The Bunker operations (and the subsequent operations in the hospital that went with them) turned out to be the last operations conducted in the camp. While the administration did not specifically state that the protests were the cause of the operations ending, it does seem likely: the rabbits had already openly protested after being called for a previous set of operations, and when they were called once again, they outright refused to report and had to be taken by force. This, in turn, had caused almost the entire camp to begin expressing support for the rabbits, which meant that further operations would almost certainly be met with additional resistance, possibly from enough of the camp to cause problems. Several women—rabbits and others—attributed the end of the operations to the rabbits' resistance and the widespread support they received after the Bunker incident, arguing that it had become clear that any more operations would be more

⁹² Póltawska, *And I Am Afraid of My Dreams*, 123-124.

⁹³ "Stanisława Michalik," *Voices from Ravensbrück*.

trouble than they were worth.⁹⁴ There was, however, a later incident in which the entire group of rabbits was summoned to the hospital, supposedly for an examination. The rabbits, suspecting that the administration or the doctors wanted to kill them to hide the evidence of the operations, did report to the hospital, but they went in pairs so that they would not all be in the hospital at the same time. The administration allowed the rabbits to get away with this protective measure, perhaps wanting to avoid larger-scale protests.⁹⁵

The rabbits' protests against the operations clearly had a major impact on the rest of the camp's opinion of them. The protests finally disproved the rumors that the rabbits had willingly submitted to the operations in exchange for some benefit, as they would hardly be willing to risk their lives fighting back against the situation if this had been the case. Additionally, the women's very visible acts of resistance to the camp authorities were a rarity in the camp, and the rabbits received a considerable amount of support simply for standing up to the hated administration. The reprisals, particularly in the case of the Bunker operations, also worked in the rabbits' favor, enraging the rest of the camp on their behalf as the administration's mistreatment of the group was made particularly apparent. The rabbits, particularly the younger ones, quickly gained a reputation in the camp for their outspokenness. Although some of the older women in their block were annoyed by their tendency toward rowdiness and disapproved when they spoke out, viewing it as a risk to the people around them, the majority of the camp had come to approve of the rabbits and their actions. Many women—including non-Poles—took it

⁹⁴ "Maria Moldenhawer," *Voices from Ravensbrück*; Lanckorońska, *Michelangelo in Ravensbrück*, 229.

⁹⁵ Interestingly, no examinations or operations were conducted on the women while they were in the hospital, and they were allowed to return to their block without incident. Symonowicz, *Beyond Human Endurance*, 179.

upon themselves to secretly acquire extra food and medicine to support the rabbits' recoveries.⁹⁶

In addition to the effects that the rabbits' protests against the operations had on their reputation in the camp, some of their increased popularity came from the fact that they also stood up to the administration on several occasions about other issues. One of the most notable displays of the rabbits' defiance over a situation other than the operations was an incident in which the camp authorities gathered the Polish political prisoners and asked for volunteers for a comparatively comfortable position as a prostitute in a soldiers' brothel. This call for volunteers was not unique; such things happened regularly in Ravensbrück (although it was usually former prostitutes who were propositioned for such things). What was unusual was the fact that the offer was being made only to Polish political prisoners. This was a deliberate insult, another instance of the administration associating political Poles with criminals and prostitutes. The intention here was not really to convince the women to volunteer for the brothel; it was to imply that women of the Polish resistance had loose sexual morals, that they were either prostitutes already or at least able to be bought with promises of less strenuous work and better treatment.⁹⁷

The insult was not lost on the women. The resulting anger was by no means limited to the rabbits, but they were at the forefront of the objections that broke out. One of the rabbits, Jadwiga Kamińska, acted as the group's spokesperson, going to the commandant along with a delegation of several other women from the assembled

⁹⁶ Póltawska, *And I Am Afraid of My Dreams*, 117, 130.

⁹⁷ "Irena Dragan," Voices from Ravensbrück. Polish Research Institute in Lund, accessed June 20, 2019. <https://www.ub.lu.se/en/voices-from-ravensbruck-3>; "Leokadia Kwiecińska," *Chronicles of Terror*.

group—a number of whom were rabbits—and asking that the administration not make such an offer to the political Poles again, calling it an “affront to [their] feminine self-respect.”⁹⁸ The commandant was initially unsure how to respond to such open defiance from his prisoners, and after staring at the women in stunned silence for a while, he had the camp police send them away.

One woman did try to accept the offer. This woman, who had been a prostitute before being arrested (she was counted as a political prisoner due to the classification rules that tried to mix women arrested for sexual or criminal reasons in with the actual political prisoners) was shouted at by much of the rest of the group for volunteering and was later jumped by a small group composed primarily of rabbits, who beat her up and managed to cut some of her hair to humiliate her for agreeing to the proposal.⁹⁹

The women were punished for their reactions. Four of the women who had attacked the prostitute—two of whom were rabbits—were successfully identified. They were whipped and sent to the *Strafblok* (the punishment block, where prisoners were forced to perform much harder labor and were treated much more harshly) as punishment, as was Jadwiga Kamińska for her role in voicing the women’s objections to the commandant.¹⁰⁰ The rest of the block received no food for three days and no parcels for the next two weeks as punishment for their support of the protest and their jeering of the one woman who had accepted the offer. Searches of the block in which possessions

⁹⁸ Półtawska, *And I Am Afraid of My Dreams*, 104.

⁹⁹ While many women in Ravensbrück had their hair shaved upon arrival, this was not a universal policy. Some women were allowed to keep their long hair or only had their hair cut shorter, while others—particularly those who came from political transports or who had particularly pretty or well-kept hair—had theirs shaved off entirely. “Krystyna Czyż,” *Chronicles of Terror*; “Irena Dragan,” *Voices from Ravensbrück*.

¹⁰⁰ “Irena Dragan,” *Voices from Ravensbrück*.

were regularly stolen and personal inspections (including gynecological examinations) became a common occurrence.¹⁰¹ This incident drove a wedge between the younger and older women in Block 15, with the older women objecting to the younger women's actions because the punishment had affected them as well, even though they had not taken part in the protest or the attack on the prostitute. The majority of the camp, however, seems to have been strongly in favor of the women's actions. When the administration tried to distribute to other prisoners the parcels that had come for the women of Block 15 during their two weeks of punishment, most of the camp outright refused to accept them. Unable to find anyone who would take the confiscated parcels, the administration eventually had to distribute them to a group of new prisoners who were unaware of the situation.¹⁰²

Another notable instance of the rabbits openly objecting to the administration's actions occurred later in the camp's history. When a large shipment of food parcels from the Red Cross arrived at the camp, intended for the Polish prisoners, the rabbits were initially given the intended one parcel each. However, they later learned that the other Polish women had received only half of the intended amount of food to allow the SS to steal much of the food for themselves. When they learned of this, the rabbits chose to go without any additional food in protest. They repacked the parcels they had been given and returned them, informing the commandant that while they appreciated that he had made sure they received the full allotment of food, they could not accept it when they knew that others were receiving less. The commandant was angry but apparently decided

¹⁰¹ "Jadwiga Bielska," *Chronicles of Terror*.

