



JADWIGA BIELSKA

Jadwiga Bielska, university student, born on 22 July 1922 in Warsaw, daughter of Jerzy and Janina, *née* Bogdanowicz, line of Bielski, resident of Lublin, 3 Maja Street 8, flat 1a, inmate no. 7922, operatee, from the camp in Ravensbrück.

I was arrested on 14 February 1941 at 12.30 p.m. (on a Friday). I was detained by two elegant men dressed in civilian clothes, one of whom spoke excellent Polish. As it later turned out, they were from the Gestapo. Since I knew German, I talked with the Gestapo officer who arrested and subsequently interrogated me. He was a handsome German by the name of Adolf – with a large scar on his chin – known for his perfidy and cruelty. He ordered me to dress, for I was to accompany him to Uniwersytecka Street (“Under the Clock” – the main Gestapo building) in order to give testimony. While I donned my clothes, they did not leave me alone for a minute – Adolf conducted a search of my books, wardrobe and bed, looking into every nook and cranny, turning the flat inside out. As a matter of fact, they told me at the very beginning that they were looking for a typewriter. Upon leaving the flat, we got into a waiting car and drove over to the Gestapo building. Adolf was exceedingly polite, for he wanted me to testify along the way. When we arrived at the Gestapo building, I was immediately taken to the first floor, to the interrogation room – there Adolf tried to get something out of me for two hours, but since I denied all the accusations, he sent me away to a small back office, guarded by an SS man. Half an hour later, my tormentor – furious – barged into the room and shouted: – Jadwiga, come. Now we shall talk differently! He dropped his veneer of politeness. After a few hours of interrogation, I was sent to a dark cell in handcuffs. Adolf said: – Now you will sit here, hungry and shackled. I was kept there for two days in terrible conditions, with the handcuffs locked so tightly that bruises formed on my wrists. On Sunday I was interrogated again, a few times; Adolf would hit me on the face with his fists, even though I was literally fainting from exhaustion. After I was interrogated on Monday, they took off the handcuffs and transferred



me to another, somewhat brighter, cell. On the evening of the same day I and two other ladies were taken by car to the prison in the Castle. The first torment applied by the prison authorities consisted of separating me from my girlfriend, with whom I wanted to stay in the same cell. I was sent to cell 35. It had 18 female prisoners and was already overcrowded – for a week I slept sitting on the edge of a stool, for there was not enough room on the floor to lie down. After a week I was suddenly transferred to cell 38 by a prison functionary, one Dietrich (a *Volksdeutscher* who had been born and raised in Poland), the most infamous torturer in Lublin prison. He detested political prisoners and strove to make our vegetation at the Castle – already difficult – more miserable in every way possible. The cell in which I was then held, located in the basement, was large and contained the worst possible element, a band of female thieves, prostitutes and thugs, who obviously knew the prison inside out and ruled the cell. Hygienic conditions were terrible: vermin, dirt, a hideous stench. But probably the worst thing was that I was forced to coexist with such loathsome outcasts of society and listen, against my will, to their discussions and quarrels, and also to the insults that they showered upon us, calling us “feigned intelligentsia” and “politicals” – obviously with contempt. This system, based on detaining young “political” girls (I was not even 19 at the time) along with the worst riffraff and in the most horrid cells, was intended to further moral corruption and make our difficult existence insufferable.

For me, the period of detention at the prison is my worst nightmare – I was completely alone amongst such people. We were tormented at every step. Any thief carried greater clout in the cell than one of the “politicals”. When they arrested my mother, two weeks after me, we were not allowed to live in the same cell. I was separated from my mother throughout the entire period of detention at the Castle and all our efforts at establishing communication were hindered. Another of the torments used by the prison authorities was the so-called sulfuration, that is disinfection against lice. Namely, we would be forced to march – nearly naked, only in our brassieres and drawers – through the entire male ward and the courtyard, past the SS-men’s house. Obviously, all the Germans would gape at us, making lewd comments and laughing at our embarrassment.

