

Judith Bubar Agassi

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**Life, death and sacrifice - Women and family in the Holocaust**  
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## **“Camp Families” in Ravensbrück and the Social Organization of Jewish Women Prisoners in a Concentration Camp**

*Judith Buber Agassi*

Before describing the small groups that are the focus of this article, it is essential to discuss the problem of why there was so little group-wide social organization among the Jewish prisoners of Ravensbrück. What kind of social organization could concentration camp prisoners establish? It has to be remembered that the SS intended to prevent not only any initiative at grass-root prisoner organization, but even simple ties of friendship among them. The prisoners were intended to be nameless numbers, ruled by a hostile hierarchy of members of the SS, of persons hired and trained by them or under their authority. The rulers of the camp could at will change the barracks and the place of work of any prisoner, decide on their transfer to other camps, send them to the *Strafblock* (“bunker”), punish them by flogging, and “select” them to be killed.

In order to maintain their kind of order and discipline, they used a system of so-called *Häftlingselbstverwaltung* (prisoner self-administration), appointing prisoners to the positions of *Stubenälteste* (room leader), *Blockälteste* (block leader), and *Lagerläuferin* (camp runner). Usually the holders of these positions, the *Funktionshäftlinge*, did not belong to the group that they had to supervise.

In Ravensbrück, we know of a time between 1940 and 1941 when all or most of the Jewish prisoners, about 1000, lived in one block and had a remarkable Jewish *Blockälteste*, Olga Benário. Group-wide cultural and educational activities took place only during that time. The intention of the SS was to bribe the *Funktionshäftlinge* by small improvements in their conditions of housing and clothing and by granting them some freedom of movement in the camp, to make them serve as loyal enforcers of the SS policies and disregard the interests of their charges. Any contravention of the orders of the SS by the *Funktionshäftlinge* that the camp authorities discovered resulted in cruel punishment. An additional system of the prevention of attempts of prisoners to organize was a network of informers.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, we know of several categories of non-Jewish prisoners with well-developed and very effective group-wide organizations that were tight-knit and even exclusive. Thus, the German political prisoners were well organized, and their mainly Communist leadership enforced its decisions by measures of strict discipline, including even the ostracism of members of their group who disregarded orders of their leadership, or of disliked prisoners outside their group. With the help of its strict organization, the German “political” group certainly was effective in ensuring a somewhat better standard of housing and nutrition for its own members. Its leadership decided on the form and extent of measures of help and support to members of

other groups according to their judgment of their relative "value". Obviously, they considered Communist and other left-wing prisoners of other nationalities, as well as all the prisoners from the Soviet Union, as their natural friends and allies. Many members of the German "political" group had been imprisoned for many years and thus had acquired positions of power. Naturally, they had no language problems of communication with the camp authorities.

Whereas the German Communist prisoners were used to strict centralized discipline from the party practice of "democratic centralism", the Jehovah's Witnesses (*Bibelforscherinnen*) based their group organization in the camp on continuing the extremely disciplined way of life of their religious sect. This way of life ruled out any fight over scarce food, stealing, untidiness or neglect of work duties. They saw themselves as "the chosen few" and considered it their sacred duty to choose martyrdom over (even formal) betrayal of the sect. This restricted their contacts with members of other groups to missionary efforts and caused them to sacrifice the lives of seriously sick members that could have been saved by signing a formal declaration of leaving the sect. Different interpretations of their sacred texts caused division among those demanding more or less extreme refusal to perform any work duties that could be construed as helping the war effort. This resulted in a group of their "radicals" first to be sent to Auschwitz and then to return to Ravensbrück to be executed.

The Red Army group of prisoners impressed their fellow prisoners by their strict military-style discipline, and by their collective refusal to perform any work for the camp authorities except for work in the camp hospital (*Revier*).

