

America So Far from Ravensbrück

Donald Reid

There are a diversity of collective memory and historiographic cultures within each nation concerning the Nazi concentration camps. Although very few American citizens were imprisoned in these camps, a number of camp survivors went to the United States after the war. However, the history of individual camps came slowly and incompletely to Americans. The concentration camps always seemed far away to them, even when they took the lead in examining their history, as they did with the extermination camps for the Jews. And this distance was greatest for a camp like Ravensbrück, neither liberated by the Western Allies nor an extermination camp.

The Recent Jewish Memory of Ravensbrück

Memory of the extermination camps established for Jews has a particular history in the United States¹; in American public culture, these have, to some extent, come to subsume the history and memory of other camps. We are all familiar with the debate occasioned by Alain Resnais' film *Nuit et brouillard* (1956) for its failure to differentiate camps whose *raison d'être* was to exterminate Jews, from the majority of camps which worked to death in horrific conditions those sent to them. In the United States today, one can confront another response from viewers of *Nuit et brouillard*. Many assume that they are seeing a film on the Shoah, because they have little awareness of the different types of camps shown in *Nuit et brouillard*. Not because of what they learn in the film, but because of what they bring to viewing it, they incorporate the experience of all deportees into that of the Jews².

What I would like to do is to examine the nature of representations of Ravensbrück, the largest women's concentration camp, in American public culture and American historiography. Ravensbrück was not a camp devoted to the extermination of Jews (although many Jews were interned and died there). Historians of Ravensbrück and other camps are very aware of the extraordinary diversity of prisoners sent to them and

¹ See Helene Flanzbaum, *The Americanization of the Holocaust* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1999); Alan L. Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001); and Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

² See Donald Reid, "Teaching *Night and Fog*: Putting a Documentary Film in History," *Teaching History* (forthcoming).

of their experiences while in the camp. Here we will look at this issue from another angle. Within this diversity, which accounts of Ravensbrück have come to the fore in the United States and why?

To get a handle on this project, let us start by looking at explanations given for the absence of research on the perhaps 20 000 Jewish women held at some point at Ravensbrück. In her recent, excellent study of Jews at Ravensbrück, based on extensive oral history research, the American historian Rochelle G. Sidel attributes this lacuna in the United States and elsewhere to three factors: Ravensbrück was in the Deutsche Demokratische Republik (DDR) and the Communists who oversaw the museum at the camp did not recognize the particular experience of Jews in their anti-fascist narrative of the camps³; many Jewish women who passed through Ravensbrück had more intense memories of other camps⁴; and finally, “the camp’s definition as a women’s camp added to the lack of interest among the predominantly male circles of Holocaust scholars and survivor leaders.”⁵ Sidel presents her work as “aimed at incorporating [Ravensbrück] into memorialization of the Holocaust in the United States.”⁶

Sidel believes that her work “inspired” Israeli sociologist Judith Buber Agassi, daughter of Ravensbrück survivor Margaret Buber-Neumann, “to begin an oral history project of Ravensbrück survivors living in Israel.” (Agassi got funding from a German-Israeli foundation and therefore, as an American citizen, Sidel found herself “excluded from the project.”⁷) Sidel’s explanation of the paucity of research on the Jewish women at Ravensbrück does not have a particular national dimension, but Agassi frames her study in these terms. She asks why there has been no place for the Jewish women held at Ravensbrück in the collective memories or historical work done in Israel⁸. Unlike survivors from other concentration camps in Israel, those who had been held in Ravensbrück did not form a national association. Why? Ravensbrück, Agassi argues, did not fit the dominant collective memory in Israel of the Jewish experience during the war as a unique phenomenon culminating in extermination. Jewish women at Ravensbrück, though held in a separate area, formed a minority of camp inmates in a diverse population. Furthermore, Agassi asserts, the national Israeli narrative sought heroism in

³ In a fascinating aside, Sidel presents evidence that her vehement complaint to the East German museum directors in 1980 that there was no recognition of the presence of Jewish women at Ravensbrück made its way into reports to the central authorities and may have been a factor in the DDR’s decision at the end of the 1980s to recognize the presence of Jews at Ravensbrück, an act the DDR saw as helping to nurture better relations with the United States. Rochelle G. Sidel, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), p. 219-220.

