

JOURNEY INTO INSANIYAT

We arrive in **Ravensbrück** late at night, along a narrow cobblestone road to the center of the village, as the last taverns are closing. Tired, and with limited knowledge of German language, I ask an innkeeper how to get to 'that sad place'. I had blocked out the name of this specific concentration camp memorial site from my mind. 'Wo ist das trauriges Ort?' But the man instantly knows, and gives us clear directions. Along a forest road around a lake, suddenly a large green Soviet tank looms up in the yellow glow of a street light, followed by a signboard '**Gedenkstätte Ravensbrück**'.

Parked in the neat lot next to the museum, we sit in silence for a while, winding down from the long drive since we left Oslo, letting this place sink in, observing. Majestic trees surround us. The night is deserted, till a cat prances across the square. Next a squirrel drops from a tree, only to dart back up the broad stem immediately, now followed by a friend. I try to sleep, but am too wired up. Before I finally drop off in the passenger seat of our van, I have seen a fox, a hedgehog, a ferret, a hopping frog, and even a mouse. At the first crack of dawn, the chatter of many birds has me wide awake again; I worm myself quietly out of the car, I need to be alone with this place, to tame my emotions, before I can face anyone. There's dew on the grass and a thin fog over the lake, the village on the far side is also waking up. We are amid pure beauty, in the heart of nature, alive with animal activity. By the waterfront, on a broad terrace, stands a tall monument of a woman cradling an emaciated body in her arms. She looks out over the lake at the village, but does the village look back at her? And what does it feel like to be a villager in such a radiant area, with such a dark history... assimilating this is not easy.

Suddenly a crane flies up. It has been patiently angling for fish; in a diamond splash, it spreads its wings and plows up into the clear morning sky, sprinkled with small fluffy clouds, high above. It startled me from my reverie and puts me back in the here and now of Ravensbrück concentration camp: exclusively a women's detention center, operative from 1939 to 1945, located 90 km north of Berlin. Memorial stones, statues and artworks dedicated in many languages, commemorate different countries and population groups. On a white marble pedestal are engraved these words, '*There's not a breathing of the common wind that will forget thee; thou hast great allies; Thy friends are exultations, agonies, and love, and man's unconquerable mind.*' It's a phrase from 'To Toussaint L'ouverture' by William Wordsworth. All around the poem, people have left stones of many shapes and colors, also candles, and small handwritten notes, smudged by tears of dew.

A scream tears upwards through my chest, but when it reaches my mouth there's no sound at all, instead it pours out of my eyes; We've been living too long in a world where horror has its legitimate place. We're too used to covering up pain with petty gratifications. I'm still crying when I find the next stone, with the message, '*der erhissungsgang, hier werden hunderte frauen und mädchen von die SS durch genickschuss ermordet*'. '**The investigation process, here hundreds of women and girls are murdered by the SS with a shot in the neck!**' Just like that. I'm not about to stop crying today, or ever. I wander into a building that houses a couple of large ovens, the crematorium, for all eyes to see. When these ovens would have been fired up, and these chimneys spouting smoke, there's no way anyone on the far side of the 'Schwedtsee' could have said '*Wir haben es nicht gewusst*' - **We did not know it!** Anybody would have known how human bodies were being consumed by torture in life and flames in death. Anger is one step up from complete desolation, I wipe my face and am ready for the formal visit.

Mads, my road captain is awake and preparing a picnic breakfast in the van. We talk of cows and calves. I'm not about to share my actual state of mind, it's too vast for me to handle right here. The museum opens, there's interesting literature on war, resistance & concentration camps all over Europe. A bus with school kids arrives. Behind an enclosure is a park with big old houses, there's the Info center. The woman who enlightens us, has short cropped hair, masculine body language, a frank gaze, and like me, one wrist-full of bracelets, that jingle-jangle when she moves her hand. She explains, 'You can visit these houses first, where the guards and their families used to live, and over there is the compound where the prisoner barracks and work areas were'. I nod. My eyes are flooding again. 'You are moved' she remarks kindly... I nod again, we will find it. It just dawned on me that some 80 years ago, two women like her and me, who would not have conformed to the social rule set by a Nazi regime, one honest lesbian and one rebellious tattooed freak, would surely have landed in the belly of this barb-wired monster, suffering, surviving or dying, while desperately looking after each other.