Perhaps the most effective organization of any national group of prisoners was that of the Poles; it has been documented in two books.<sup>2</sup> From the beginning of the arrival of Polish political prisoners in 1942, the initiative for their internal organization came from the Roman Catholic political resistance. Their central and most active cores were the seven groups of the Catholic Scout Movement (*Murów*) and the organization of the "Friends of the Scouts".<sup>3</sup> Their main strength lay in their religious and patriotic ideology and practice. They organized regular educational activities (preparing young girls for school-leaving exams), as well as prayer and religious services, all of which the camp authorities strictly forbade. In the later stages of the camp, after larger numbers from the Polish left-wing socialist/Communist underground had arrived in the camp, they even succeeded to establish a common platform with them. By gaining access to the most important places of work, they succeeded to obtain enough food and clothing in order to save many of the weakest members of their group. These were the youngest, the oldest, and especially the "*Kaninchen*" ("guinea pigs"), those Polish political prisoners on whose legs horrible "experimental" bone-transplant operations had been performed. They established a widespread illegal correspondence with their families in Poland. They also established contact with the International Red Cross in Switzerland through Polish POWs, stationed near the work places of some of the Polish women, and even succeeded to inform the BBC about the "selection" of a large group of

old and sick prisoners and their deportation to the death camps of Majdanek and Auschwitz.<sup>4</sup> They were effective in hiding “*Kaninchen*” from being executed, but could not prevent the execution of more than 160 of their members, who had been condemned to death while in Polish prisons.<sup>5</sup>

One of the most amazing group activity of the Polish organization, initiated by Ursula Winska, was the theft of copies of hundreds of arrival lists from the *Massar Nähstube* (the sewing workshop<sup>6</sup>) with the declared intention “to let the world know what happened”.<sup>7</sup> The lists were packed in 70 small parcels, to be carried by 70 Polish prisoners under their clothes. Most of these were evacuated on the last train of the Bernadotte humanitarian rescue mission,

This highly organized Polish group was composed nearly exclusively of women and young girls who had been arrested for political resistance activities, and thus were ideologically motivated. There were in the camp, however, thousands of Polish prisoners who had reached Ravensbrück as deported “civilians”, and many who had been working in Germany as foreign laborers, either forced or voluntary, and had been charged with some offence and imprisoned. This group was not organized at all.

The Austrian, the Czech and the French groups, as well as the Norwegian group, were composed mainly of women arrested for resistance activities. They also had well-developed group organizations that were not (or only partially) dominated by the Communists.

Was it at all possible for the Jewish prisoners of Ravensbrück to develop an organization including all or most of the Jewish prisoners in the camp at a certain time, or at least an organization or organizations of the major “national” Jewish groups? As conditions changed radically and as there was little continuity between the Jewish populations at different times, I find it convenient to divide the six years of the existence of the camp into five periods. First, from 1939 to the end of January 1942, when nearly the entire Ravensbrück Jewish population was killed in the euthanasia gas chamber of Bernburg; second, from February 1942 to the end of February 1943, when the last of the Jewish women were sent to Auschwitz and the camp became “*judenfrei*”; third, from March 1943 to the end of July 1944, when special groups of Jewish women and children arrived; fourth, from August 1944 to the end of the year, when thousands of mainly Hungarian and Polish Jewish women arrived for the express purpose to be sent as slave laborers to the war industry in external labor camps; finally, fifth, from the beginning of 1945 to the beginning of May – the end of the camp and of the war – when Ravensbrück was an extermination camp.

Was it possible for the Jewish prisoners of Ravensbrück to organize? Obviously the Jewish prisoners of Ravensbrück lacked the elements that served as the basis of the successful group organization of the non-Jewish groups mentioned above. They lacked a common homeland, a shared patriotism: they came from 15 different countries. Even in those countries, where many Jewish inhabitants had considered themselves not only loyal but even patriotic citizens, as for instance Italy and Hungary, the local political leadership had eventually collaborated with the German

allies or occupation forces in the rounding-up, imprisonment, deportation and destruction of their Jewish population. Not only did all the Jewish prisoners, but also the members of each of the "national" Jewish groups, lack a common political ideology, but even a common religious belief, practice and organization. Zionist ideology and Zionist youth organizations had affected only a minority. Only from the large group of survivors from Lodz, several young women remembered early affiliation with Zionist organizations.

As for religion, a considerable number came from traditional Jewish families, especially those originating from Poland, from the Hungarian rural areas, from those parts of Romania and Slovakia occupied by Hungary, and also from Belgium and the Netherlands. For many of them home life had been that of closely knit large families. Their families had still observed Jewish holidays and the dietary laws, and were opposed to marriage to non-Jews. They accepted the fact of their being Jewish. Yet this common traditional religious background of part of the Jewish women and girls from different countries apparently did not serve as a sufficient basis for a common social organization. We have to remember two additional factors. First, communication, even between those with a traditional Jewish background but coming from different countries, was often difficult. Second, Jewish women traditionally play a much less active role than men in religious ceremonies, services, prayer and especially studies.