⁴ This has begun to change and the United States has been the site of the publication of memoirs by Jewish women held at Ravensbrück. See, for example, Judith H. Sherman, *Say the Name* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005).

⁵ Sidel, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp*, p. 7.

⁶ Rochelle G. Sidel, “Integrating Ravensbrück Women’s Concentration Camp into Holocaust Memorialization in the United States” in *Women in the Holocaust: Responses, Insights and Perspectives. Selected Papers from the Annual Scholars’ Conference on the Holocaust and the Churches, 1990-2000*, ed. Marcia Littell (Philadelphia: Merion Westfield Press International, 2001), p. 64.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁸ Judith Buber Agassi, *The Jewish Women Prisoners of Ravensbrück* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007), p. 12-15.

the experience of Jews during the war; this understanding of heroism was gendered male and understood primarily as armed resistance, with little place for heroism in the form of mutual aid which characterized the efforts of women at Ravensbrück⁹. If this explanation in terms of gender, complements that of Saidel, Agassi suggests a further specifically Israeli impediment to memory of the Jewish women held at Ravensbrück. More than 1 300 Jewish prisoners at Ravensbrück were rescued by the Swedish Red Cross in 1945, as a result of the efforts of its director, Count Folke Bernadotte. In 1948, Bernadotte served as a representative of the United Nations (UN) in Palestine and worked for an internationalization of Jerusalem under UN control. The Stern Gang—an important actor in the collective memory of the emergence of the Israeli state and the organization to which future Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Shamir belonged—assassinated Bernadotte in 1948. This, Agassi contends, became a further source of repression of the memory of Jews at Ravensbrück. The state of Israel only slowly recognized Bernadotte's role in saving Jews, and memory of Ravensbrück in Israel necessarily forces confrontation with the memory of Bernadotte and his assassination. There is nothing in the American experience of Ravensbrück of this nature, but Agassi's analysis suggests how national culture can figure into the ways Ravensbrück is recounted (or not recounted).

America Confronts Ravensbrück

There is an important literature on the Allied liberation of camps in Germany and the reception in the United States of evidence of the inhumane world of the camps¹⁰. However, as Ravensbrück was in the sector liberated and occupied by Soviet troops, it does not figure directly into these accounts. American readers of the *New Yorker* would have seen Janet Flanner's moving description of the arrival of three hundred women from Ravensbrück at the Gare de Lyon in Paris in April 1945:

There was a general, anguished babble of search, of finding or not finding. There was almost no joy; the emotion penetrated beyond that, to something nearer pain. Too much suffering lay behind this homecoming, and it was the suffering that showed in the women's faces and bodies.... As the lilacs [given the returning women] fell from inert hands, the flowers made a purple carpet on the platform and the perfume of the trampled flowers mixed with the stench of illness and dirt¹¹.

However, many Americans first and more intimate encounter with Ravensbrück probably came in July 1945, listening to an interview with Gemma La Guardia Gluck,

⁹ For a compelling examination of this issue see Tzvetan Todorov, *Face à l'extrême* (Paris: Seuil, 1991).

¹⁰ Robert H. Abzug, *Inside the Vicious Heart: Americans and the Liberation of Nazi Concentration Camps* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1985).

¹¹ Janet Flanner, *Paris Journal 1944-1965* (New York : Atheneum, 1965), p. 25-26 (19 April 1945).

sister of Fiorello La Guardia, the popular mayor of New York City from 1934 until 1945. Though Gemma and Fiorello were raised as Episcopalians, their mother was a Jewish immigrant to New York from Italy. Gemma had married a Hungarian Jew and moved to Hungary. She believed that she and her husband were arrested in June 1944 as retribution for the anti-Nazi statements of her brother. Gemma's husband was sent to Mauthausen where he died. While doing research for the trial of Adolf Eichmann a decade and a half later, prosecutors found documents showing that Gemma was sent to Ravensbrück, rather than being sent to her immediate death in a camp in the east because the very relationship to her brother she believed had led to her arrest also made her appear to be of potential value to the Nazis; this also saved her from the worst of conditions at Ravensbrück. Gemma La Guardia Gluck wrote a memoir of her experience which she was unable to get published until 1961, when the Eichmann trial generated renewed interest in the Nazi concentration camps in the United States¹². An expanded edition of the memoir has recently been published by the efforts of Rochelle Saidel¹³.