Various diseases, such as typhoid fever, spotted fever and scabies, were rife in the prison. Since medical care was poor, a great many people died. Constant executions, nightly summons and the taking of people to their deaths, non-stop searches, beatings and other “niceties” ensured that our stay at the Castle was indeed terrible.



On 21 September 1941 I was in a group of 156 women who were deported to Germany “for labor, where everything will be much better” (the words of the German prison commandant). Naturally, we did not know where they were taking us. The trip took two days and two nights. Throughout this time we were given practically nothing to eat. We begged for at least some cold water, as we were thirsty, but to no avail.

Finally, on the morning of 23 September, freezing cold and hungry, we arrived at Fürstenberg station. At the station we were greeted by a bunch of female camp overseers with enormous dogs – Alsatians – specially trained to attack people. All of the *Aufseherins* had revolvers, with which they threatened us constantly; they would also set the dogs on us, hit us in our faces and kick us all over our bodies – to put it simply, the Germans resorted to maltreatment and terror right from the start. They took us in covered trucks to Ravensbrück camp and arranged us in the main square, the so-called *Lagerstrasse* before the *Baden*, that is the baths, where we were to change, bathe and get registered. We stood in the square from 6.00 a.m. to 12.00 p.m. without any food. We were not allowed to squat or sit. As it transpired later, we were treated particularly badly since we were a special transport, a so-called *Sondertransport*, intended in the main to be killed – either by firing squad, or through experimental operations.

The transport was received in a very cruel manner. The poor women were beaten and kicked. Obviously, we were deprived of literally all our belongings, including our clothes and the remnants of food that we had taken with us from prison. In other words, we entered the baths stark naked. There, after the bath, we were inspected by a Gestapo physician (Doctor Sonntag was present when we arrived) who would hit us at every opportunity. Next, still completely naked, we went for a hair inspection – nearly all the young girls who had nice hairstyles had their heads shaved bald with a hair trimmer. My hair was also cut. This was so incredibly sad, as the cold made itself felt on the naked head. We were dressed in striped clothes – skirts and short jackets – and given enormous wooden clogs, which kept falling off and injured our feet. We also wore thin white headscarves and stockings made from “German wool” (from nettles) – such was our winter attire. We were sent to block 15. During three weeks of quarantine we did not go to work, while the block overseers tormented us with constant inspections and punishments. Each one of us was allotted a bed, which we had to make up with military neatness and precision. The worst imaginable penalties would be meted out if we failed to comply. The same would happen in the event of any infringement of the idiotic camp regulations. Those found guilty would be sent to

the *Strafblock* (penal block) or to the so-called bunker, that is the prison, where they were starved. Another penalty was beating: 25, 50 or 75 blows with a rubber truncheon, or forced standing for a dozen or so hours in the freezing cold.

At the time, there were 270 inmates in the block. In September 1941 the camp had some 5,000 women – there were 12 barracks that served as living quarters, while the remainder housed the *rewir* [from the German *Revier* – sick room, hospital; translator's note], the chamber, tailoring shop, etc. There were 15 barracks in total.

The work was varied. After quarantine was over, we were sent to perform physical labor on the premises of the camp, such as transporting earth, digging channels for sewage pipes, building roads, carrying stones, carting snow in wheelbarrows near the lake, loading coal and the like. I participated in all these forms of work, although they were very, very hard and exceeded my strength. If any one of us could not perform the work allotted to them or lagged behind, the overseers would set their dogs on us and beat us until we lost consciousness. They wrote down reports on the basis of which we would be sent to the penal block or the bunker. In winter the frost was terrible, we would be chilled to the marrow in our thin jackets, while the biting wind penetrated our prison garb right through. Our legs would go numb and develop frostbite. We would stand at roll-call three times a day (in the morning, at noon and in the evening) for two – three hours.