Many of the better-educated and urban Jewesses came from a more or less assimilated background.<sup>8</sup> What all or most of the Jewish prisoners knew of Jewish culture including religion, history, literature and music, was evidently not enough to serve as a substantial bond among them. Yet for some of them their cruel experiences caused them to develop a kind of Jewish national pride or consciousness. One Israeli survivor, who was as a child in Ravensbrück, housed with her mother in a "Block" together with Yugoslav non-Jewish women, reports that when these women, who had all been arrested for resistance activities, constantly performed small acts of sabotage at work, and the whole "Block" was punished, she asked her mother, "Why do they do this?" Her mother answered: "Because they have a Fatherland". She then decided that she too wanted to have a fatherland, and would go there. The US survivor, Halina Nelken, describes in her remarkable diary from the Krakow ghetto and from the Plaszów concentration camp, how, as a 17-year-old girl, who had grown up in an upper-middle-class cultured and assimilated family, she developed a Jewish national consciousness. After a massacre in the ghetto, she writes: "What words could describe how we are being driven to slaughter? Worse than cattle. Why? What fault is it of ours? ... Of course I know – we are Jewish. Suddenly, with the broom in my hand, I straightened up, as though the suffering of my nation had given me strength and pride. At this moment I realized what a powerful bond common suffering is. My nation! My *Jewish* nation, no longer just my *Polish* nation, as I had felt until now".<sup>9</sup>

Most important, the Jewish prisoners lacked the conviction, common to all those

non-Jewish prisoners imprisoned for political and/or religious opposition to the Nazis, that their suffering was the result of their previous effective actions against the regime of their persecutors and jailers. Only in the first and the second periods (from 1939 to the end of 1942) the SS still maintained the fake division of the Jewish prisoners into groups with different reasons for arrest. The persecution and imprisonment of nearly all of them in fact rested on their belonging to a group defined by the Nazis as “racially inferior”. With the outbreak of the War, all members of this group were declared enemies of the German people and condemned to death by the Nazi leadership.

During all five periods, most of the Jewish prisoners were housed together and worked in separate Jewish work groups. Contacts between them and non-Jewish prisoners were rare, discouraged, and even banned by the SS. Circumstances permitting or hampering internal Jewish group organization varied very much from period to period.

During the first period, the Jewish prisoners, though from various social backgrounds and political convictions, nearly all spoke German and had lived in Germany or Austria and the Czech Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Nearly all of them were housed in the *Judenblock* (*Baracken* 9 or 11) and in 1940 and 1941 had a Jewish *Blockälteste* (barrack leader).<sup>10</sup> Thus in this period, before the general conditions of housing, hygiene and food, deteriorated considerably, in spite of the segregation, the especially onerous work-tasks and the special humiliations meted out to the Jewish prisoners, the internal life of the *Judenblock* was relatively orderly. For some time it was still possible to conduct some regular cultural and educational activities, secretly organized by several courageous and well-educated women. Thus, in spite of the constant threat of punishment and persecution by the camp authorities, a certain Jewish prisoner society existed during this period.

After the mass murder of nearly all the Jewish prisoners of the first period between February and April 1942 in the gas chamber of Bernburg, it could hardly be expected that the few survivors from that first period, together with the several hundreds of new arrivals, could develop a new Jewish camp society before the mass deportation to Auschwitz on October 5, 1942.

During the third period of 1943 to the end of July 1944, the period of the “special groups”, we know about a surprising measure of social organization within the family groups that had arrived from the Dutch internment camp Westerbork, sufficient to establish a school-class for their children in Ravensbrück.<sup>11</sup> These families obviously had known each other for some time in Westerbork. We also know about children’s birthday parties, friendship groups, some outdoor play, and the availability of paper and pencils for the children.<sup>12</sup>

There is, however, no evidence for a similar social organization of the Belgian group, most of whom claimed Turkish citizenship and were of Sephardic or part-Sephardic origin and had arrived from Brussels and from the Malines (Mechelen) internment camp.