¹⁰² Póltawska, *And I Am Afraid of My Dreams*, 104.

that the lack of food to supplement their inadequate rations would be punishment enough. As the rabbits returned to their barracks afterward, they were greeted with cheers and applause from the prisoners who had seen what they had done.¹⁰³

The rabbits' visible acts of resistance did a lot to improve their popularity in the camp, gaining them a far more favorable reputation than they had arrived with. In many cases, this also resulted in other prisoners providing them with material support as well, in the form of stolen food and medicine. Not all of the rabbits' resistance to the administration was done openly, however. They also worked to preserve their lives by secretly smuggling information about their situation out of the camp, hoping that if they made outsiders aware of their plight, the doctors and camp administration would have less reason to kill them to cover up the evidence of the operations.

The rabbits were by no means the only Ravensbrück prisoners to smuggle information out of the camp. Work details that left the main camp complex often came into contact with civilians—both Germans who lived in the area and foreign forced laborers brought from occupied territories—as well as prisoners of war being held in nearby camps. Several non-rabbits reported that they or someone they knew smuggled letters or information through contacts such as these. Some of these women also took advantage of the opportunity to assist the rabbits by getting word of the operations out of the camp.¹⁰⁴ The camp authorities were, of course, aware of the possibility that this could occur and were vigilant for such things. Several Ravensbrück women remembered people

¹⁰³ Póltawska, *And I Am Afraid of My Dreams*, 154.

¹⁰⁴ "Irena Dragan," *Voices from Ravensbrück*.

from their work details who were severely punished after being caught, or even just suspected of, smuggling letters.¹⁰⁵

The rabbits were, of course, not allowed in the work columns that would have given them easy access to civilians who could potentially smuggle letters for them. Several of them managed to find ways around this obstacle, however. Some had friends in outside work columns who brought their letters out of the camp for their contacts to send. Later on, as the camp was being evacuated, letters could be smuggled out via prisoners who were being evacuated. For example, one of the rabbits, Stanisława Michalik sent a report via a Polish prisoner of war from a nearby camp in the hopes that he would be sent somewhere which would be liberated soon. In fact, he collected several such reports from the multiple camps he was in during the war and later transmitted these reports to the Polish government to be used in prosecuting the perpetrators of the Holocaust.¹⁰⁶

While at least some of the rabbits were able to successfully smuggle information out of Ravensbrück, none were so successful as the group consisting of Wanda Wojtasik, Krystyna Czyż, and Janina and Krystyna Iwańska, who were able to send numerous detailed letters to their families by writing in invisible ink on official correspondence. Ravensbrück prisoners were allowed to send one letter home per month, although censorship was so strict that there was almost nothing the prisoners could write other than stating that they were in good health and inquiring about the health of friends and family

¹⁰⁵ “Janina Pawlak,” Voices from Ravensbrück, Polish Research Institute in Lund, accessed June 20, 2019. <https://www.ub.lu.se/en/voices-from-ravensbruck-3>.

¹⁰⁶ “Wojciecha Buraczyńska,” Chronicles of Terror; “Jan Duchnowski,” Chronicles of Terror, Witold Pilecki Institute of Solidarity and Valor, accessed July 10, 2019. https://www.zapisyterroru.pl/dlibra/indexsearch?attId=61&startstr=_all&ipp=60&p=0.

members. By writing—initially on the letters and later on the envelopes in order to have more space—in invisible ink made from their own urine, which would become visible when the paper was heated, Wojtasik, Czyż, and the Iwański sisters were able to send home extremely detailed information about the operations. In the visible text of their first letter, the women included a reference to a book, popular with Polish children, in which this method was used, as well as composing the text so that the first letter of each line read “*list moczem*,” (letter in urine).¹⁰⁷ They also included ways for the recipients to indicate that they had received the secret letters, such as leaving a thread of a particular color inside the next parcel from home. The group—which later expanded to include several other women—also devised additional ways to send messages. In addition to establishing contact with the men in a nearby prisoner of war camp, they also enlisted the help of Ravensbrück women who were being sent to work in the Hohenlychen sanatorium to smuggle their letters out of the camp on the way to work and slip them into the regular mail.¹⁰⁸

Fortunately, the rabbits were never caught in this endeavor, although there was a very close call in 1944 when the camp censors found a letter from the Iwański family being smuggled into the camp in a parcel, leading to a thorough search of the rabbits’ barracks. None of the letters were discovered, as nobody thought to check the envelopes for hidden messages, but Janina and Krystyna Iwańska did spend a month in the Bunker as punishment for their family having tried to send them an illegal message.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Symonowicz, *Beyond Human Endurance*, 63-64.

¹⁰⁸ Symonowicz, *Beyond Human Endurance*, 66.

¹⁰⁹ “Janina Iwańska,” *Chronicles of Terror*, Witold Pilecki Institute of Solidarity and Valor, accessed July 17, 2019.
https://www.zapisyterroru.pl/dlibra/indexsearch?attId=61&startstr=_all&ipp=60&p=0.

Miraculously, most, if not all, of the letters got through to their recipients, with the secret correspondence continuing until the fighting came close enough to Lublin that mail service was disrupted and further communication became impossible.

Upon receiving the letters, the women's families conveyed the messages to the underground organization in Poland, where the information eventually made its way to several of the organization's leaders, whose postwar writings mention learning of the rabbits through smuggled missives.¹¹⁰ Through the Polish resistance, the rabbits' messages could be transmitted to the Polish government in exile in London. Word of the rabbits' plight also made its way to the International Red Cross and the Catholic Church. Eventually, packages from a Catholic organization, *Akcja Katolicka*, arrived in the camp. These packages were addressed to the rabbits personally and included a blessing from the Pope. Though the packages were not distributed, word did get around camp that a list of rabbits (presumably with at least some information about their circumstances) had reached the outside world.¹¹¹ Other organizations, including the International Red Cross, also later sent packages addressed specifically to the rabbits.¹¹² In addition to providing the rabbits with much-needed food supplies, these packages sent a message to the camp administration and doctors, informing them that the operations were already known outside of the camp, so there was no point in killing the rabbits to hide the evidence. By extension, if the rabbits did not survive to liberation, these organizations would have a good idea of why they had been killed.

¹¹⁰Stefan Korbonski, *Fighting Warsaw: The Story of the Polish Underground State 1939-1945*, trans. F. B. Czarnomski (New York: Hippocrene Books, 2004), 284; Tadeusz Bor-Komorowski, *The Secret Army*, (London: The Camelot Press, 1950), 160.

¹¹¹"Maria Moldenhawer," Voices from Ravensbrück.

¹¹²Póltawska, *And I Am Afraid of My Dreams*, 136.

