



THE WOMEN IN WALDHEIM PRISON

By Gabriele Hackl, 2017

German author and resistance fighter Eva Lippold spent almost five years of her ten-year sentence—from January 4, 1938 to July 25, 1943—in Waldheim prison. In her two novels, which provided the literary model for the East German film Die Verlobte (1980, The Fiancée), she reflects on her prison experiences.

Penitentiaries and prisons are institutions of remarkable continuity. This is also the case for the prison in Waldheim, which originally opened in 1716 as the first prison, poorhouse and orphanage in Saxony. From the beginning on, the institution housed people of both sexes, but men and women were kept separate. In 1886, a women's prison (*Weibergefängnis*) was erected in order to completely segregate the sexes. From its inception, this facility counted among the largest and most important women's prisons in the German Reich. Measured according to the total number of inmates in the men's and women's prisons, the Waldheim state penitentiary was the second largest penal institution in 1930s Nazi Germany, after the Brandenburg-Görden penitentiary in Berlin.¹

Both the men's and women's prisons reported to the same director. As of 1926 at the latest, however, in practice the women's institution in Waldheim was brought under the management of a female director: Dr. Else Voigtländer. The renowned psychologist, employed there until 1945, made a lasting impression on new arrivals. Former prisoner Eva Lippold described Voigtländer in her novel, *Leben, wo gestorben wird* (1974, *Living Where There Is Death*), noting that she was surprised that Dr. Voigtländer was not only a woman, but also smoked cigars.² Voigtländer struck the Czech political prisoner Milada Marešová as an "old giant," with her masculine appearance and voice.³

The firsthand reports of Lippold and Marešová are a valuable source in reconstructing daily life for female prisoners under the National Socialists. Nevertheless, one must use caution when working with such sources; they represent a subjective truth, but can also contain conscious bias. Eva Lippold's works *Haus der schweren Tore* (1971, *House of the Heavy Gates*) and *Living Where There Is Death*—which were the literary basis for the DEFA film *Die Verlobte* (1980, *The Fiancée*)—are to be understood as novels in which the author took artistic liberties. Moreover, one must take into consideration that they were created against the backdrop of the political climate of East Germany. This explains Lippold's claim that her transfer from the Jauer to the Waldheim women's prison was due to the efforts of political companions—when it actually resulted from a request by her mother. A considerable intervention Lippold made into her own life story was to merge her two life partners, Karl Raddatz and Hermann Danz, into the character of her fiancé, Hermann Reimers.

Likewise, Lippold's estimation that between five and seven inmates of the women's prison died every week in 1943 does not entirely correspond to the facts.⁴ According to records and death registers, a total of twelve women prisoners died in the facility that year;⁵ although the number is only an approximation, the discrepancy is considerable. Although the verifiable mortality rate seems low in comparison to Lippold's allegation, it actually indicates a remarkable increase in mortality. By way of comparison: during the Weimar Republic period, an average of only one prisoner died in the Waldheim women's prison per year. The noticeable increase in deaths is indicative of the physical and psychological mistreatment of prisoners imprisoned by the Nazis; but above all, it reflects insufficient food, bad medical care and ever-increasing work.

In spite of some inconsistencies and embellishments, in her novel Lippold presents a realistic, albeit subjective portrayal of the life of women prisoners in confinement. At their core, statements about the complex relationships between the prisoners seem true. The women imprisoned in Waldheim were characterized by a great heterogeneity, which is more

¹ See: Reichsjustizministerium (Ed.), *Das Gefängniswesen in Deutschland*. Berlin, 1935: 35-42.

² Lippold, Eva. *Leben, wo gestorben wird*. 2nd ed. Berlin: Der Morgen, 1976. 13.

³ Marešová, Milada. *Waldheimer Idyll*. Waldheim: Dr. der Strafvollzugsanst., 1964. 25.

⁴ Lippold, Eva. *Leben wo gestorben wird*. 167.

⁵ Death Records at the Waldheim registry office, Staatsarchiv Leipzig (StAL), 22000, no. 1737; *ibid*, no. 1739, no. 1741-1750 and the death register of the Waldheim registry office, Waldheim city archive (12/10/1918 until 3/14/1933).



