



## The Brothels in Auschwitz

### *A Little-Known Aspect of the History of the Nazi German Camp*

#### Fifteen minutes in Block no. 24

Houses of prostitution for the use of prisoners functioned under SS supervision in the German concentration camps for several years. Until recently, however, there was a reluctance to speak about them. "A prisoner functionary was assigned to stand downstairs," says a former Auschwitz prisoner who was a client in the camp bordello. "You handed him a special coupon worth two camp marks. That's how much it cost. After a cursory venereal-disease check, if everything was in order, the SS man on duty gave you the number of one of the rooms. You got a tag with the number on it and went upstairs. Each girl had her own room. Two marks was the price of a pack of cigarettes.

"The rooms were furnished like in a normal home. A bed, a nightstand, curtains. The girls were very nicely dressed, in decent civilian clothes. Only if you've spent a couple of years behind barbed wire can you appreciate the impression such a sight made on us. What happened next? What do you think happened? You did it. Afterwards, an orderly disinfected your genitalia with some liquid, and you went back to your barrack."

Heinrich Himmler personally issued the orders setting up the bordellos in the camps in 1941. Access to these facilities was intended as a reward for good behavior and hard work. The SS also saw it as a way of preventing the spread of homosexuality among prisoners.

In the end, they opened brothels in ten concentration camps on the territory of the Third Reich and occupied Poland. One of them was opened in Auschwitz in the summer of 1943. "It was located in Block no. 24. The first building on the left past the gate with the inscription *Arbeit macht frei*," says Piotr Cywiński, director of the museum located at the site of the camp. "Between ten and twenty women worked there. There was even one woman who was in charge of the whole facility."

"A regular brothel in a German death camp?"

"Do you find that strange? There was an SS man here who removed tattooed skin from prisoners and made it into lampshades," said Cywiński. "That's what I call strange. The people incarcerated in Auschwitz were red-blooded human beings and everything associated with human activity went on here."

#### The Women

Jerzy Bielecki (camp number 243) arrived in Auschwitz as part of the first transport, in June 1940. He has clear memories of the opening of the brothel. "It made a big impression on everyone. I remember how the girls would lean out the windows as we marched past that building on our way to work. They waved to us and blew kisses. It looked very alluring. Of course, the boys replied in kind, and it soon turned into a spectacle," he says.

When the women were placed in block no. 24, the Political Department ordered that they be photographed. "They came to me smiling and relaxed. Very attractive. They laughed and giggled in front of the camera," says Wilhelm Brasse (number 3444), the famous photographer of Auschwitz.

Eight Polish women and seven German women. "I talked with them," Brasse says. "They were happy, because they had been given hope. The Germans promised that, if they agreed to work in the brothel, they would be released after six months. Aside from that, they received additional food rations and clothing. It quickly turned out, however, that the promises were empty. None of them was ever released."

The women were recruited from among the prisoners. Some of them did so under compulsion, while others, mostly professional prostitutes, volunteered. "It was a choice between the house of prostitution or death," explains Robert Sommer, a German historian who is working on a book on the subject. "Many of these women would have been sentenced to immediate extermination if they had not decided on the assignment."

Sommer has succeeded in identifying 230 women who worked in brothels in the camps. The overwhelming majority of them were German. There were 49 Polish women, along with several Ukrainians and Byelorussians, and even a Dutch woman. In Auschwitz alone, several dozen women worked. Only "Aryans" could avail themselves of their services. No Jews allowed. Even in the houses of prostitution, the SS remained faithful to the Nuremberg Laws. German men could sleep with German women, and Polish men with Polish or other Slavic women. "So it was in theory," says Brasse. "In practice, the male prisoners eagerly swapped the numbers they had been given. The Germans were particularly willing to exchange. The Polish women must have been prettier."

#### Mechanical Sex

The camp was planned to function with Germanic precision. "Everything was done in a mechanical way. Almost like in a factory," says Sommer. "Every prisoner had exactly 15 minutes. The guards watched through the peepholes to make sure that everything was being done by the book."

The prisoners were only allowed to satisfy their desires in the missionary position. In line with a healthy National Socialist worldview, the SS treated any divergence from the norm as sexual perversion. The prisoners were also required to remove their shoes before engaging in sexual relations.

Of course, the rules were not always enforced, because prisoners used every means at their disposal to get inside. "Not everyone was able to get an admission coupon," recalls Jerzy Bielecki. "That is why the boys had to be inventive. All the windows at the back of Block no. 24 were boarded up. But people found ways, of course, to pry the boards loose and get in. On one occasion, several capos, Poles and Germans, found a long rope somewhere. They slung it between the blocks and got in that way. But somebody informed on them and the SS laid a trap. I remember that they each got 25 lashes on their bare bottoms," he adds.

At other times, the head camp scribe, and, once, even the head cook were caught visiting illegally. "The SS men were strictly forbidden to resort to the services of the female prisoners. But they too, of course, secretly sneaked in to the girls," says Wilhelm Brasse.

The brothels were open two hours a day, after working hours. They stayed open somewhat longer on Sunday. As few as a handful or as many as 150 prisoners visited Block no. 24 each day. This means that the women sometimes had to service eight men each within the course of a few hours. At such times, prisoners had to wait in line in the foyer.

## The Men

Who were the prisoners who resorted to the SS houses of prostitution? "A pass to that special block was a form of reward. And so, to a large degree, the clients were prisoners who got along well with the camp authorities—various prisoner functionaries, capos, and informers," says former Auschwitz prisoner Józef Stós (camp number 752).