The rabbits occupied an unusual position in the camp, being seen as objects of pity, in need of protection and frequent assistance from others in everyday matters, while also being a group known for their outspokenness and frequent rebellions. They were not truly a resistance organization—they did not come together for the purpose of fighting back; the group was instead formed by the camp administration for its own purposes and was made distinct from the members' previous group affiliations by their new shared status as victims. While the rabbits did fight back, their organized acts of resistance were planned for the sole purpose of preserving their lives against the immediate threat of the experimental operations or the looming threat of mass execution. Their acts of resistance against other things tended to be spontaneous expressions of outrage or solidarity, irrelevant to their group identity, though perhaps inspired by their shared background in resistance organizations back in Poland.

While the rabbits were not a resistance organization, their rebellions against the authorities certainly caught the attention of the rest of the camp. Their major acts of resistance were followed by expressions of support and solidarity from other prisoners. By the time the operations ended, the rabbits were generally well-regarded in the camp, even if they did irritate some of the people around them with how loud and outspoken they tended to be. While the operations themselves had earned the rabbits sympathy from other prisoners, their acts of resistance—both planned and spontaneous—ultimately garnered them the support of much of the camp. This widespread support would prove crucial to their survival in 1944, as the Soviet army approached and the administration began to think seriously about getting rid of the evidence of their crimes.

CHAPTER IV – CAMP SUPPORT

The rabbits may not have been particularly popular when they first arrived in the camp, but the operations they were subjected to had garnered them a considerable amount of sympathy, and they gained even more support as a result of their rebellions. Between their efforts to protect themselves from further operations and the instances in which they protested over injustices unrelated to the experiments, the rest of the camp had numerous opportunities to witness the rabbits standing up to the hated administration. The support that they gained from this meant that by the time the operations ended in late 1943, the rabbits were rather well-regarded. Not everyone in the camp got along well with them, but the majority generally approved. This popularity may not have been the rabbits' intention when rebelling, but it would ultimately prove essential to their survival by contributing significantly to the decisions made by the prisoners to help the rabbits escape execution.

Beginning in approximately mid-1944, conditions in Ravensbrück began to deteriorate significantly as the end of the war approached, with massive transports of prisoners arriving from concentration camps elsewhere in Europe, creating supply and sanitation problems as well as severe overcrowding. It was under these conditions that the doctors and camp administration began to think seriously about hiding the evidence of what they had done. Although by this point, multiple outside organizations had sent parcels addressed to the rabbits by name, making it known to the administration that people outside the camp were aware of the rabbits' situation, the camp administration and doctors still intended to kill the rabbits to prevent them from falling into Allied hands. As

other prisoners began to be transported out of the camp ahead of the approaching Red Army, the administration prepared to take the rabbits for execution. The rabbits, however, were not willing to go quietly to their deaths, and the rest of the camp supported them. What followed was a three month long game of cat and mouse, as the rabbits hid in foreign barracks, changed their identities, and employed various methods of disguise. The entire situation was, as one of the rabbits later put it, “suitable for a sensational film.”¹¹³ What was most remarkable, however, was not that the rabbits themselves fought back—by this point, they had enough of a reputation for rebelliousness that it should hardly have surprised anyone that they put up a fight—but rather, the degree of support they received from the rest of the camp. While the situation could not quite be deemed a full-blown mutiny, there were several instances where it came close. Additionally, not a single one of the rabbits was ever betrayed to the authorities by a fellow prisoner—not even one wearing a green or black triangle, the long-standing enemies of the political prisoners and the women usually most inclined to act as informers. It was because of this unprecedented widespread support in the last few months of the camp’s existence that every one of the rabbits who was alive at the start of the attempted execution was able to survive to liberation. The rest of the camp wanted to ensure that these young women who had endured so many horrors already and who they had unexpectedly come to support would survive to personally share their stories with the world.

Conditions in Ravensbrück had never been what anyone would call pleasant, although they were still better than certain other camps—prisoners transferred from Auschwitz, for example, tended to find Ravensbrück a step up from their previous

¹¹³ “Leokadia Kwiecińska,” *Chronicles of Terror*.

surroundings. In 1944, however, as the Allies began to come upon other concentration camps, the Germans started to ship their prisoners to camps further away from the front. Many of the female prisoners were brought to Ravensbrück, as were huge transports of women and children from Warsaw following the Warsaw Uprising. Ravensbrück had never been intended to house this many people, and conditions in the camp worsened drastically. Three or more times the intended number of prisoners was crammed into the living blocks and there was still not enough room to fit everybody. A huge tent was set up to provide some modicum of shelter from the elements for prisoners waiting to be processed and shipped off to factories, but this tent also became incredibly overcrowded. Clean water became almost impossible to come by and food, except for what was received from Red Cross parcels, became utterly inadequate in terms of both quality and quantity. Sanitation was a thing of the past with lice everywhere and the sewer system breaking down often. Unsurprisingly, disease ran rampant under these conditions and the hospital overflowed with patients.¹¹⁴

During this time, the camp authorities opened a small subcamp known as the *Jugendlager* (the youth camp, so named because the location had once been a correctional facility for juvenile delinquents). At the *Jugendlager*, a gas chamber and crematorium were constructed, and the administration began holding selections— cursory examinations of the prisoners by a doctor to separate the (relatively) healthy and useful workers from those deemed no longer worth keeping alive. These selections were supposed to weed out the sick, the injured, the elderly, and the weakest prisoners, but in practice, even the healthy sometimes had their names written down to be transported to

¹¹⁴ “Maria Moldenhawer,” *Voices from Ravensbrück*.

the *Jugendlager* and ultimately killed. To avoid this fate, women used various tricks to try and make themselves appear healthier at selections, such as improvising makeup to make their cheeks look redder, but any minor sign of weakness or illness could get a prisoner killed. “It was enough to have grey hair, a miserable appearance, some defect in the construction of the body,” one of the rabbits later recalled.¹¹⁵

The rabbits, meanwhile, had been left unharmed by the administration since the end of the operations. Early in 1944, they had been moved to a new block which they shared with other prisoners who warranted a little extra attention from the administration and who were not supposed to make it out of the camp alive, including a group of women from the French resistance as well as a group of Soviet women who, as members of the Red Army (primarily as medical personnel), should have been treated as prisoners of war. There was also a German woman assigned to report on the activities of the prisoners in this block to the administration.¹¹⁶ However, the rabbits were not being singled out for any new special torments and began to form connections with the other groups of women in their new barracks. Their interactions with the Frenchwomen and the Red Army women were both particularly unusual.

The Frenchwomen in Block 32 had arrived in a relatively recent transport. They had been arrested for resistance activities in France and had been transferred to Ravensbrück from Auschwitz. Like the rabbits, they arrived with death sentences. Somewhat unusually, although Poles and Frenchwomen did not tend to get along particularly well in Ravensbrück—the Poles usually viewed French prisoners as

¹¹⁵ “Leokadia Kwiecińska,” *Chronicles of Terror*.