As to the group of *Mischlinge*, who had arrived together from Auschwitz and most of whom had originated from the "German Reich", there is no evidence of any special group solidarity within the entire group, despite their unusual common fate. The remarkable larger group of friends (about 20) that later formed at the Siemens factory was not based on any special ties between the several members of the *Mischlingstransport* working there and later also living there. It included many other fellow workers, Jewish and also some non-Jewish.<sup>13</sup> There was little chance that the thousands of Jewish arrivals of the fourth period (the five months of August to the end of 1944) would develop a common social organization for all or most Jewish prisoners. The basic reason for this was their instability. Over 30% of them stayed in Ravensbrück for only a short time, often less than a month, before being sent on to – at least – eight different external labor camps.

But also for many of those staying in Ravensbrück until the end of the fourth period and into the fifth, there existed serious problems of communication. Most of those classified as Hungarian or as Polish, the two major "national" groups of Jewish arrivals, had no common language. Obviously most Hungarian Jews did not speak Polish and Polish Jews certainly did not speak Hungarian, but, most important, most Hungarian Jews neither spoke nor understood Yiddish. Most Romanian Jews and many French and Belgian Jews could communicate in Yiddish, and German Jews could at least understand it. For Polish Jews with a secondary education and for those living in Polish cities with a large German-speaking population, German was another important language of communication in the camps, not only with their German jailers, but also with many Jewish and non-Jewish prisoners. A minority of the Hungarian and Romanian women and girls had learned German at school. Many Czech, Slovak and Dutch Jews spoke German, and of course all German and Austrian Jews too. Yet the hard-core of the Hungarian, as well of the Italian and the Greek-Jewish prisoners, suffered from serious communication problems. The hard-core of the two largest groups of Jewish Ravensbrück prisoners of the fourth and of the fifth periods from Hungary and from Poland could not understand each other. This proved a serious obstacle to the development of a general group-wide Jewish social organization, among the Jewish prisoners in the main camp of Ravensbrück as well as in its two major external camps – Malchow and Neustadt-Glewe.

Who were the Hungarian-Jewish women who remained in Ravensbrück at least for several months? Only a very few had arrived in August and September 1944. The rest had arrived with the direct transports from Budapest in November 1944 and also with the nearly 1,700 arrivals from the cruel labor camp of Frankfurt/Walldorf. All of them suffered from the horrendous housing and sanitary conditions, and the starvation diet accorded to new arrivals towards the end of 1944. The physical condition of the arrivals from Frankfurt/Walldorf was especially bad.

Who were the Polish groups who remained in Ravensbrück for at least several months? Out of the 500 arrivals directly from the Lodz ghetto on October 22, 1944, 200 women had been sent to Wittenberg, and the children were eventually sent to

Königs Wusterhausen. The members of the Ghetto Piotrkow direct transport of December 2, 1944 remained in the camp until March 1945, when many of them were sent to Bergen-Belsen.

Many of the Polish arrivals of the last two transports from Auschwitz in November and December 1944, and of the transport from Czestochowa at Christmas 1944, were soon sent to Malchow. The fact that many women from these three transports were eventually evacuated to Sweden from Malchow, raises the possibility that this Polish-Jewish group that spent four months together in Malchow may have developed group-wide ties.<sup>14</sup>

Apparently there was no wider social organization among the Hungarian Jews staying in Ravensbrück. In the infamous tent and later in the rundown blocks where they were housed, they lived not as a separate group, but together with other groups. Among them were especially Polish-Jewish women with whom they did not succeed to communicate and to overcome mutual animosity and suspicion. They were unable to protect themselves from the extremely bad *Blockälteste* and *Stubenälteste* who systematically stole their food and prevented them from using the scanty washing and sanitary facilities of the block. Although among the Hungarians small groups appear to have played an important role, we hear little about any wider group activities. Seren Tuvel reports having told to larger groups stories about her childhood and her rural, traditional Jewish family, stories that involuntarily tended to end in descriptions of the wonderful food eaten at holidays and festivals.<sup>15</sup>

Surprisingly, even within the large group (originating from different countries) of those that arrived as survivors of the "Auschwitz *Todesmarsch*" (death march) of January 1945, many had a common history of living and working at the "Union" factory in Auschwitz. This included even the participation of several of them in underground activities. Nevertheless, the ties broke down during and after the "Auschwitz *Todesmarsch*"<sup>16</sup> due to sheer exhaustion. Although at least 81 of the "Union" workers were sent to Neustadt-Glewe, under the extreme conditions of starvation and epidemics, even the common history of this group was not sufficient to permit the creation of a larger group there. After the war, the "Union" survivors established a worldwide organization.