The houses where the perpetrators lived are spacious, there are some black and white photos of yesteryear's residents, an antique desk, broad stairways with wooden hand railings, vintage bathroom appliances and light switches, doors to shut and windows to look out at the pretty park and the placid lake. On this side, the compound walls exist to keep intruders out, while the bordering walls were meant to keep the victims in. 'These idiotic bastards, what thoughts would have crossed their thick minds?' I muse. In some of the renovated buildings, there's a youth hostel. Granted, it's an ideal place to study peacefully, or even to write a novel set in wartime, about the insanity of '**Insaniyat**', the Urdu word for humanity.

The camp is vast. There used to be 14 huge dormitory barracks, where hundreds of women slept in three-tiered wooden bunks with only one washroom and toilets per barrack. Two sickbay barracks, kitchen and laundry area, from all of which, only the foundations are left. Still standing are several large industrial workshops and warehouses, and a detention block

with 78 cells, where inmates from Lichtenburg women's camp in Saxony were also confined. The bars of the workshop windows are shaped like the sun, with long iron rays, painted white. The blue summer sky and the woolly lamb clouds reflect in the glass panes beyond. Inside are photo exhibits, Holocaust related art, and panels with information that most of us know by heart: From 1939 to 1945, roughly 132,000 female prisoners passed through Ravensbrück camp system; Polish, Hungarian, Czechoslovakian, Belgian, German, Austrian, Yugoslavian, Jewish and Roma from all countries, Russian, Spanish, French, Dutch, Jehovah's witnesses, also homosexuals, the mentally challenged, resistance fighters, intellectuals, communists, anarchists and prisoners of war. The SS labeled them "a-socials, criminals, work-shy and race defilers" and identified each group with different color triangles, stitched on their mandatory camp pajamas.

The living quarters were terribly overcrowded, which, aggravated by the appalling sanitary conditions, caused typhus epidemics. Medical experiments were conducted on 86 Polish political prisoners, in order to test Sulfonamide drugs; deliberate cuts were made in leg bones and muscles, infecting those with virulent bacteria and introducing foreign objects like wood or glass. The drug turned out to be ineffective. Gypsy women were sterilized, deceived into signing a consent form, as the overseers promised, under false pretense, that they would be released. Instead, all prisoners were required to work, from agriculture and construction jobs to building the V-2 rocket parts for Siemens. Several sweatshops produced profitable ware, like textiles and leather products or electrical components. Prisoners were sent to private local enterprises, like the German Food and Produce centers, and farmers hired them as cheap labor. Due to 11 hour workdays and exploitation of working capacity, people fell apart from exhaustion. The paramilitary organization of Nazi Germany, called *Schutzstaffel*, or **SS**, began opening brothels, most of the women who were exploited there by camp authorities were prisoners from the Ravensbrück. The SS subjected prisoners to "selections" in which those who were too weak to work were killed. Initially they were shot, but as infrastructure grew, soon they were transferred to the gas chambers at sanitarium Bernburg, which was a killing center within the framework of the so-called '*Eutanasia Program*', especially targeting people with physical and intellectual disabilities. Bodies were cremated in the nearby Fürstenberg crematorium till the SS constructed the crematorium and a gas chamber at the camp itself. On 30 March 1945, nine Jewish women being led to the gas chambers, grappled with the SS guards and tried to escape. They were recaptured and killed. This happened just one month before the camp's liberation by Soviet Red Army on 30 April 1945.

Realizing the end was near, SS leadership decided to remove as many prisoners as possible, in order to avoid leaving live witnesses, who could testify to the camp's war crimes. They ordered all physically capable women to exit the camp on foot towards northern Mecklenburg, forcing over 24,500 prisoners on a death march. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, about 50,000 inmates perished from disease, starvation, and overwork, and around 2,200 were killed in the gas chambers. At liberation only some 3,500 severely emaciated female prisoners were still alive in the main camp.