¹¹⁶ “Jadwiga Bielska,” *Chronicles of Terror*.

physically weak and lacking in internal discipline, while French prisoners tended to see the Poles as egotistic and having a tendency to look out exclusively for themselves at the expense of other groups—the rabbits and this particular transport got along oddly well.¹¹⁷ They did have something of a rivalry at times; as one example, Wojtasik describes the divide between the Poles (and Russians’) focus on physical cleanliness and the Frenchwomen’s focus on keeping up their physical appearance as just one of the myriad of “strange ways” their rivalry was expressed.¹¹⁸ However, this rivalry was much less intense than the contempt and hatred that marked the divide between the political and criminal/asocial factions, and close friendships also developed between women of the two groups. Several of the Frenchwomen joined in the efforts to acquire additional food and medical supplies for the rabbits who were still suffering from health issues, and a number of the women—Frenchwomen, Poles, and women of several other nationalities as well—hatched a plan to form an international women’s organization after the end of the war.¹¹⁹

Even more unusual than the friendships between the rabbits and the Frenchwomen were the interactions between the rabbits and the Red Army women. Overwhelmingly, interactions between Poles and Russians in the camp tended to be distinctly negative, colored by national rivalry and ideological differences. However, the rabbits and the Red Army women were remarkably friendly with each other, and the Red Army women would even play a significant role in protecting the rabbits from the initial

¹¹⁷ “Maria Moldenhawer,” *Voices from Ravensbrück*; Moorehead, *A Train in Winter*, 245.

¹¹⁸ Póltawska, *And I Am Afraid of My Dreams*, 137.

¹¹⁹ Moorehead, *A Train in Winter*, 253; “Maria Moldenhawer,” *Voices from Ravensbrück*.

attempts by the administration to round them up for execution.¹²⁰ At least one of the Red Army women also put her medical skills to use to assist the rabbits, helping to remove bone splinters from one of their leg wounds.¹²¹ Although not all of the Poles in the camp approved of the Red Army women, as some objected to their political stance and argued that their assistance to the rabbits could also have been done for propagandistic reasons, the rabbits themselves seemed to get along with the Red Army women particularly well.¹²²

Although many of the rabbits had initially been given positions in work details performing difficult labor, by the last year or so of the camp's existence, most of them had managed to get into positions in lighter jobs, such as the knitting detail, or, surprisingly, positions as camp police. This was fairly light work, since their main duty was to stand guard around the air-raid shelters for shifts of just a couple of hours at a time.¹²³ In keeping with their usual attitude, the rabbits used this job to defy the authorities in numerous ways. For example, after one of them managed to acquire a camera (having traded with a newly arrived prisoner, offering bread that could be eaten right away for a camera that would be taken anyway), the rabbits used their police positions, which required them to stand around in otherwise deserted areas of the camp, to secretly take photographs of their injuries, which a friend leaving on a transport was then able to smuggle out for them.¹²⁴ There were also instances of rabbits using their relative freedom of movement to go up to women waiting to be transported to the

¹²⁰ Póltawska, *And I Am Afraid of My Dreams*, 137.

¹²¹ Symonowicz, *Beyond Human Endurance*, 86.

¹²² Lanckorońska, *Michelangelo in Ravensbrück*, 272.

¹²³ "Zofia Stefaniak," *Chronicles of Terror*.

¹²⁴ Póltawska, *And I Am Afraid of My Dreams*, 138-139.

Jugendlager and either take messages for their families or outright encourage them to escape from the transport, sometimes offering assistance in doing so as well.

Additionally, some particularly daring policewomen managed to lead away entire groups who had been designated for a transport, pretending that they were escorting a column of workers.¹²⁵

The rabbits continued their resistance in other ways as well. Some stole items from the effects stores to provide warm clothing for the women who had recently arrived from Warsaw, for example. Some of the older rabbits, meanwhile, taught secret lessons to younger women (rabbits and others), enabling them to continue their education as much as possible. Some of the younger rabbits, in addition to attending these secret lessons, also participated in the underground scouting organization that had been established in the camp.¹²⁶

As the Red Army approached Ravensbrück and the camp administration set to work covering up the evidence of what had been done there by destroying incriminating records and preparing transports to move the prisoners to camps further into Germany, the doctors and administration decided that the time had come for them to get rid of the evidence of the medical experiments that had taken place in the camp. Even before this point, they had not always been subtle about the fact that this was their intention: the commandant had threatened the rabbits with “immediate enforcement” of their death sentences before, and more than one rabbit had been told by the German hospital

¹²⁵ “Natalia Chodkiewicz,” Voices from Ravensbrück; “Maria Moldenhawer,” Voices from Ravensbrück.

¹²⁶ “Stefania Hryniew,” Voices from Ravensbrück, Polish Research Institute in Lund, accessed June 20, 2019. <https://www.ub.lu.se/en/voices-from-ravensbruck-3>; “Natalia Chodkiewicz,” Voices from Ravensbrück; Symonowicz, *Beyond Human Endurance*, 93.

personnel that they would not be allowed to live.¹²⁷ Janina Iwańska, one of the women behind the letter smuggling committee mentioned in the previous chapter, later wrote that the rabbits had expected that they would be shot just before the Allies reached the camp. Her friends in the political office confirmed that this was what the administration was planning.¹²⁸ Six of the rabbits had been executed in 1943, but with liberation fast approaching, the elimination of the remaining rabbits suddenly became a priority. In February of 1945, Dr. Gebhardt, the head doctor behind the experiments, instructed the administration to execute the remaining rabbits.¹²⁹

Shortly afterward, a list of names—all of the rabbits, as well as three other women from the Lublin transport—was delivered to the rabbits' *blokowa*. The women whose names were listed were forbidden from leaving the block until the next morning, when they would be required to report to the camp administration. This was a measure ordinarily taken to prevent the escape of prisoners who were soon to be executed, but the rabbits were told not to be alarmed. They were simply going to be transported to the camp of Gross-Rosen by train because their injured legs would prevent them from making the trip by foot the way most other prisoners could.¹³⁰ The rabbits were aware that the camp of Gross-Rosen had already been liberated, however, so it clearly could not have been their actual destination. Furthermore, word had already gotten around the camp that Gebhardt had demanded the rabbits' executions. Knowing, then, that this was just a

¹²⁷ “Leokadia Kwiecińska,” *Chronicles of Terror*; “Maria Broel-Plater,” *Chronicles of Terror*; “Helena Piasecka,” *Chronicles of Terror*, Witold Pilecki Institute of Solidarity and Valor, accessed July 1, 2019. https://www.zapisyterroru.pl/dlibra/indexsearch?attId=61&startstr=_all&ipp=60&p=0.

¹²⁸ “Janina Iwańska,” *Chronicles of Terror*.