There are dozens of memoirs by Ravensbrück prisoners published in English since 1945 by a diversity of Dutch, French, German and Polish women. These are more revealing about the extreme inhumanity experienced by camp inmates than Gemma La Guardia Gluck's account, since she was spared the worst of this¹⁴. However, her memoir stands out for what can be seen as revealing qualities in her experience of particular value to American readers. La Guardia Gluck asked to be appointed a dining table supervisor, a *Tischälteste*, at Ravensbrück.¹⁵ However, she did not want to oversee a table where all shared the same nationality, like the other tables. Creating her own melting pot, La Guardia Gluck successfully oversaw a table of thirty-four women of twelve different nationalities and several religions. She also tells readers several times that her brother, Fiorello La Guardia, appointed director of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) in March 1946, displayed an admirable egalitarianism in dealing with his sister and her daughter and grandson: "he informed us... that we would simply have to wait our turn in the visa quotas. He could not treat us as if we were any more important than the thousands of other displaced persons who were waiting to get

¹² *New York Times* (5 February 1961), p. 12.

¹³ Gemma La Guardia Gluck, *Fiorello's Sister. Gemma La Guardia Gluck's Story*, ed. Rochelle G. Saidel (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007). For another recently published memoir by an American held at Ravensbrück, see Virginia d'Albert-Lake, *An American Heroine in the French Resistance. The Diary and Memoir of Virginia d'Albert-Lake*, ed. Judy Barrett Litoff (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

¹⁴ For an interesting recently translated memoir of a nationalistic German Catholic sent to Ravensbrück, with a very good introduction by Hester Baer and Elizabeth R. Baer, see Nanda Herbermann, *The Blessed Abyss. Inmate #6582 in Ravensbrück Concentration Camp for Women*, trans. Hester Baer (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000). American Maia Wechsler's excellent film of four French resisters sent to Ravensbrück, "Sisters in Resistance," has been broadcast on public television in the United States. To such materials easily accessible to interested Americans, one can add accounts of Ravensbrück survivors available on the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website: http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/media_oi.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005199&MediaId=2490, accessed 13 March 2008.

¹⁵ As sister of the mayor of New York, Gemma La Guardia Gluck was a *Sonder-Häftling*, a special prisoner. The dining arrangements she describes were reserved for a privileged minority of prisoners in the camp.

to America.”¹⁶ They did not come to the United States until May 1947, a few months before Fiorello La Guardia’s death.

Gemma La Guardia Gluck was an American who briefly brought Ravensbrück to public attention at the end of the war and again at the time of the Eichmann trial. Of the numerous memoirs by European women held at Ravensbrück available in English, two of them had a particular resonance for Americans, because of their relationship to phenomenon at the heart of postwar American public culture, anti-Communism and Christianity. Americans learned of the Nazi concentration camps as they prepared to fight the Cold War against Communism. Many Americans saw Communism as the totalitarian twin of Nazism, and the Nazi and Soviet camps as necessarily similar. Other nations sought to appeal to this idea. French diplomat André François-Poncet considered Ravensbrück well enough known in the United States to cite it in his response to a *New York Times* editorial in 1947 which had reviewed unfavorably French policy in Indochina: things are being done there by Communists there, he inferred, which “exceed in cruelty” what had been done at Ravensbrück, so the Americans should not criticize actions France was taking to address the situation in IndoChina¹⁷.

Margaret Buber-Neumann was a German Communist arrested by Stalin for dissidence and sent to a Soviet gulag camp, Karaganda. The Soviet Union later returned her to Nazi Germany after the two nations signed their non-aggression pact. She was then incarcerated at Ravensbrück. Her memoir of this experience, *Under Two Dictators*, published in the United States in 1949, was widely read and commented upon for its comparison of the two camps. Though Buber-Neumann notes that the effects of the war made Ravensbrück increasingly resemble Karaganda by 1944, her fundamental argument is that the two camps brought out differences in the national cultures of the two nations: there was a “blundering, often stupid brutality” at the Soviet labor camp and a “refined, law-abiding sadism” at Ravensbrück¹⁸. Ravensbrück figured in later explorations of the Cold War as well. In 1967, the prominent American television correspondent Welles Hangen published a long article on a visit to Ravensbrück in *Holiday*, a mass circulation monthly magazine. While he noted that the Communist interpretation of the camp failed to mention the Jews, his article is primarily a positive evaluation of the relationships he establishes with the East Germans he meets at Ravensbrück, saying that he feels they are closer to him, the American, than they are to the Russians who were using Ravensbrück as a military base. His visit to Ravensbrück provided a singular occasion for American/German bonding, in contrast to German relations with the Russians¹⁹.