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strongly emphasized in Lippold's novels than in the film *The Fiancée*. They differed from each other in terms of the grounds for incarceration, the imposed penalty, age, nationality, religion, profession, etc. Those imprisoned in Waldheim under National Socialism were predominantly adult women of German nationality, who were sentenced to lengthy terms. The number of foreign women—especially Czechoslovakians and Poles—rose noticeably only after the beginning of the Second World War. As the war neared its end, French and Belgian women made up the bulk of the foreign prisoners. In contrast, Roma, Sinti and German and non-German Jewish women represented only a small portion of the prisoners. There were a number of reasons for this. First, they were only a small part of the population; second, in the 1940s it was common practice to hand them over to the Gestapo before the end of their sentence; third, as of July 1, 1943, only police forces were responsible for the punishment of the “deviant behavior”⁶ of Jewish people.⁷

Those incarcerated as political enemies of the regime comprised about a third of the occupants at the Waldheim women's prison; but those convicted for ordinary reasons, such as theft and fraud, remained the most common. Murderers and robbers represented a comparably smaller portion of the inmates, while the number of female “wartime economy criminals” (*Kriegswirtschaftsverbrecherinnen*)⁸ was relatively high.⁹ The political prisoners were to experience special hardships while in custody, insofar as they were to be denied promotion to the highest level in the hierarchical prison system.¹⁰ Additionally, they were not to be employed as domestic workers, as this would allow them more freedom of movement and to maintain contact with fellow prisoners more easily.

The distinction between “politicals” and ordinary criminals pertained not only to judicial institutions, but also to the self-understanding of the prisoners. The political prisoners did not regard their crimes as immoral acts; but they did judge those of the criminals as such. In addition, the political prisoners felt not only morally, but especially mentally superior to the criminals, despite being convicted offenders themselves. This did not mean, however, that political and criminal prisoners did not establish friendly relations or that they did not help each other out, as Lippold also described.¹¹

Administrators and officials made further differences between prisoners on the basis of ideological, and especially racist principles. For example, if there were shortages, the German women were provided for first, so that the foreigners often received the worst clothes or no outerwear, bedding or stockings.¹² In addition, the items distributed were often too small or too large, damaged or mended, and meager protection against the cold or wet. In general, there was an extreme scarcity of clothing, hygiene articles and basic equipment, which was mainly a consequence of the extreme overcrowding of penal institutions. Due to the rigorous use of the judicial system under National Socialism, the total number of prisoners increased sharply; the proportional increase of female prisoners was even greater.¹³ At the beginning of July 1943, the number of inmates at the Waldheim women's prison—which had a maximum capacity of about 450 people—passed the one thousand mark. The number of occupants had thus grown sixfold in ten years, while the number in the male prison was about double what it had been.¹⁴

The most urgent concerns of the imprisoned women, however, were probably medical care and scarce food rations. Prisoner diets, like other prison conditions, worsened gradually, not abruptly after Adolf Hitler's rise to power in 1933. In the

⁶ Editor's note: Special terms espoused by the Nazis are written with quotation marks around their English translations.

⁷ See: Decree No. 13 of the Reichsbürgergesetz (Reich Citizens Act) from July 1, 1943, Reichsgesetzblatt (Reich Law) 1943. 372.

⁸ Crimes against § 1 of the “War Economy Regulations.” From September 4, 1939, like illicit trading, illegal slaughtering, counterfeiting food ration cards, etc.

⁹ See: Statistical Survey of the Waldheim Prison from the years 1939-1945, StAL, 20036, no. 1803. N.p.

¹⁰ From 1923-1940, a hierarchical “level system” was used in the German penal system, with three levels associated with different conditions of imprisonment. Through impeccable conduct and work performance, prisoners could advance, after serving a part of their punishment, which came with certain privileges. In 1940, the Nazi regime replaced this system with a system of performance rewards.

¹¹ See: Lippold Eva. *Haus der schweren Tore*, 6th ed. Berlin: Der Morgen, 1989. 147, 241-243; von Gélieu, Claudia. *Frauen in Haft. Gefängnis Barnimstrasse. Eine Justizgeschichte*. Berlin: Elefantentpress, 1994. 161.

¹² Faralisch, Brigitte. “‘Begreifen Sie erst jetzt, daß wir rechtlos sind?’ Zeitzeugenberichte über den Strafvollzug im ‘Dritten Reich.’” *Strafvollzug im ‘Dritten Reich.’ “Am Beispiel des Saarlandes, Baden-Baden*. Eds. Jung, Heike and Heinz Müller-Dietz. 1996. 303-377, here: 364; and, Christian Friedrich, “Sie wollten uns brechen und brachen uns nicht...” *Zur Lage und zum antifaschistischen Widerstandskampf weiblicher Häftlinge im Frauenzuchthaus Cottbus 1938-1945*. Cottbus, 1986. 8.

¹³ From 1939-1944, the number of female prisoners was quintupled, while the number of male prisoners only doubled. See: Rainer Möhler, “Strafvollzug im ‘Dritten Reich.’ Nationale Politik und regionale Ausprägung am Beispiel des Saarlandes.” *Strafvollzug*, Jung/Müller (eds.), 9-301, here: 90.

¹⁴ See: Statistical Survey of the Waldheim Prison from the years 1939-1945, StAL, 20036, no. 1803. N.p and, Letters by the Reich Minister of Justice to the Attorney General, June 22, 1943, *ibid*, no. 1638: 36.