¹²⁹ “Maria Broel-Plater,” *Chronicles of Terror*.

¹³⁰ “Jadwiga Bielska,” *Chronicles of Terror*.

ruse and that the administration was actually planning to take them to their deaths, the rabbits decided to fight for their lives—literally, if necessary. Other women, both the rabbits’ friends in their own block and women from other blocks, expressed their support and agreed that the rabbits must not be allowed to die so close to the end of the war. At first, they encouraged the rabbits to try to escape, but since this was not feasible, the rabbits and their allies began making preparations to hide within the camp.¹³¹

The next morning, the prisoners turned out for roll call before dawn, as usual. The rabbits who had gone to roll call waited anxiously, preparing to fight or to run, as a group of SS men made its way toward them, carrying the list of women who were to be taken from the roll call square. Suddenly, before the rabbits could be called, the lights illuminating the roll call square went out, plunging the entire square into darkness. Shouts erupted from all over, pandemonium reigned, and amidst all the hullabaloo, the rabbits were able to quickly remove the patches on their uniforms bearing their camp numbers, which the SS could have used to identify them, and escape into various prepared hiding places in theirs and other blocks.¹³² Similar incidents occurred at roll call for the next week, with one of the Red Army women, Szura, somehow managing to circumvent the increased security and cut off the lights every day to allow any rabbits in the roll call square to escape and make it much harder for the authorities to get an accurate count of the prisoners in the square.¹³³

¹³¹ Póltawska, *And I Am Afraid of My Dreams*, 143; “Izabella Rek,” *Chronicles of Terror*, Witold Pilecki Institute of Solidarity and Valor, accessed July 2, 2019. https://www.zapisyterroru.pl/dlibra/indexsearch?attId=61&startstr=_all&ipp=60&p=0.

¹³² “Maria Broel-Plater,” *Chronicles of Terror*; “Stanisława Michalik,” *Voices from Ravensbrück*.

¹³³ Póltawska, *And I Am Afraid of My Dreams*, 145.

The rabbits' spectacular, Hollywood-worthy escape from their scheduled execution was possible only because of the combination of the incredible confusion and disorder in the camp at the time and the aid and support of their fellow prisoners. In theory, it should have been possible for the administration to order all of the prisoners out to the roll call square (presumably during the daytime to prevent electrical issues from interfering), search the assembled women and their emptied barracks, and remove the rabbits by force. However, in practice, the camp was in such a state of constant confusion that an orderly inspection of the entire premises was effectively impossible. The enormous influx of people from other camps had caused enough disorder by itself, with newly arrived prisoners not being processed promptly—in fact, many of the later transports from Auschwitz were not recorded at all. In addition, the overcrowding in the barracks and general disorder meant that it was all but impossible to get an accurate count of how many people were in each block, since the number of prisoners ostensibly in a given block fluctuated constantly. The issue was complicated further by the mortality rates, which were at an all-time high due to rampant disease and starvation. Deaths from recently arrived transports were often not reported at all. At the same time, the camp was being evacuated, with large transports of prisoners leaving the camp nearly every day. It was all too easy for a few prisoners here and there to swap numbers, for someone to be falsely reported dead, or for another person to take the identity of a dead woman.¹³⁴

The chaos and confusion in Ravensbrück may have made it impossible for the camp administration to effectively find the rabbits for themselves, but the widespread

¹³⁴ “Halina Piotrowska,” *Chronicles of Terror*; “Alicja Jurkowska-Serafinowa,” *Voices from Ravensbrück*.

support of the entire camp was also vital to the rabbits' survival. It would have been impossible for more than sixty women to remain hidden throughout the camp without the knowledge and assistance of others. The rabbits hid in barracks attics, among groups of prisoners, even among the sick and dying women in the hospital. For this to be possible, not only did people have to offer hiding spaces to the rabbits in the first place, but others in the vicinity had to cooperate with the scheme, at least enough to not immediately go to the administration and inform them of where the fugitives were hidden. Furthermore, most of the rabbits also needed assistance to obtain food, since, with the exception of the ones who had swapped numbers with another prisoner, they were not included in the official number of women in a particular block and therefore food was not delivered for them. Often, *blokowe* got around this by neglecting to report deaths within their blocks until at least the next day, enabling them to include dead women among their numbers and, therefore, to have additional meals delivered.

One thing that was particularly notable about the rabbit situation was the fact that the camp support was universal, or at least something close to it. Not only did the rabbits remain in hiding for months without being betrayed, but the assistance of other prisoners became commonplace, with shouts of "they're after the rabbits" or "watch out, rabbits" going up whenever it was necessary to signal that any rabbit not in hiding should disappear quickly.¹³⁵ In this way, even those not involved in creating hiding places for the rabbits were able to play an active role in the great rescue operation. Other prisoners offered to exchange numbers with the rabbits, putting themselves in great danger to ensure that the rabbits could not be readily identified. *Blokowe* of various nationalities

¹³⁵ Póltawska, *And I Am Afraid of My Dreams*, 146.

offered the rabbits hiding places in their blocks and camp doctors registered some of the rabbits on the list of those who had died. At one point, the rabbits' block was surrounded by the SS to prevent the escape of anyone hiding inside, but a crowd of other prisoners rushed them, creating as much confusion as possible and allowing the rabbits to slip out in the chaos and hide among the crowd or in nearby buildings.¹³⁶ Some women were replaced at roll call by prisoners from the quarantine barracks, who were not supposed to be at roll call at all, therefore ensuring that the correct number of people were reported present without requiring the rabbits to expose themselves to additional danger.¹³⁷ Other rabbits, who were unable or unwilling to remain in hiding places for such a long time, were advised to disguise themselves as particularly ragged new prisoners or as *Goldstücks*, the camp's term for those prisoners who had become particularly worn down and broken, and who were habitually avoided by others (often called *Muselmen* in other camps).¹³⁸

At the same time that the prisoners were going to elaborate lengths to hide the rabbits, the camp was being steadily evacuated, with transports leaving for other camps just about every day. This, of course, presented a particularly tempting opportunity for the rabbits to preserve their lives by sneaking onto a transport that was headed out of the camp—farther away from the approaching Red Army, perhaps, but also farther from the camp administration and the others who were actively looking for the rabbits. Of course,

¹³⁶ “Halina Piotrowska,” *Chronicles of Terror*, “Stanisława Michalik,” *Voices from Ravensbrück*.

¹³⁷ “Maria Karczmarz,” *Chronicles of Terror*, Witold Pilecki Institute of Solidarity and Valor, accessed July 22, 2019.
https://www.zapisyterroru.pl/dlibra/indexsearch?attId=61&startstr=_all&ipp=60&p=0.