We have already noted the role of Rochelle Saidel in drawing attention to the Jews held at Ravensbrück. However, other Americans took a particular interest in Christians (not the Jehovah’s Witnesses) held at Ravensbrück, with whom they could identify, as French

¹⁶ La Guardia Gluck, *Fiorello’s Sister*, p. 120.

¹⁷ *New York Times*, 23 January 1947.

¹⁸ Margarete Buber, *Under Two Dictators* trans. Edward Fitzgerald (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1949). Her positions were disseminated in magazine articles as well, i.e., Margaret Buber-Neumann, “Hitler or Stalin: Which Was the Worst?,” *American Mercury* 74:340 (April 1952): 74-82.

¹⁹ Welles Hangen, “Last Trip to Ravensbrück,” *Holiday* 41:4 (April 1967): 70ff.

readers of the memoirs of French resisters at Ravensbrück might be expected to do. A typical early example of this interest is the essay by the French resister Suzanne Bertillon published in *The Catholic World*, a widely read review published by the Paulist Fathers. Bertillon wrote of the Benedictine nun, Elise Rivet, known as Marie-Elizabeth de l'Eucharistie, a *Nacht und Nebel* prisoner who had been Mother Superior of a convent in Lyon. She was remembered for the aid and comfort she gave other prisoners; she urged those condemned to die in the gas chambers "to accept their sufferings and death with Christian resignation." When a group selected for death at the end of March 1945, distraught to be chosen when liberation seemed near, rejected her efforts, she decided voluntarily to join them, and led them through the yard singing the Marseillaise, and died with them²⁰.

However, the single account of Ravensbrück which has had the most resonance in the United States, is that of Corrie ten Boom, a Dutch Christian whose family hid Jews in Amsterdam. Acting on information from an informant, the Germans arrested the ten Boom family in February 1944. Corrie and her sister Betsie were sent to Ravensbrück. They smuggled a bible into the camp and sustained their faith and spoke to others of it in the camp. Betsie died in the camp. In her final days, she told Corrie that Corrie "must tell people what we have learned here. We must tell them that there is no pit so deep that He is not deeper still. They will listen to us, Corrie, because we have been here."²¹ Corrie herself was released as the result of a clerical error in December 1944. After the war, she preached around the world, drawing on her affirmations of belief in a God of love in an environment which had sorely tested her faith. A few years after the war, when approached by a particularly cruel Ravensbrück guard in Germany, she was able to offer him forgiveness. Corrie ten Boom's memoir, *The Hiding Place*, sold widely in the United States and became the basis of a major motion picture in 1975, starring Julie Harris. The film was produced by World Wide Pictures, the motion picture ministry of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. The recreation of the Ravensbrück camp in the film, whatever its deficiencies, is certainly the closest most Americans have come to "seeing" Ravensbrück.

Accounts of Ravensbrück which resonated with important currents in American public culture, whether anti-Communism or Christianity and later Judaism, had particular impact in the United States. They drew lessons from the experience and reinforced the desire of many Americans to feel that their opposition to Communism and their affirmation of religious belief were acts that countered states which created camps like Ravensbrück and cultures which nurtured them. But there was another confrontation with Ravensbrück which offered Americans the opportunity to respond more directly to the inhumanity which had been perpetrated there.

²⁰Suzanne Bertillon, "The Heroine of Ravensbrück," *The Catholic World* 171 (1950): 356-9.

²¹ Corrie ten Boom with John and Elizabeth Sherrill, *The Hiding Place* (Minneapolis: World Wide Pictures, 1971), p. 215.

The Ravensbrück “Lapins” come to America

Norman Cousins was editor of the *Saturday Review*, a widely-read literary review, and head of the Hiroshima Peace Center Association. In 1955, he arranged for twenty-five unmarried young women disfigured from burns and radiation from the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima ten years before, to come to the United States for plastic and reconstructive surgery done gratis by surgeons in New York City. The Hiroshima Maidens lived as guests with American families for close to two years, before returning to Japan, where many married and pursued a diversity of careers. The Hiroshima Maidens Project responded to Americans’ desire to address the devastation wrought in their name, but also sought to reconstruct the Maidens’ lives as well, to serve a therapeutic role for women who had been shunned in Japan²².