But the sick were treated the worst. For the German women working in the *rewir* – SS nurses and ordinary prisoners – Poles were the most hated. They would refuse to examine the sick and throw them outside. If a new arrival did not know German and was unable to communicate her symptoms herself in this language, she would be thrown out immediately and oftentimes severely beaten. The doctors would beat and kick the sick women, who were suffering from frostbite to the arms and legs, with sores and ulcers brought about by the lack of vitamins, and not give them any drugs. In actual fact, the only people who were admitted to the hospital were ones who were nearly unconscious from fever or dying, and therefore needed "assistance" in the form of a lethal injection to the heart. One of the German nurses, Gerda, was a specialist in putting the acutely sick to death. The worst of all the hospital personnel were the German physicians: Sonntag, Schiedlausky, Rosenthal, and Oberheuser (a woman). Later on, their ranks were supplemented by Doctor Trommer, who in 1945 conducted the so-called selections, that is the picking out of elderly, sick, gray, and sometimes even completely

healthy women, who would be sent to the gas chamber. In March 1945 some 8 – 10 thousand women of different nationalities fell victim to such selections (excluding those who had been gassed in previous years). For example, lung patients were taken away and executed regularly, once every few months.

During my four-year detention in Ravensbrück I became familiar with nearly every form of physical labor. For two months we sewed straw shoes for German soldiers. This work was carried on at day and at night, in terrible hygienic conditions – the dust from the straw would rise in the air and contaminate our lungs. Throughout this time, my job was the most difficult: weaving straw plaits, which I had to do standing. My hands were swollen and cut up by the straw.

The overseers tormented us in unison with the work inspectors – German inmates, who in some instances were even nastier than the overseers.

After the straw boots campaign had drawn to a close, I was sent to the military tailoring shop. I think it goes without saying that work in the camp was obligatory, while anyone who did not work received a disability card and was sent for execution on the next transport. The tailoring shop was supervised by SS-men, who were army tailors. The worst of them were Binder, Graff, Schmidt (he committed suicide in consequence of his corrupt practices), Opitz, Pitsch, and others. I worked at the electric sewing machine. For two months I would sew only at night, for 12 hours at a stretch. Invariably starving and hungry, we would have to sew coats – anoraks for the army and clothes for the male prisoners. We were treated awfully. Reports would be written down for even the slightest negligence at work, and we would be sent to the *Strafblock* or beaten until we bled.

In April 1941, 13 of our friends from the prison in Lublin, who were in the same block with me, were taken to be executed. Their families were notified a few months later. Executions were performed in the camp irregularly. Mass shootings were most frequent in the years 1942 – 1943. Women would be taken from the block and led to the political office outside the main gate of the camp, from where none ever returned. Frequently during evening roll-call we would hear rifle salvos, as the execution yard was located close to the camp, in the nearby forest which surrounded the facility. Poles, mainly from the Pawiak transport and ours, accounted for the majority of execution victims.

The camp grew in size very rapidly. Over time, more and more women of other nationalities were brought to the camp: Czech, Russian, Ukrainian, French, and Dutch. During the final year, 1944/45, the number of transports was so great (between a few to a dozen or so thousand people per day) that there was, literally, insufficient room to house them. Almost immediately, the allocation of one person to a bed was abolished – towards the end we slept two to a single, narrow bed.

The sanitary conditions, initially passable, deteriorated over time – the last months of detention in the camp were a sheer nightmare due to the numerous epidemics, the stench of the corpses lying around the blocks, the vermin and our terrifying experiences of a moral nature, such as the constant selections and gassings. The crematorium chimney belched smoke without a pause. In 1944/45 the stench and stink of burned bodies was such that sometimes it was difficult to go out into the square.