¹³⁸ “Maria Kuśmierczuk,” *Chronicles of Terror*, Witold Pilecki Institute of Solidarity and Valor, accessed July 23, 2019.
https://www.zapisyterroru.pl/dlibra/indexsearch?attId=61&startstr=_all&ipp=60&p=0; Półtawska, *And I Am Afraid of My Dreams*, 151.

the rabbits were not allowed to sign up for these transports, but there was still the possibility of trying to sneak onto one. Overall, the rabbits agreed that if too many of them sneaked out of the camp in this way, the administration would increase its efforts to ferret out the remaining rabbits, perhaps ordering a full, detailed search of the camp. Leaving as a large group was, therefore, not an option. Some rabbits did leave in this way, however; the idea was that it would not only save them from the searches but also would leave several rabbits unaccounted for at Ravensbrück, potentially buying additional time for the others as the camp administration tried to track down the missing women.¹³⁹ The rabbits who left on these transports usually managed to sneak into the group by exchanging identities with another prisoner or by taking the identity of someone who had recently died (usually from a later Auschwitz transport, since deaths from these women frequently went unreported) before putting their names forward for inclusion in one of the evacuation transports. Although the women who were taken on these transports to camps further inside Germany certainly did not have an easy time after leaving Ravensbrück—those who were brought to the camp of Neustadt-Glewe, for example, lived in incredibly overcrowded and vermin-infested barracks with hardly enough food to survive on—they were not being actively hunted in these new surroundings, and could wait out the Red Army in comparative peace.¹⁴⁰

The rabbits who remained in Ravensbrück soon faced new challenges. The search for the rabbits lessened somewhat in intensity after a while, with several of the rabbits even able to resume their regular activities later in March. Two of the women, Zofia Baj

¹³⁹ “Maria Kuśmierczuk,” *Chronicles of Terror*.

¹⁴⁰ “Alicja Jurkowska-Serafinowa,” *Voices from Ravensbrück*; “Halina Piotrowska,” *Chronicles of Terror*.

and Jadwiga Kamińska, went to the camp administration as spokespeople for the rest of the group early on, speaking with the commandant and *Oberaufseherin* Binz about the situation. The administration's representatives were courteous to them, repeating the earlier claims that the rabbits were not going to be executed, but were only going to be transported to another camp for their well-being as part of the general evacuation of Ravensbrück. Baj and Kamińska responded that the rabbits knew that they would be shot if they reported as ordered and that they would not leave in a special transport but would only evacuate in the company of the rest of the prisoners. In later negotiations with the two women, Binz tried to persuade the rabbits to come out of hiding by pointing out that nothing had been done to any of them yet and that she was even aware that a number of them had already managed to sneak out of the camp in evacuation transports, evidently intending for the lack of reprisals to serve as proof of her good intentions. Baj and Kamińska, meanwhile, attempted to play on the camp administration's fear of what would happen to them after the camp was liberated, promising that if the administration protected the rabbits in this situation, things would go better for them after the liberation of the camp.¹⁴¹

Throughout all of this, camp life went on. Selections continued happening, which the rabbits having to go to extra trouble to avoid. Because their injured legs would immediately mark them as unfit for work, the rabbits hid during selections, generally with the knowledge and support of the *blokowa* hiding them, but the selections did claim

¹⁴¹ "Jadwiga Dzido," *Chronicles of Terror*, Witold Pilecki Institute of Solidarity and Valor, accessed July 9, 2019. https://www.zapisyterroru.pl/dlibra/indexsearch?attId=61&startstr=_all&ipp=60&p=0; "Maria Kuśmierczuk," *Chronicles of Terror*; "Maria Moldenhawer," *Voices from Ravensbrück*.

the lives of thousands of other prisoners during this period.¹⁴² Once the selections ended, the commandant told the rabbits' spokespeople that the issue of what was to be done with them would be addressed after the Warsaw transports were finished being evacuated, giving the rabbits a little bit more breathing room for a time. By this point, Red Cross representatives had begun arranging transports as well, assisting with the evacuation by transporting women out of the camp and to neutral Sweden. These transports were organized by nationality, with only certain women eligible to sign up for any given transport. The rabbits were, rather tellingly, not allowed to join any of these transports—at one point, when three rabbits did put their names forward for a Red Cross transport, they were taken off the list almost immediately. One of the rabbits, Zofia Sokólska, did manage to sneak into a transport of Frenchwomen and escaped the camp in that way, but as a rule, the Red Cross transports were not an option for the rabbits. In fact, when the Red Cross tried arranging an evacuation of the rabbits, the administration put off the issue by insisting that the rabbits' injuries would require special train cars and that they could not possibly be evacuated with the other prisoners. The administration was still determined to ensure that the rabbits did not get away.¹⁴³

Although the rabbits had a little more breathing room during the last month or so of their time in Ravensbrück, and some of them took advantage of that to go about the camp more openly than they had previously, some of them remained in hiding or continued to use exchanged numbers, obviously not trusting the administration's word that nothing would happen. And in fact, the administration did still seem to be looking for

¹⁴² "Jadwiga Dzido," *Chronicles of Terror*.

¹⁴³ "Maria Kuśmierczuk," *Chronicles of Terror*; Symonowicz, *Beyond Human Endurance*, 140.

the rabbits, even if they were investing far less energy into it than they previously had, if the rabbits' observations about their continued hiding during roll calls and the SS eventually starting to catch on to the changed numbers were any indication.¹⁴⁴ During this later period, the rabbits were also able to use the evacuations to their advantage in order to smuggle information out of the camp by giving messages to friends who were leaving the camp, requesting outside assistance. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Stanisława Michalik smuggled out a report on the conditions of the camp via a male prisoner of war being evacuated from nearby, while one of the Frenchwomen agreed to smuggle information on the rabbits' situation and their request for outside assistance onto one of the Red Cross transports.¹⁴⁵

Eventually, near the end of April, the administration had arranged as many transports out of the camp as possible. Theoretically, this was the time when they would turn their attention to the problem of the rabbits' continued existence, but by this point, the Red Army had gotten close enough to the camp that liberation was expected any day. The administration could have tried to round up the remaining rabbits and execute them before the Red Army could arrive, as they had initially been intending to do, but by this point, camp personnel had become far more concerned with getting themselves out of harm's way than with any individual group of prisoners. The rabbits left the camp on April 29, 1945 with the rest of the prisoners as part of the general evacuation, just as Baj and Kamińska had earlier said that they would. The column of evacuating prisoners was liberated by the Red Army two days later.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ "Zofia Stefaniak," *Chronicles of Terror*.

¹⁴⁵ "Jan Duchnowski," *Chronicles of Terror*; "Jadwiga Dzido," *Chronicles of Terror*.

¹⁴⁶ "Jadwiga Dzido," *Chronicles of Terror*.