In 1958, Carolyn Ferriday, an American philanthropist (and staunch supporter of the French Resistance during the war who received the Légion d’honneur for her efforts) went to the Hiroshima Maidens Project and asked that it undertake a similar effort for the Ravensbrück Lapins, Polish women, primarily Catholic resisters, who had been subjected to a variety of disfiguring surgeries at Ravensbrück. In useless and sadistic experiments to test the use of sulfanilamide preparations in combating serious infections, the young women had had their legs cut open, muscles removed, and their bones broken or shattered. They were administered strong infectious agents and had gangrenous material sealed into their wounds. Drugs were administered when they fell ill. Those who survived were left crippled and subject to a variety of serious medical conditions from their exposure to potent germs. Cousins and his group responded enthusiastically to Ferriday’s plea and collected the funds needed to bring the Lapins to the United States from private foundations and the readers of the *Saturday Review*²³.

Of the fifty-three surviving Lapins, the thirty-five whose personal situation and health permitted them to come to the United States, made the trip. Cousins’ group recognized that there was little that could be done medically for most of these women in the United States, except for the treatment of residual infections in a few cases. The Americans saw the trip as primarily therapeutic. “The most compelling reason of all for bringing the Lapins to America,” the mass circulation *Look* magazine explained, “was the boost it might give their morale. Many of the women had the feeling that the world had never really comprehended what had happened at Ravensbrück”²⁴; “it was hoped that they might be restored to some extent in spirit and outlook,” the *Saturday Review* reported²⁵. The Lapins’ sense of injustice had been heightened by the refusal of the West German government to pay compensation to them, as it was doing for other camp victims, on the grounds that it did not have diplomatic relations with Poland. Americans involved in the

²² Rodney Barker, *The Hiroshima Maidens. A Story of Courage, Compassion, and Survival* (New York: Viking, 1985).

²³ See the many articles on the Ravensbrück Lapins in *Saturday Review*, particularly those of 28 June 1958; 25 October 1958; 24 January 1959; 13 June 1959; 2 January 1960; 20 February 1960; and 22 July 1961.

²⁴ Erica Anderson, “These Women Were Nazi Guinea Pigs,” *Look* 23:6 (17 March 1959): 112.

²⁵ *Saturday Review*, 13 June 1959, p. 24.

project responded by presenting themselves as “grateful, too, for the opportunity to prove to [the Lapins] that people still cared about them, that the world was not indifferent, as they might have thought in the long years since Ravensbrück.”²⁶ The Lapins came to the United States in December 1958 and February 1959 and the last left in December 1959. Their stay was widely covered in the American press. The women were sent to twelve cities across the United States where they lived with American families. In the summer of 1959, the Lapins assembled to see the United States on a road trip by bus from San Francisco to New York City. One of the women remarked that Texas was such a large state that, reading the signs they passed on the highway, she saw that there were dozens of towns with the same name: Tessa-kow. (The interpreter then explained that homogeneity in the United States took another form. Texaco was the name of a ubiquitous service station company.)

American journalists judged the trip a success, evident in “the emotional and psychological regeneration of the Ladies.”²⁷ When the “Lapins” came,

they were broken in health and deeply embittered. Their experiences [as guinea pigs]... had brought them to a gloomy view of man’s capacity for noble action. It didn’t really surprise us that most of the Lapins doubted that anything much would be done for them [in the United States]. The change that has taken place in the year since the first group of Lapins arrived is almost unbelievable... For our committee, and for the other Americans who came to know the Ravensbrück Lapins, the most remarkable outcome of the visit was its moral impact. These women, whose confidence in man had been shattered by the inhuman brutality they suffered in the cause of ‘science,’ little by little came to see us as friends... the establishment of a bond of human feeling that links people of differing nationalities, differing religions, differing ideologies.²⁸

The sponsors of the Lapins’ visit to the United States helped break West German resistance to paying compensation to the Lapins by getting their committee itself recognized as the women’s legal representative. In 1961, Bonn agreed to begin payments. While at Ravensbrück, the Lapins had sustained themselves by resolving that the world should learn of their experience. They had taken West German refusal to address their demands as evidence that they were being ignored. Cousins’ group, working in cooperation with the Polish state’s deportees’ organization at the height of the Cold War, took pride in breaking this isolation, in offering these women what they had been able to offer the Hiroshima Maidens, recognition and respect. The *New York Times* proudly reported that “the Lapins have regained their faith in humanity. The bitterness and psychological scars of the inhumane action of others have slowly given way to the warmth, friendship and generosity they found in America.”²⁹ The visit of the Lapins, the single most important direct American confrontation with the horrors of Ravensbrück, was an event in which many Americans shared due to its wide mediatization. It

²⁶ Anderson, “These Women Were Nazi Guinea Pigs,” 114.