There was no large-scale social organization, and hardly any medium-scale social organization, among the Jewish prisoners of the fourth and fifth periods. The affinity between those from the same country of origin, and especially those from the same hometown, such as those who had come from Lodz, Piotrkow, Krakow, or Budapest, facilitated cultural activities. These were telling the contents of books, reciting poetry, singing songs, and listening to one of the astonishingly many artists in the camp. Among a larger group of women and girls from Poland and the Ukraine, starving in Malchow, the common greeting in the morning was, "What are you cooking today?" While some described pierogi or knishes, everybody knew that two of them "kept kosher", and listened to their chicken soup and noodles recipes.<sup>17</sup>

To sum up, we have seen three major obstacles to the formation of wider group

ties and activities among the Jewish prisoners of Ravensbrück in the fourth and fifth periods: the instability resulting from the constant transports to labor camps, the appalling conditions that caused apathy and extremely high mortality, and the tensions resulting mainly from communication difficulties.

Nevertheless, there were rare instances of overcoming the animosities and tensions between different Jewish groups, as well as instances of leadership and initiative. Examples are: the heroic leadership by speech and by singing of Franka on the Burgau transport,<sup>18</sup> the story of Irmgard Judith Berger, now Becker, who reports that in Malchow her mother, Pepi Berger, prevented the throwing out of the dying typhoid patients, who were soiling their surroundings, from the block, by convincing her block-mates that as Jews it was their duty not to abandon the dying.

One exception of a successful larger group organization that existed during the fourth and fifth period was that of the nearly 500 women and girls who had been sent from Auschwitz to the small all-Jewish labor camp at Krupp/Neukölln, which arrived in Ravensbrück as late as April 1945. Their group organization carried over to Ravensbrück during the short time they stayed there, facilitated their evacuation to Sweden as a group and persisted there.

As to the problematic role of those designated *Funktionshäftlinge* (prisoners appointed as functionaries), most non-Jewish functionaries prevented the forming of any solidarity among the Jewish prisoners. Later, in the labor camps, there were also some Jewish *Blockälteste* and even a *Lagerälteste* (camp leader). Several survivors mention Jewish women whom they call "the Auschwitz élite" who behaved badly when appointed, but they also mention several very decent and resourceful Jewish *Blockälteste*, *Stubenälteste* and *Lagerläuferinnen* in labor camps, who encouraged the formation of positive ties among the prisoners.<sup>19</sup>

Only one medium-sized group for special purposes had been mentioned by the survivors of the fourth and fifth periods. This group was the "burial-kommando" (special work crew) that was organized by Rena Kornreich in Neustadt-Glewe. It included ten girls who, each at her own initiative and request, volunteered to move each day the dead bodies that lay outside the *Revier* on a cart with a box to a burial place, first in the Neustadt-Glewe cemetery, and later in the woods.<sup>20</sup>

Now to my main point, that is the crucial role of small-group ties or "camp-family" ties. My claim is that in the life of the Jewish women prisoners of Ravensbrück, a special form of social organization played a crucial role. I called it here the small group or the camp family. This was other than the ties that existed between mothers and their young children under age thirteen. The arrival of family transports, including mothers with their young children, or even mother-substitutes, especially aunts with nephews and nieces, were the exception in Ravensbrück. Late in 1943 and early in 1944 such family transports arrived, especially from the Netherlands and Belgium. Among the flood of thousands of arrivals, starting in August 1944, such family transports, one from France, several from Slovakia and from Italy,<sup>21</sup> as well as three direct transports from Polish ghettos (i.e. not via Auschwitz),<sup>22</sup> were the

exception. Although maternal caregiving was extremely difficult under concentration camp conditions, it was considered by all to be the natural behavior of women. This caregiving was truly heroic and certainly contributed to saving the lives of many of the children.

My intention here is not to describe these maternal-child relations, but to elaborate on a special form of small group, sometimes called “camp-family”.