Miraculously, of the 74 rabbits, 63 of them survived the war. Five died from the operations they had been subjected to, and six more were executed in 1943, but all of the rabbits who had gone into the series of events surrounding the evacuation of the camp and the attempted execution of the rabbits managed to survive, even though the administration had actively attempted to round them up and execute them. Clearly, some of the reason for this was the chaos and lack of organization in Ravensbrück in 1945, which would have made it nearly impossible for the administration to fully search the camp for the rabbits the way that they would have been capable of doing earlier, when the camp was less overcrowded and more organized. The chaotic situation also provided the rabbits with opportunities for hiding and for disguising their identities by taking the numbers of dead women or swapping numbers with unregistered prisoners. Still, while the chaos may have opened certain possibilities for the rabbits, their survival would have been impossible without the support—active and otherwise—of the entire camp. Hiding in a foreign block was only an option when the women in that block were willing to accept having a fugitive in their midst, and it would have been all too easy for a prisoner to report to the administration that some of the rabbits were hiding in the attic of their barracks. Additionally, the intervention of other prisoners to allow the rabbits the opportunity to run away and hide in the first place—the sabotaging of the roll call square lights, for example, or the mob that rushed the SS to allow the rabbits to sneak out of their block—required women to outright risk their lives in rebellion against the camp authorities. Whatever role the chaos going on in the camp at the time may have played, the fact remains that for several months, the prisoners of Ravensbrück were essentially in open rebellion against the camp authorities, at least in regard to the fate of the rabbits.

Disorganization may have played a role in enabling this to succeed, but it was not the cause.

The rabbits survived in large part because an incredible number of other prisoners were willing to risk their own well-being and even their lives to help ensure the rabbits' survival. When the rabbits' block had refused to hand over the women who had been selected for operations two years before, the entire block had been threatened with death and punished with three days without food. It was entirely possible, even likely, that a block which was discovered to be hiding one of the rabbits from her execution would be punished at least this severely. Three days without food had been bad enough in 1943. In 1945, when the prisoners were receiving even less food than they had been (and what little food they did receive was much less nutritious), people would almost certainly have died if forced to go three days with no sustenance at all. Despite this, numerous blocks—and not just primarily-Polish blocks, who could have been motivated by their shared nationality—were willing to hide the rabbits for extended periods of time. The prisoners who switched numbers with the rabbits faced an even higher risk of death if they were caught, and the women who rushed at the SS to create enough confusion for the rabbits in the block to escape could have been killed for their actions as well. The fact that the Red Army electrician who repeatedly cut the lights to the roll call square was *not* killed for her actions is probably a miracle in itself.

The rabbits' postwar testimonies record numerous instances in which their fellow prisoners responded to learning of the administration's intention to execute the rabbits by stating that they would not allow the rabbits to be killed so close to liberation. The exact wording of these statements varied from individual to individual, but the idea was

consistent: the rabbits had gone through enough already, they were on the verge of regaining their freedom, and the administration was not going to kill them at the very last moment. Another idea appears numerous times as well: that the rabbits needed to survive the war, not just because they deserved it after everything they had been through, but because they needed to personally be alive to bear witness to what had happened to them. There were multiple instances of prisoners using this idea to push the rabbits into exchanging identities with them for the rabbits' protection, being willing to risk their lives for the rabbits, even when the rabbits themselves were more reluctant. One woman, for example, tried to convince Wanda Wojtasik to switch numbers with her shortly after the rabbits learned that they were going to be executed the next day. Not only did this woman offer to switch numbers, however, but she actually spent a fair amount of time arguing the point, insisting that she was old, would die soon anyway, and had nobody depending on her return, while Wojtasik was young and needed to survive to bear witness. Wojtasik refused to switch numbers with her, not wanting the woman's death on her conscience. The woman was apparently quite determined to ensure that at least one of the rabbits was not rounded up, however, and managed to convince Krystyna Czyż to switch numbers with her instead.¹⁴⁷ Her determination to trade her life for one of the rabbits was, according to her arguments, due to a combination of the rabbits' youth (Wojtasik and Czyż were among the younger rabbits) and to her conviction that the rabbits needed to personally survive the war to tell their story. Another rabbit, Eugenia Mikulska, encountered a similar situation, with a fellow prisoner trying to insist that the

¹⁴⁷ Although Wojtasik's accounts never mention what happened to the woman in the end, the woman did survive the initial roll call, escaping in the confusion along with the rabbits, and Wojtasik later mentions encountering her elsewhere in the camp. Póltawska, *And I Am Afraid of My Dreams*, 144.

two of them trade numbers to ensure that Mikulska would have the opportunity to tell the world what had happened to her. Notably, unlike the situation with Wojtasik, Mikulska's friend was Norwegian, not Polish.¹⁴⁸

The rabbits were protected by the entire camp in part because many of the prisoners believed that the rest of the world needed to know of the horrors that had been committed against these young women and that the rabbits themselves needed to be the ones to share these stories. Additionally, by 1945, the rabbits had long since earned the approval of the majority of the camp. Their protests in previous years had caused much of the camp to not only sympathize with them over their health issues but also to support them in their efforts to preserve their lives and stand up to the administration. Other prisoners had smuggled food to them when they were locked in their barracks after the Bunker protest and had assisted in getting their letters and photographs of their injuries out of the camp, having already become unexpectedly invested in the survival of these women. The rabbits' reputation for rebelliousness had endeared them to much of the camp, who had naturally approved of anyone who stood up to the hated camp authorities responsible for the suffering and death that surrounded everyone at Ravensbrück. The idea that these young women who had suffered so much and who had fought so hard to survive—and who had managed to survive the consequences of their protests so many times—were going to be killed so close to liberation was particularly unbearable.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ Mikulska's friend was later evacuated on a Red Cross transport and returned to her home after the war. Symonowicz, *Beyond Human Endurance*, 184.

¹⁴⁹ The attempted roundup of the rabbits occurred three months before the camp was liberated, but at the time the prisoners had expected the Red Army to arrive much sooner. This expectation also likely had an effect on their response to the potential execution of the rabbits, as they believed that the rabbits would need to stay in hiding for a few weeks at the most, not three months.

At least in regard to this one particular issue, the camp administration's efforts to divide and conquer the prisoners through what Anna Pawełczyńska called the psychological relativity of numbers seems to have been overcome. The prisoners had found one area which everyone—regardless of age, nationality, religion, language, reason for being in the camp, or any of the other countless ways the prisoners were divided—could agree on: the rabbits had to survive. Even if the rest of the camp was still a mass of strange and potentially frightening Others to any given individual, those Others were all supporting the same cause in this one instance. Their way of protecting the rabbits was not a universally agreed upon, organized rebellion or a camp-wide uprising; it was a series of smaller acts of resistance, many of them spontaneous, most undertaken by individuals who were supported by the groups they were part of. Still, thousands of women overcame the divisions and psychological tricks imposed on them to keep them divided and managed to agree upon at least this one goal. In fact, the universality of this goal made it safer for individuals to get involved—after all, there was much less need to worry about informers when the entire camp was doing the same illegal thing.