²⁷ *Saturday Review*, 13 June 1959, p. 26.

²⁸ *Saturday Review*, 2 January 1960, p. 37.

²⁹ *New York Times*, 31 May 1959.

embodied a generosity and a naïvete, but also an American desire to remedy and resolve a past that by its nature must remain irresolvable.

When Americans Write the History of Ravensbrück

Thus far, we have discussed the appearance of Ravensbrück in American mass culture. Americans with a scholarly interest in Ravensbrück have been able to turn to works in French, German and Polish, as well as to the translation of Germaine Tillion's excellent *Ravensbrück*³⁰. In 2000 American historian Jack G. Morrison published *Ravensbrück: Everyday Life in a Women's Concentration Camp 1939-45*, a very good work which draws on interviews with camp survivors and on camp archives opened up after the end of the DDR. Fully aware of the diversity of conditions and the universally horrific treatment of prisoners at Ravensbrück, Morrison occasionally chooses wording that those closer to Ravensbrück by experience or shared nationality with deportees might not have used: "The women of Ravensbrück lived for the weekend"³¹; the death march of the prisoners in April 1945 "became like some kind of gigantic slime mold, changing size and shape as it lurched onward."³² Morrison in no way seeks to diminish the inhumanity of the Ravensbrück camp. My point is that as an American a half-century removed from events, Morrison occasionally allows himself a linguistic freedom, but never out of disrespect. He simply writes without the same concern as European authors that his choice of words could dishonor individuals whom he rightly has a clear conscience that he is fully respecting.

Some of the most interesting work done by Americans on Ravensbrück in recent years has been in the form of an explicitly or implicitly comparative historical sociology. Rather than comparing Ravensbrück to other camps, whether in the Third Reich or elsewhere, these scholars examine operations at Ravensbrück not to elucidate only the qualities that make the *univers concentrationnaire* the "other" of the democratic capitalist universe in which Europeans and North Americans live today, but to examine as well the ways in which examining Ravensbrück can also help us understand this contemporary world. Once again, I see this not as in any way a sign of disrespect or a failure to understand the unique, horrific nature of the camp experience. It is, however, an intellectual move which American researchers, without the direct ties to individual and national experiences, are more prone to take than historians in Europe³³. One example is Susan Benedict's study of the inhumane acts of nurses at Ravensbrück. She

³⁰ Germaine Tillion assembled a set of essays on Ravensbrück by survivors which appeared in 1946. She published her history of Ravensbrück in 1973 and a revised edition in 1988. The English translation is of the 1973 edition.

³¹ Jack G. Morrison, *Ravensbrück: Everyday Life in a Women's Concentration Camp 1939-45* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2000), p. 116.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 304.

³³ However, this is a project open to all. Todorov's *Face à l'extrême* is a particularly successful effort to draw from camp experiences insights into the world outside the camps.

frames her study in such a way as to not make these totally alien to the world outside the camps:

Despite the horror, the stories [of the three nurses who are the focus of her article] are relevant to nursing today because nurses are committed to providing compassionate care to diverse populations, often under extremely difficult circumstances. It is important to understand factors that could lead nurses away from compassionate caring to malevolence, so that nurses in the future can be aware of possible harbingers of deviation from the caring role³⁴.

Benedict studies the camps for what they might reveal about the way we live in the non-camp world.