From August 1944 the thousands that were transported to Ravensbrück from Auschwitz, as well as the arrival with the direct transports who had walked from Budapest to the Austrian border, all were of working age. They rarely included girls under 16 or women over 50. Among the 2305 names of arrivals, survivors of the “Auschwitz *Todesmarsch*” of January-February 1945 known to us, we know of only 23 children up to 13. Yet a great number of mothers with daughters either teenage or in their early twenties, and even many more sisters and cousins from the same city, small town or ghetto, arrived from August 1944 to the end of the camp in the first days of May 1945. There were also groups that included sisters-in-law. Many young women had been working in the same workplace or had gone to school together. Middle-aged women played the role of mother-substitutes to the daughters of their neighbors. This was the basis of small real-family and substitute-family groups, usually not larger than four people. Sometimes a larger group of sisters, for example, the 6 Schreiber sisters (from the Frankfurt/Walldorf transport) and the 6 Stern sisters (from the Krupp/Neukölln transport), formed such a family group.

The most common small group was that of two sisters, two best friends,<sup>23</sup> or of a mother with one or two daughters.<sup>24</sup> If a woman had only one sister or friend, a separation may have proved fatal. Kato Gyulai, who was deported from Budapest with her younger sister Evi, was separated from her when Kato was “selected” for work in Spandau. The fact that she could not prevent this separation and that she never saw her sister again, was for her the most tragic event in her Holocaust experience.<sup>25</sup>

Lidia Vago (Rosenfeld) describes her frenzied attempt not to be separated from her sister Aniko (who was away to have the bandage on her freshly operated hand changed) at the roll-call for the transport from Ravensbrück to Neustadt-Glewe. She had tried to reserve a place in a row of five for her sister. She writes: “this was not an easy task, considering that lonely women were a rarity in the camps, because being alone meant near certain death. Everyone without a close relative, or a good friend, had to have a *Lagerschwester* (camp sister), or the younger girls whose mothers had been gassed, were adopted by mature women”.<sup>26</sup> Seren Tuvel described the danger of separation at the time of the selection for the Burgau transport as follows: “A great cry went out, a moan that welled up from the bottom of despair. Each pair would be cut in two, leaving every woman far less than half of what she had been in a pair. Having a sister, a cousin, or a friend in the camp with you was sometimes the only thing that gave you the courage to go on; each lived solely for the other”.<sup>27</sup>

Even Silvia Grohs, the actress and singer, who had a gift for making friends, needed the friendship of an older woman, a “camp-mama”. She was Gemma Glück the

Hungarian-Jewish twin sister of Fiorello La Guardia, the then mayor of New York.<sup>28</sup>

Several memoirs describe the adoption of single girls by a mother-daughter "small group". Erika Kounio Amariglio describes how her mother "adopted" three Greek girls at the beginning of the "Auschwitz *Todesmarsch*", and thus a "camp family" of five was formed. It lasted through the death march, their stay at Ravensbrück, the months in Malchow, the evacuation march from Malchow, until their arrival to the American Occupation Zone.<sup>29</sup>

Lidia Vago also described how after existing for some time as just a small group of two sisters, in Neustadt-Glewe they found two women known to them from the "Union" factory of Auschwitz and formed a group of four. Somewhat later they found another congenial group of four and regularly told each other stories and relieved the hunger pangs by exchanging extravagant recipes.

Substitute-family groups could also form on the basis of a common unusual background, such as the Eva Dános group of four baptized Jewish women from Budapest, who together read a French prayer book that they had found in the Ravensbrück garbage.<sup>30</sup>

Groups of this size played a crucial role in "organizing" minimal food and clothing, trading them against other necessities such as medicine, protecting its members against aggressive others and the theft of essentials, supporting them in case of illness, dragging them along during the cruel foot-marches and preventing suicide.

Why did well-organized small groups usually not try to include additional members? Seren Tuvel's answer was: it was dangerous to make friends with more people, even if they appeared congenial, because you were always in danger of losing them, as mortality was so high.<sup>31</sup>

The small groups tended to be a combination of stronger and weaker members. There usually was one stronger woman whose authority was accepted and who forbade any behavior that she considered as life-threatening. As Seren Tuvel described it: "I felt completely responsible for these three young girls; to me we were all sisters. I had to do everything in my power to enable us to remain alive. Survival became a matter of establishing rules and adhering to them religiously. I was the oldest; I made the rules. We were of the old European school of thought: you listened to the oldest even if she was a fool".<sup>32</sup> A basic rule was that the members of the group should stay together against all odds, when being assigned to a workplace or being "selected" to an external labor camp.<sup>33</sup> It was the combination of receiving help and feeling responsible for the wellbeing of others that played an important role in the will to live, as well as of avoiding many dangers.