Germans, of course, were the most privileged prisoners. "It was the Germans who hung around there. No self-respecting Pole would ever disgrace himself that way. We regarded ourselves as political prisoners who were being detained illegally and suffering for the homeland. Making use of such a facility provided to us by the enemy would have been an affront to our dignity.

"We regarded it as disgusting," says Stós. Other witnesses contend that many prisoners were too exhausted by backbreaking labor and the starvation-level food rations to even think about visiting a bordello.

"Not true," says an Auschwitz prisoner who visited Block no. 24 on several occasions. "Everybody went there. Poles did, as well as Germans." "A person who has spent several years behind barbed wire does not think of the homeland at such moments. What he's worried about is whether he'll still be alive the next day."

Even in the hell of Block no. 24, affections flourished. "One of my friends, a Pole, worked in the camp fire department," says Jerzy Bielecki. "He spent all his money on visits to one of the girls, Irka. He was in love. They supposedly got married after the war and moved to Canada or Australia together."

Prisoner functionaries also had precedence in the so-called "puff" facilities in camps located in Germany proper. "The most privileged prisoners, who collaborated unreservedly with the camp administration, were the German communists. And they were the most frequent callers at the brothels," says Insa Eschebach, director of the Museum at the site of Ravensbrück women's concentration camp, where many women were recruited.

## A Conspiracy of Silence

For decades, the subject of the camp bordellos was only whispered about. It was, of course, mentioned in the scholarly literature, and especially in prisoner memoirs. However, these facilities were written and spoken about with embarrassment, as if they were not a suitable subject for serious historians.

Recently, however, the situation has begun to change. Several German historians have been researching the subject, and an exhibition devoted to the brothels has opened at the Ravensbrück site. "No other exhibition has ever enjoyed so much interest," says Insa Eschenbach, who set it up. "The majority of people are completely surprised and shocked that such a thing occurred in the camps. The public turns out to have been completely unaware of it."

The German authorities also took pains to conceal the bordellos from public knowledge. A special directive issued by the SS strictly forbade showing the "special blocks" to German guests (civilian or military officials) touring the camps.

"The worst thing is that this directive outlived the Third Reich," says Eschenbach. "It remained in force for a long time after the war, and it was forbidden to show tourists the blocks that contained the brothels, or to tell about them. Why? Sex and the Holocaust are not subjects that go together."

Former prisoners are hardly surprised that long years of silence surrounded the issue of prostitution. "Who was supposed to talk about it? Who was supposed to complain publicly? The girls were ashamed of having worked there, and the former prisoners of having gone there," says Wilhelm Brasse. "It would have compromised their status as martyrs."

## Why?

Officially, the brothels functioned to increase prisoner labor productivity. "They were an element of a horrendous system. The SS was interested in making its institutions as efficient as possible. Therefore, it resorted to even the most ruthless methods of compelling the prisoners to work harder. The brothels were one such method," explains Christa Paul, the German author of a book about state-run bordellos in the Third Reich.

Prisoners, however, regard the opening of the "special blocks" as yet another form of harassment. "There is no room for illusions. The camp brothels were no humanitarian gesture on the part of the Germans. They placed them in the camps in order to humiliate us and cause dissension. To strip us of our higher feelings and reduce us to the role of animals who only work in order to sate their primal instincts," says Jerzy Bielecki.

Józef Stós agrees. "The Germans wanted to demoralize us with this tactic," he says. "I consistently refused to go to Block no. 24, although it was difficult to say no. One day, our capo ran out of patience and threatened that, if I did not go there on my own, he would send me by force. Nevertheless, I did not give in," he says.

Bielecki adds that the brothels also had a function in relation to the outside world. "Various people would come to Auschwitz from time to time," he says. "Either the Red Cross, or officials from neutral countries. Then the Germans could tell them: look how good the prisoners have it—we even built a bordello for them."

Professor Józef Szajna, camp number 18729, says that "this was no accident or exception to the rule. The brothels were an element in the German plan to torment the prisoners. Anyone who regards Block no. 24 as some kind of luxury provided for the prisoners is simply ignorant about Auschwitz. This was a matter of degrading people. This was another example of German cynicism and perfidy. The camp brothels are no sensation, but only another of the crimes of National Socialism."

## No Compensation

The greatest victims of this crime were the women who worked in the bordellos. The SS took no particular interest in their health or safety. Because the male prisoners were not given condoms, pregnancies were frequent. The women were then subjected to routine abortions.

Camp physicians carried out the abortions in a slipshod way, in primitive conditions. Many women suffered permanent injuries as a result. They were also treated brutally when the prisoners infected them with diseases. After cursory treatment, they went back to work. This went on for years.

"We have accounts of the condition these women were in when they were released from camp," says Robert Sommer. "They were human wrecks, in both physical and psychological terms."

While researching her book, Christa Paul contacted two former camp prostitutes. "Even decades later, it was difficult for them to talk about it," she says. "The things they did in the camp scarred them forever. After the war, they had trouble finding a place for themselves. None of them ever had children. They struggled with various psychological problems."

After the war, some of the women overcame their shame and applied for compensation for forced labor. However, the German authorities ruled that, in view of "the voluntary nature of their labor in camp," they had no right to damages. In any case, the majority of them never spoke about their experiences.

"I met one of them by chance on a streetcar in Warsaw several years after the war," says Wilhelm Brasse. "She was very elegantly dressed and looked beautiful. She was with someone. She recognized me, too. She went pale and then held her finger up to her lips. I fulfilled her request—without going up to her, I turned away and looked out the window."

Piotr Zychowicz, Rzeczpospolita, July 21, 2007

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