Initially, the food in the camp was tolerable in taste, but the quantities that we received were insufficient. We were given 25 or 20 decagrams of bread made from conker flour per day, a cup of black, bitter coffee, and a small portion of rutabaga soup, with or without potatoes. With every passing day we felt more and more exhausted by the hard work and the unimaginable hunger. Luckily, in December 1942 we were allowed to receive food parcels from home. Although our parcels were inspected and pilfered by the overseers, they constituted our sole source of nourishment for nearly two years and served to sustain us physically. The food became worse and worse. Finally, in 1944 and 1945 it was impossible to swallow, literally: a tiny portion of black soup made from rotten, dried rutabaga, and 1/7 part of a loaf of bread, that is to say a rather thin slice, for the entire day. In the last three weeks before the evacuation they ceased giving us bread altogether, even though the warehouses were full of bread – as well as of parcels from America, from the Red Cross and from Sweden; the SS-men and overseers stuffed themselves with these foodstuffs, eating to their hearts' content, while we literally perished of hunger. If a prisoner failed to get a few potatoes or a slice of bread through one of the women working in the camp kitchen, she would die of hunger. It was the same with clothes – the situation grew steadily worse. Our striped prison garb was replaced with private clothes, with crosses painted on or affixed to them, and various items of clothing were taken back piece by piece. The final transports would walk – literally – without stockings nor shoes, without shirts, solely in dresses.



Women of the following nationalities were inmates at the camp: Polish, French, German, Czech, Dutch, Yugoslavian, Russian, Ukrainian, Belgian, and also Jewesses of all nationalities (all were gassed to death) and Gypsies of all nationalities (they were also gassed to death). In actual fact, the camp had representatives of each and every nationality, for there were even a few Americans, Englishwomen, black women, etc. There were also Jewish and Gypsy children, while towards the end the facility housed a very large number of Polish and French newborns, who had been born in the camp and whose mothers had come on one of the last transports.

A number of social classes were present in the camp. The fundamental division of *Häftlings* (prisoners) was as follows: 1) political (red triangle), 2) thieves – criminal cases in general (green triangle), 3) the so-called asocial element – various prostitutes and other riffraff (black triangle), 4) a religious sect comprising mainly German women, the so-called Bible Students (purple).

In principle, individual nationalities lived in separate blocks, i.e. Polish blocks, French blocks, etc. Towards the end, however, the camp was in such a mess that the prisoners were all mixed together, and therefore the conditions became insufferable. Blocks intended for 270 people had 700 – 800 inhabitants. In the final period there were 32 living barracks, this excluding the separate camp for prisoners working in the gigantic military tailoring shop and the Siemens camp – a factory that produced light bulbs, electrical parts for bugging devices, and aircraft parts. The largest number of inmates detained in Ravensbrück at any one time was approximately 45,000, and the numbers given to prisoners exceeded 126,000 in total (this was the number that passed through the *Lager* during the six-year period of German occupation). Our transport's numbers started with the digit "7", for "seven thousand".

Suddenly, in July 1942 we were summoned by name, all of us from the Lublin transport, to the *rewir*, where we were looked at by a few Gestapo men in uniforms (as it later turned out, these were doctors who were selecting victims for the experimental operations that began on 1 August 1942). I was called to the sick room in November together with some other women (our group numbered 12 or so). Initially, only a few were taken. Having been sent away to the block three times, on 21 November I was summoned for the fourth and final time, cursorily examined by a female German physician, Oberheuser, and referred to the *rewir*. In the *rewir* we were bathed, given clean underwear and laid in bed. We waited

for two days, trembling at the thought of what was to come. Before the arrival of Professor Gebhardt, the German doctors were not especially interested in us. On 23 November around noon our legs were shaved, after which a German nurse came round and gave us intramuscular shots of morphine (we knew this from our predecessors). Two hours after we had been given the morphine, when I was still somewhat unconscious, the nurse walked up with a gurney and ordered me to lie down; I was wheeled out to the corridor, next to the surgical theater in which my friend was already being operated on (I was second in line). The nurse gave me an intravenous anesthetic and I fell asleep having counted to 21. I woke up around seven in the evening on my bed in the *rewir*. I had a terrible headache, chills, a crazy temperature (40°), and a jagged pain in my right leg, which I was literally unable to move. Curiosity got the better of me, however, and I got up on the bed and drew the quilt aside. My right leg was unimaginably swollen and bluish-purple in color – there was no incision – only two large marks left by a very thick needle. Thus, I had received two internal injections right in the middle of my calf. As I was later informed by Polish doctors who worked in the sick room, I had been injected with so-called gas gangrene, which resulted in the development of gangrene in my right leg.