Yet even the best organized small group could not guarantee survival. Three of the four members of Eva Dános' group succumbed to typhoid fever in the locked wagon of the Burgau death-train; one of the four members of Seren Tuvel's group died in the same wagon.

Yet, a small group of sisters, cousins and friends, sometimes even succeeded to save one of their members from certain death. Klara Landau, later Bondy, succeeded

together with her cousin and her friend to convince the S.D.G. (*SS-Sanitätsdienstgrad*; medical orderly) to remove her sister's name from the list of those already "selected" to be returned from the *Revier* in Neustadt-Glewe to Ravensbrück to be gassed there<sup>34</sup>. Yet, Lea Schwalb-Kisch, also a member of a small group of sisters, who did not know of the danger of "selection" from the Neustadt-Glewe *Revier*, continues to blame herself for not having saved her sister Blimi from the *Revier*, a mere two weeks before liberation.<sup>35</sup>

It is interesting that many of the memoirs and interviews with survivors mention that at the time of liberation or soon after, in spite of their physical weakness, they found enough energy to form larger medium-sized groups of friends or acquaintances. These groups, with between 8 and 20 members, undertook the tasks of finding temporary housing, food, clothing, and most important – of organizing the journey to wherever they wanted to travel or to return.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, as I cannot compare this large group of Jewish women concentration camp prisoners to a group of Jewish men prisoners under equal conditions, I can only speculate that the proliferation and vitality of "small-group" or "camp-family" social organization among the Jewish Ravensbrück women prisoners was a phenomenon facilitated by the widespread socialization of girls towards a high degree of responsibility, support and care of others, especially of weaker, younger or older family members, including even a sense of obligation towards those not especially loved by them.<sup>37</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Buber-Neumann, Margarete, *Als Gefangene bei Stalin und Hitler*, Munich 2002, p. 295.
- 2 Wanda Kiedrzyńska, *Ravensbrück, kobiece obóz koncentracyjny*, Warszawa, Książka i Wiedza, 1961; a full length German translation, *Die Werte siegten*, in the Ravensbrück archive, and Ursula Wińska, *Zwcięzły wartosci: Wspomnienie z Ravensbrück: Wyd 1*. Gdansk: Wydawn. Morskie, 1985.
- 3 Wanda Kiedrzyńska, op. cit., pp. 233-234.
- 4 Wanda Kiedrzyńska, op. cit., p. 234.
- 5 Wanda Kiedrzyńska, op. cit., p. 150.
- 6 Wanda Kiedrzyńska, op. cit., pp. 7-8.
- 7 In this sewing workshop the cloth triangles designating group affiliation and prisoner number were prepared. To that end copies of all arrival lists were deposited there.
- 8 Sara Tuvel Bernstein writes (in: Sara (Seren) Tuvel Bernstein, *The Seamstress*, Berkley, New York, 1997, p. 228): "Lily and many of the other women in the camp were children of mixed marriages where Jewish customs had ceased to be observed generations ago."
- 9 Halina Nelken, *And Yet I Am Here!*, Amherst, 1999, pp. 173-4. Italics in the original text. After Plaszów she was imprisoned in Auschwitz, Ravensbrück, Malchow and HASAG-Leipzig.
- 10 This was the only case of a Jewish block leader in Ravensbrück itself. In the external