The attitude of the camp toward the rabbits when the administration began its efforts to round them up for execution could not have been more different from the reception the rabbits had received when they had first arrived at Ravensbrück several years before. Initially, the rabbits had not only been objects of scorn for their lack of experience in the camp, but they had also been associated with the worst elements of society by the camp administration and targeted with rumors about the alleged violent criminal activities that had brought them to the camp in the first place. The operations had made some progress in changing the way the other prisoners viewed them, but it was

the rabbits' rebellions that had swung popular opinion firmly onto their side, earning them the support of the other prisoners. After each of the rabbits' major rebellions, other prisoners had found ways to express this support. After each time the rabbits were punished for their attempts at preserving their lives, other prisoners had been outraged—an effect the rabbits had deliberately encouraged at times, true, but also a fairly natural side effect of witnessing these young women collapsing from exhaustion at work or struggling to stand at roll call after their bed cards had been prematurely taken away for (relatively politely) objecting to their being illegally experimented on. This outrage, this solidarity, this support was what ultimately led to the incredible series of events in 1945 which rendered the camp administration incapable of executing a particular group of prisoners that it had actively sought to kill, and which ultimately enabled the rabbits to survive the war and bear witness to what had been done to them.

CHAPTER V – CONCLUSION

Most of the rabbits were liberated either while being evacuated from Ravensbrück with the rest of the camp or, in the case of those who had left the camp by slipping into earlier transports, when the Red Army reached the concentration camps they had been brought to. Some of the rabbits even managed to escape from the mass evacuation on their own, taking advantage of lax supervision and the chaotic circumstances. After their liberation, six of the rabbits made their way to western Europe or the United States, while the rest returned to Poland. Several of them then testified in postwar trials of Gestapo and concentration camp personnel, including the Doctors' Trial in Nuremberg, finally fulfilling the wishes expressed by numerous other prisoners that the rabbits personally tell the world what had been done to them. As a result of these trials, Dr. Gebhardt, the man responsible for organizing the operations in Ravensbrück, was executed, as were several of the other Ravensbrück doctors. Dr. Fischer, who performed most of the operations, was sentenced to life imprisonment but was released early after his sentence was reduced. Dr. Oberheuser, who was also involved with the operations, was sentenced to twenty years in prison but was released early for good behavior. She worked as a children's doctor in Germany until her connection to Ravensbrück was discovered and legal action was taken to strip her of her medical license.¹⁵⁰

With the war over and the trials finished, the rabbits attempted to return to their former lives as best they could, but the effects of the operations still lingered. Almost all of the women suffered from various health issues for the rest of their lives. Most had

¹⁵⁰ "Doctors' Trial Transcripts." Microfilm Publication M887; Symonowicz, *Beyond Human Endurance*, 20-21.

difficulty walking or standing for long periods, and many also faced heart problems, recurring bouts of fever, and other health complications from the operations and their incomplete recoveries. They were also haunted by psychological trauma from their experiences. During the following twenty-five years, seven of the rabbits died due to the health problems they had sustained from the operations.¹⁵¹ Many of those who survived were limited in the types of careers they were able to pursue because of their poor health, and some were unable to work at all. The rabbits received a monthly disability pension from the Polish government, but this pension was often not enough to entirely support themselves or their families, forcing some of the rabbits to go to work despite their poor health, which often exacerbated the problems. Although some concentration camp survivors received compensation from the German government, the rabbits were initially excluded because they had been members of resistance organizations, forcing them to spend decades fighting to receive money to help them pay for medical bills and to supplement their disability pensions.¹⁵²

Some of the rabbits still managed to do well after the war despite their circumstances. Krystyna Czyż, for example, became a professor at the University of Lublin, married, and had two children. Her friend Wanda Wojtasik also married and wrote her memoir in an effort to combat her recurring nightmares about the camp. She became a psychiatrist and was a personal friend of Pope John Paul II.¹⁵³ Although one of

¹⁵¹ Symonowicz, *Beyond Human Endurance*, 20.

¹⁵² Correspondence from the Ravensbrück Lapins Committee to Caroline Ferriday, 7 February, 1958, Caroline Ferriday collection (1994.A.0334), United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington DC.

¹⁵³ According to the memoir's introduction, the nightmares did stop after she wrote her story down. Póltawska, *And I Am Afraid of My Dreams*, 11.

the initial group that had smuggled letters out of the camp, Krystyna Iwańska, died after the war, her sister Janina survived and went on to study journalism. One of the worst injured rabbits, Jadwiga Dzido, became one of the main spokespeople for the rabbits after the war, although she continued to suffer from her injuries. Despite these comparatively positive stories, however, the majority of the surviving rabbits indicated in the 1950s that their injuries from the operations still negatively impacted their ability to find and keep a job and that the money they received from the Polish government was not enough to live on, particularly for those who had to support family members.

In 1958, an American woman named Caroline Ferriday learned of the rabbits' plight and began seeking to assist the rabbits in their efforts to get compensation from the German government, as well as helping to organize a program to bring the rabbits to the United States for a year of free medical treatment.¹⁵⁴ During their time in the United States, the rabbits stayed with families who had volunteered to host them and received specialized medical treatment tailored to their specific injuries. Though not all of the rabbits were able to make the trip, with a few unwilling or unable to leave their families or their work, those that did take advantage of the opportunity expressed in various newspaper interviews that the experience and the generosity of everyone involved had done a lot to restore the faith in humanity that their experiences with the operations and their failed efforts to get compensation afterward had taken from them.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ Clipping from June 28, 1958 Saturday Review article "Dialogue in Warsaw: Report on the Ravensbruek Lapins," Helena Piasecka collection (2007.158), United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington DC.

¹⁵⁵ Clipping from January 3, 1959 Cleveland News article "City Opens Heart to Nazi Victim," Helena Piasecka collection (2007.158), United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington DC; Clipping from newspaper article "Tortured By Nazis, Teacher Marks Thanksgiving in Bedford Heights," Helena Piasecka collection (2007.158), United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington DC.

Most studies of resistance in the concentration camps focus on the best-known camps, particularly Auschwitz, and look primarily at organized resistance groups. The Ravensbrück rabbits, while a distinct group within the camp, were not an organized resistance, and neither were most of the people who assisted them. Although the rabbits did oppose the camp administration, most of their activities were either relatively spontaneous or were undertaken in response to an immediate threat. The rabbits were unified not by a goal of resistance to the camp administration but rather by their shared status as victims of the medical experiments and their shared goal of ensuring their survival. Despite not being a true resistance organization, however, the rabbits were willing to openly defy the camp authorities to an unusual degree, something which led to a remarkable amount of solidarity and support from the rest of the camp and, ultimately, to the complete failure of the camp administration to eliminate the rabbits as planned. This situation occurred from the spontaneous support of the majority of the camp for a group of prisoners who, while openly defiant, ultimately were not an resistance organization, something easily overlooked when we examine only the actions of organizations formed specifically with resistance in mind.

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