I lay in the sick room for three weeks, during which time I ran a high fever of up to 40° nearly constantly; in the last week it fell somewhat, to over 38 and over 37. My leg swelled and the pain grew in intensity; I was completely unable to move it. A German female doctor inspected us daily, checking the condition of our legs. Unfortunately, everything was shrouded in such secrecy that I really have no idea what was done to me during those few hours of anesthesia. As medication, I received three intravenous shots per day, however I do not know what the injections contained. The Polish doctors working in the sick room guessed that it could have been a serum cultivated in my girlfriends who had been operated on previously. In addition, we were given droplets of morphine for the night; these were intended to alleviate the pain, which was dreadful and did not allow us to sleep.

Medical care was very poor. Apart from Oberheuser – a German female army nurse who replied to all of our complaints with a smile: – *Ist Gut* – and a cleaner, also a German woman, nobody took any care of us. We had been placed in a separate wing of the camp hospital and both the other patients and sick room personnel – and in particular the Polish doctors – were strictly forbidden from entering our rooms. My sickness had all the symptoms typical of a serious infectious illness, such as a high temperature, headaches,

etc. In any case, Oberheuser – the female German doctor – called us “those who had received *Infektionsspritze*” (infectious injections).

Slowly, my organism started to fight off the infection that was eating away at it. Gradually, the pain in my leg lessened and the swelling subsided. We were visited twice by Doctor Fischer, the chief assistant to our torturer, Gebhardt, who took us for inspections to the wound dressing room. There he examined my leg, pressing down and touching the calf and ankle, and when I groaned in pain, he responded: – *No ja! Est ist schön!*

After three weeks we were sent back to the block. Oberheuser opined that we were now able to walk. Naturally, this was out of the question. My leg hurt terribly, and I was absolutely unable to swing it off the bed. Furthermore, my muscles felt as if they were paralyzed. My ankle was immobilized, I could not move my foot at all, let alone take a step. My calf muscles felt as hard as rocks. I continued to feel some sort of weight and pressure inside my calf and was felt as if my leg would simply burst at any moment. It was a terrible sensation. My right leg was (or at least so it seemed to me) much shorter than the healthy leg – this was all due to the paralysis and contraction of muscles and tendons.

I spent the whole of December lying in the block, and was able to start walking more or less normally only in mid-January (two months after the procedure). I have felt pain in my calf and ankle, accompanied by numbness in the leg, throughout the years since the operation. As it turned out, the infection remained in my body and in January 1945 I fell seriously ill with phlegmon 1) in the groin, 2) in the thigh of the operated leg. Only an immediate operation and the removal of pus saved my life and health.

Due to the experimental procedure and the high fever, and also the hard physical labor which our German torturers forced us to resume only a few months after the operation, but especially because of the anesthesia, I developed a serious disease of the heart. The female Czech doctor who inspected me in the sick room said: – Quite naturally these are the aftereffects of the operation and the serious infectious disease that you had in connection with the experimental procedure.

After the operations we were not allowed to work outside the premises of the camp. Simply, the Germans were afraid of any propaganda that we could stir up by showing our injured legs and speaking about all the unbelievable atrocities committed in the *Lager*, of which the

German civilian population did not have the slightest inkling. Thus, we were made use of on the premises of the camp, performing very hard labor.

Two of the sick room doctors: Schiedlausky and Rosenthal, wanted to give us work disability cards – which obviously would have been tantamount to a death sentence, for those who did not work were attached to the so-called black transport and put to death. We chose the lesser of two evils and continued to fight for our lives, doing everything in our power to survive.

Alas, the duplicity and cruelty of the Germans knew no bounds – seven of our operated friends were executed. This caused us to sink into depression, but at the same time motivated us to rebel. After all, our friends had suffered so much and yet, after all they had experienced, were still killed by the Germans. If we were all destined to die, then we wanted the Germans to kill us outright, without putting us through such terrible torments. On 15 August 1943 a few people were once again summoned for an operation. We did not want to give them away. Large-scale repressions were applied. They were operated on in the bunker, under terrible hygienic conditions. Our entire block was locked down for three days and nights, with no air (the shutters were hammered shut) and no food. Our parcels were confiscated, too. The camp adjutant threatened all of us with machine guns, a proven means of putting down rebellions. When after this time the block was finally opened and we were ordered to go for roll-call, we saw a frightening sight: the women, deprived of fresh air on such stifling and hot days, fainted one after the other, exhausted from hunger.