- camps there were several of these
- 11 According to Israeli survivor Judith Harris, war name Judith Hirsch, interviewed 26.08.1997 by A.K. "Mrs. Kraus taught the children in Dutch".
  - 12 Story that the late Professor Arthur Abraham (Buma) Stahl told in an interview with J.B.A. on 16.03.1998.
  - 13 Interview with Israeli survivor Judith Taube, war name Jolanta Arato (Aufrichtig), by J. B. A., 10.09.1997.
  - 14 It is significant that hardly any of the Polish-Jewish women who had arrived before the end of 1944, were sent from Malchow to HASAG-Leipzig.
  - 15 Sara (Seren) Tuvel Bernstein, op. cit., pp. 229-230.
  - 16 Vago, Lidia Rosenfeld, *One Year in the Black Hole of our Planet Earth*, Petah-Tikva, Israel, 1995 (119 pp., unpublished), pp. 43, 52.
  - 17 Halina Nelken, op. cit., pp. 249-250.
  - 18 Dr. Eva Danos Langley, *Prison on Wheels: From Ravensbrück to Burgau*. Daimon Verlag, Einsiedeln, Switzerland; 2000, pp. 76-79.
  - 19 Examples are: Edita Kornfeld, the Czech lawyer who was appointed head of the office or *Blockälteste* at Krupp/Neukölln, see chapter VIII/6, and Paula Katz-Eisen in Neustadt-Glewe - Anna Szyller-Palarczyk states that she and another Polish prisoner, Wanda Marosanyi, survived the camp due to her (in: Karl Heinz Schütt, *Ein vergessenes Lager? (I) – Über das Aussenlager Neustadt-Glewe des Frauen- KZ Ravensbrück*, 1997, p. 28).
  - 20 Kornreich-Gelissen, Rena, in: Karl Heinz Schütt (I), op. cit., pp. 60-61.
  - 21 With the family transport from Toulouse came 15 children and 4 young teenagers; in the various Slovak transports there were 32 children and 13 young teenagers; and in the Italian transports – 6 children and 2 young teenagers. All of these transports also included older women.
  - 22 Ghetto Czestochowa (on 03.09.1944) – 5 children, Ghetto Lodz (on 22.10.1944) 36 children and 10 young teenagers, most of whom were transferred to Königs Wusterhausen, and the Piotrkow ghetto (on 02.12.1944) – 55 children and 15 young teenagers.
  - 23 Goldberg-Blumen, Regina: "Each of us had a small group of friends she felt belonging to", in: Schütt, op. cit., p. 37.
  - 24 An example was Irmgard Judith Berger, later Becker, and her mother Pepi and sister Marlit.
  - 25 Gyulai, Kato, *Eine einfache Deportiertengeschichte*, Budapest 1947 (Xeroxed version), pp. 37-38.
  - 26 Vago Rosenfeld, Lidia, op. cit., p. 55.
  - 27 Tuvel Bernstein, Sara, op. cit., p. 243.
  - 28 Grohs-Martin, Silvia, *Silvie*, New York, 2000, p. 316.
  - 29 Kounio Amariglio, Erika, *From Thessaloniki to Auschwitz and Back*, London, 2000, pp. 120-137.
  - 30 Dr. Eva Danos Langley, *Prison on Wheels: From Ravensbrück to Burgau*, Daimon Verlag, Einsiedeln, Switzerland, 2000, pp. 31, 47, 48.
  - 31 Tuvel Bernstein, Sara, op. cit., pp. 215-216.

- 32 Tuvel Bernstein, Sara, op. cit., p. 210.
- 33 When not all the four members of Seren Tuvel's group were "selected" to be sent to Burgau, they exchanged coats with Ravensbrück numbers with others who wanted to stay in Ravensbrück and had been "selected". Eventually all were sent to Bruggau (in: Tuvel Bernstein, Sara, op. cit., pp. 244, 245).
- 34 Israeli survivor #425/270011 Landau Bondy Klara, in: Karl Heinz Schütt (I), op. cit., pp. 62-63.
- 35 Testimony of Lea Schwalb-Kisch, in Karl Heinz Schütt (I), op. cit., pp. 114-115.
- 36 Testimonies of: Margita Schwalbova, in: Karl Heinz Schütt, *Ein vergessenes Lager? (II)*, June 1998, p. 24; Lea Gelbgras-Ferstenberg, in Karl Heinz Schütt (I), op. cit., p. 48, Jutta Pelz-Bergt, in Schütt, op. cit., pp. 75-78, Lidia Vago, in Karl Heinz Schütt (I), op. cit., p. 103, and Irene Kluger-Hajos, Karl Heinz Schütt (II), op. cit., p. 57. A group of 20 set out from Neustadt-Glewe in the direction of Czechoslovakia - in: Karl Heinz Schütt (II), op. cit., p. 8.
- 37 Thus Halina Nelken's camp-family of six included from beginning to the end also her sister-in-law Genia, towards whom she felt an obligation although she was not at all congenial (Nelken, Halina, op. cit., p. 251).