A more telling example of this approach is provided by Michael Thad Allen in his presentation of TexLed, the textile firm which operated in the Ravensbrück camp, as an example of “flexible production.” “Flexible production” has been the subject of much admiring scholarship in recent years. It refers to forms of manufacture that can adopt quickly to clients’ frequently changing orders for small production batches³⁵. Allen shows that “flexible production” is generally characterized as using less specialized machinery; a more skilled, but less specialized labor force; and as characterized by a less bureaucratic, less hierarchical and more communitarian, more cooperative relationship between management and labor. Allen argues that TexLed at Ravensbrück used camp labor to achieve the results of “flexible production” for its clients, particularly the military, but did so with standardized forms of production and a hierarchical management based on terrorizing the labor force, a system totally at odds with the humane, democratizing characteristics otherwise associated by researchers with “flexible production.”³⁶ Allen uses the example of flexible production at Ravensbrück to critique the technological determinism he sees in much of the literature on “flexible production” that affirms that this type of manufacture requires or will produce a humane work culture where creativity will thrive. Allen’s decision to make his critique of what he sees as the romanticism of “flexible production” by using the example of concentration camp labor engaged in “flexible production” has an iconoclastic element to it. It is neither wrong nor disrespectful, but it may be a choice that would emanate only from an historical culture one step removed from those of European nations, whose collective memories are rooted in reference to the camps, as perpetrators and as victims.

³⁴ Susan Benedict, “The Nadir of Nursing: Nurse-Perpetrators of the Ravensbrück Concentration Camp,” *Nursing History Review* 11 (2003): 129-146.

³⁵ See Charles Sabel and Jonathan Zeitlin, *World of Possibilities: Flexibility and Mass Production in Western Industrialization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

³⁶ Michael Thad Allen, “Flexible Production in Ravensbrück Concentration Camp,” *Past and Present* 165 (November 1999): 182-217.

Conclusion

For good reason, studies of collective memory and historiography examine the memory and history of events of central importance in particular cultures, asking why they are of central importance, and how they are remembered or forgotten. But the ways that events at the center of one national experience, but apparently at the margins of another, are incorporated and explained, given meaning or ignored, is also important in an era of world wars and globalization, phenomenon themselves which both question and reinforce elements of national identity. The way that events are remembered and given meaning in a national culture reveals what is valued, what is shunned, in that society. By the same token, historians of one national culture may pose questions and ways of answering them that those of national cultures much more imbricated in the event and its memory would not see. Many Americans who confronted Ravensbrück after the war did so through anti-Communism and the affirmation of religious values, or in an effort to affirm what was valued as an American ability to respond to injustice ignored by others, that is to say in terms of bedrock elements of the national public culture. American historians, one step removed from the national settings of Ravensbrück and the native lands of those sent there, feel freer to treat experiences at Ravensbrück as historical events, useful for what they might reveal about totally different situations. The experience of camps like Ravensbrück is of universal import, but that universality expresses itself differently in different historical and historiographic contexts.

L'auteur

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Résumé

Comment les Américains ont-ils abordé le sujet des camps de concentration dont la raison d'être n'étaient pas l'extermination des Juifs ? Au début, les Américains ont lu des récits au sujet de Ravensbrück qui se rapportaient principalement à leurs centres d'intérêts (christianisme et communisme). Plus tard, ils ont consacré leur attention d'une part aux "Lapins," les survivantes polonaises d'expériences médicales - car ces dernières offraient aux Américains une occasion de tenter de réparer une injustice -, et d'autre part à l'internement des juives à Ravensbrück, qui inscrit ce camp dans l'histoire de Shoah, un événement avec lequel les Américains sont maintenant familiers. Les recherches académiques des Américains sont à la fois innovantes et discutables dans la mesure où elles tendent à inclure l'analyse de camps de concentration comme Ravensbrück dans l'étude de l'univers non concentrationnaire.

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Mots-clés : camps de concentration ; témoignages ; « lapins » ; guerre froide ; philanthropie ; mémoire juive ; culture nationale.

Abstract

How have Americans learned of individual concentration camps whose raison d'être was not the extermination of Jews? Americans initially read of Ravensbrück primarily in accounts that spoke to their concerns about Christianity and communism. Later, Americans would devote the most attention to the "Lapins," Polish survivors of experimental surgery — because the "Lapins" offered an opportunity for Americans to work to repair an injustice — and to the Jews at Ravensbrück, which helped give Ravensbrück a place in the Holocaust narrative with which Americans are now familiar. American scholarly research has been both innovative and problematic in integrating analysis of concentration camps like Ravensbrück into the non-camp universe.

Key words : Concentration camps ; witness accounts ; "lapins" ; Cold War ; philanthropy ; national culture ; Jewish memory.