This was in the evening. Next day in the morning they all had to report for work, as always, as otherwise reports would be written. Some time later another great scandal erupted when the camp adjutant summoned all the Polish “political” women and proposed that we volunteer for the *Puff* (bordello) – “for Polish POWs”, as he said. This resulted in a strong protest on our part, for, as political prisoners and women who had been operated on, we felt insulted – simply – by such a disgusting proposal. Our action led to severe penalties: a few of my friends were locked in the bunker, while the entire block was deprived of parcels for two weeks and of food for three days. Furthermore, the block was subjected to a thorough search, during which we were robbed of our personal items, such as underwear sent in parcels, and also of the food that had been sent to us from home. From this time on we, the group of “rabbits”, were especially tormented and strictly guarded. Constant searches

and inspections, accompanied by the confiscation of parcels, became the norm. In January or February 1944 we, the operatees, were transferred to the so-called *Sonderblock* (special block) no. 32, where we were detained together with Frenchwomen who had received the death penalty. During this transfer I was separated from my mother, and we were kept apart right until our release from the camp, in spite of all our efforts.

Our block was especially closely guarded. Nobody was allowed to visit us and, obviously, we were given a special block warden – a German and a spy – who was supposed to follow us and report on everything she saw and heard to the camp authorities. Her name was Käty Knoll. Even the slightest opposition to regulations was punished with the most severe penalties.

In 1944 the anti-Polish stance became less severe. Indeed, the Germans were clearly wooing us. *Oberaufseherin* Binz, the adjutant, and the commandant attempted somehow to improve our living conditions, for example by providing us with separate beds, etc. We did not understand what all this meant. It later became apparent that they wanted to dull our vigilance in order to make it easier for them to do away with this compromising evidence of their crimes when the opportune moment arose. And so it was – the critical moment came on 4 February 1945, when all of the operatees were summoned by name to the commandant and ordered to ready themselves for a journey. It was plainly obvious that they wanted to lure us out of the camp premises under any old pretext and simply kill us. The commandant explained that we were to be transported to another, more comfortable camp, where we would receive better care – the camp in Gross-Rosen was mentioned. "*Herr* commandant – we replied – but the camp in Gross-Rosen (in Silesia) is long since occupied by the Soviet army". To which the commandant became flustered and remarked in German to *Oberaufseherin* Binz, who was sitting next to him: – So we have made another error. This shows best that his stories about a transport were no more than a lie. They just wanted to finish us off, clearly acting on the personal instructions of our "butcher" – Gebhardt.

We did not give in, however, and played for time, believing that in light of the changing political situation our salvation would come soon. After a few weeks of concealment and hiding in attics, in other blocks and dressing up as women of different nationalities, changing our numbers, etc., we managed to win this unique and final battle – the battle for our lives. We all thought that it would have been exceedingly cruel for us to die on the eve of liberation. Thanks to the assistance of our companions in misery and the fact that



there were so many prisoners in the camp, the Germans were simply unable to track us down. When in March and April our camp came under the care of the Swedish Red Cross and the removal of inmates from Ravensbrück to Sweden started, we were obviously safe. At long last, facing defeat on all fronts, the Germans had been reduced to impotence. The Germans forced us to endure one final torment, though: under threat of the most severe penalties we, the operatees, were not allowed to go to Sweden. The camp administration inspected all those leaving, so that we had to remain in the camp until it was evacuated. The commandant hoped that we would fall dead along the way. But we managed to return to our homeland safe and sound.

I confirm all of the above testimony, written down in my own hand, by my signature.

Jadwiga Bielska, Lublin, 9 October 1945