I understand that a summary of such incomprehensible malevolence is hopeless as hell. What healthy brain would know what to do with such senseless information? Dragging my feet around the foundations of the erstwhile barracks, I lean against a twisted knotty tree, and imagine women, once upon a time, sheltering in its shade. I ask the tree to tell me, 'what did the women talk about?' But the tree doesn't answer - it chose to shed it leaves together with the whispers and the groans long ago. Its new leaves sing of different times and give shelter to birds of happy chatter. Nearby, some bright red poppies are braving the barren soil; they do tell me how they've returned seasonally for the past 80 years, 'just to give hope to any eye that catches our color.'

It was important for the prisoners to retain some of their human dignity by creating personal items, bracelets, dolls and objects

as keepsakes. Small gifts that helped in creating bonds of friendship and trust. These effects would be of great importance to them, many risked their lives to keep their treasures safe. In the cell block barrack there are exhibitions, representing all cultures that existed at the camp. A small embroidered sugar bag catches my eye. It's somebody's birthday gift and has an impressive poem in Dutch sewn in red and black thread on it, which reads: '*And why would we be moping when the slammer is oh so big, at the front it has two doors and at the back it's a dead-end, a barrel we have to sit on, and you'll get used to the stench, a hay sack to do some snoring, we're really being spoiled, than you still get something to peck at, although it ain't that much, it's best to swallow it anyhow, for everyone gets their share, a tiny gob of margarine so you can smear it on your bread, too much you shouldn't cry, it's a long time before you'll die, here's a baggy with some sugar, which is quite worth the effort, and a withered bouquet, that's just in our nature.*' I'm speechless, amazed at human capacity to preserve kindness and a sense of humor in the most deplorable of circumstances.

A small room is filled to the brim with identity photos, thousands of monochrome female faces stare back from the walls. All their names, nationalities, dates of arrival and demise, are noted in a large book. I find one person with my same surname. The whole morning, I've been praying under my breath in different languages. Praying for the dead, for the living, for the world; addressing Sufi saints, Hindu gods, Buddha and the Inner Source, anything to help channelize all this unsettling energy.

I would never have come here if it wasn't for my travel companion who is interested in the history of warfare. My life has been marked by the aftermaths of war through my father and maternal grandma. My father, a teenager in 1941, too young to make a martial effort but old enough to realize the emergency of action, made himself useful carrying pamphlets for the resistance in his bicycle satchel. He was conceived out of wedlock, his mother died in childbirth and his strict protestant tugboat captain of a grandfather put him up for adoption. A barren couple of rich peanut heirs raised him. Though as soon as he was mobile, he preferred to spend time with a family of resistance workers, who's patriarch, Walter Brandligt, he deeply admired. A handsome fellow, with slicked back hair, a deep gaze, and round spectacles, initially a writer of regional novels. But when the Culture chamber was established by the occupying forces in 1941, he strongly opposed this and officially no longer published any work.

The *occupationists* aim, of course, was to control and censure all artists, writers, musicians and stage performers; joining was compulsory if they wanted to continue their profession. Instead, Brandligt became active in the resistance and was involved with the illegal magazine *De Vrije Kunstenaar* - **The Free Artist**. He was a member of the ID-card Center and provided assistance to Jewish people in hiding by forging identity papers. He regularly sent Jewish compatriots and members of the resistance to his wife in Epse to go into hiding. When negotiating on behalf of two arrested resistance men he was arrested himself; unwittingly, he had been dealing with a V-man, Vertrauensmann, or 'Trustee' of the Nazi party, who infiltrated resistance groups and had betrayed him by informing the Sicherheitspolizei. He was sentenced to death, along with 18 other members of the resistance and shot in the dunes near Overveen, then buried in a mass grave, just one year short of liberation.

My father remained forever tormented by these events. He believed that anyone who hadn't experienced 'The War' could not have a life remotely valid. I had many discussions with him on the subject, to no avail. He remained stuck in time, adding up the 'wrong' and 'right' parties of the past, blind to current injustices. Guantanamo Bay detention facilities, or the documented existences of US administered secret torture prisons all over the planet, never seemed as real to him as that particular war of his youth.

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