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Waldheim institutions, prisoners suffered from insufficient provisions as of the outbreak of the war. As of 1941, at the latest, we can assume that prisoner nutrition was drastically inadequate. Additional rations could be prescribed for sick inmates and pregnant women; but prison doctor Helmut Rath, a convinced National Socialist, knew exactly “how National Socialism classifies prison inmates.”¹⁵ Accordingly, he provided no additional rations for prisoners classified as “alien” (*fremdvölkisch*) or “asocial” (*asozial*).

Rationalized by women’s somewhat lower calorie consumption, female prisoners moreover received rations that were shortened up to twenty percent.¹⁶ One way to improve their diet was that they could earn the right to purchase additional food by exceeding the required productivity goals. Prisoners considered to be “aliens to the community” (*Gemeinschaftsfremde*) were excluded from this option though; and as imprisoned women—like those in the outside world—received significantly lower wages for their work than men, they probably had difficulty finding the funds even if given permission to purchase extra food. When wartime economic demands pushed Waldheim’s female prisoners into jobs previously reserved for men, management took measures to adjust their food rations, but without any significant results.

Traditional types of work for female prisoners were crafts, such as knitting, embroidery, sewing, making nets, or rolling cigars. They were also employed as domestic workers in the prisons. At the Waldheim women’s prison, for example, a large laundry was installed, to which Lippold was assigned.¹⁷ These typically feminine jobs were gradually restricted or given a new look. Women still sewed and knitted, but now they made nurses’ uniforms, socks and cigars for the army. They were also sent to private companies as forced laborers for essential wartime production. In 1944, the majority of the female prisoners at Waldheim worked for such companies, with 85% working in manufacturing parts for cars, tanks, machine guns and airplanes, as well as in transport and agricultural work. When companies could not set up shop within the prison walls, prisoners were moved to satellite prison work camps located nearby. Separation of the sexes was also important in the satellite camps. Additionally, under National Socialism prisoners were generally also separated according to their “völkisch” identities; in Waldheim, separate work groups were thus established for Jewish and Polish prisoners and assigned to the most difficult and undesirable work. Jewish women had to work in isolation from their fellow prisoners in cells;¹⁸ some cells had as many as four or five women, although they were not meant for so many.¹⁹

Living together in extremely confined space was a physical and psychological challenge for many prisoners. It also posed a problem for officials and administrators, in terms of both hygiene and discipline. Sexual contact between prisoners was to be avoided at all costs. As Else Voigtländer admitted, “quite harmless, friendly intimacy ... [was] discouraged and suspected”²⁰—and even the suspicion of an intimate relationship incurred severe punishment. Such relationships, of course, could result from entirely opportunistic reasons. Lippold wrote of a woman who offered her affections to another prisoner for food, apparently leaving the other to starve.²¹ Both male and female prisoners at Waldheim also entered into opportunistic relationships with free workers at the outside companies where they worked. Such partners demanded sexual favors in exchange for food or for smuggling letters out.

Despite the wartime economic demands, it was a concern for the Nazi regime to limit prisoner contact with the outside world as much as possible. Thus the worsening conditions of imprisonment after 1933, resulting from two penal decrees and “wartime simplifications” (*Kriegsvereinfachungen*), had to do with such things as censorship of mail and the rights to write letters and have visitors. The new rules were to be strictly enforced by officials and the numerous prison guards. The treatment of prisoners by female staff worsened over time, becoming increasingly brutal and callous. Certain courtesies, still granted during the Weimar Republic, were now scarce. While it may be true that Luise Oeser, the laundry manager, may have surreptitiously given Lippold hand cream, it is questionable that Oeser smuggled illegal news out of the prison for her,

¹⁵ Letter by the institutional doctor, Helmut Rath, to the Dresden Attorney General, January 13, 1942, HStA DD, 13471, Nr. ZC 20073, A. 4. 48.

¹⁶ Fischer, Herwart. “Gesundheitsfürsorge in den Gefangenenanstalten.” *Deutsches Gefängniswesen. Ein Handbuch*, Erwin Bumke (ed.). Berlin: Vahlen, 1928. 198-232, here: 218f.

¹⁷ She reports how the caustic solution constantly destroyed the laundresses’ unprotected hands. See: Lippold, *Leben, wo gestorben wird*, 242.

¹⁸ Marešová, *Waldheimer Idyll*, 33.

¹⁹ Regulation by the Board of Directors, PPA, Rudolf Winkler, March 11, 1942, StAL, 20036, no. 1820. 105.

²⁰ Meeting minutes of the Criminal Law Commission, June 18, 1937, BArch, R 61, no. 344. 31.

²¹ Lippold, *Leben, wo gestorben wird*, 139-141.



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as she describes in *Living Where There Is Death*,²² although in the last months of the war, many officials tried to make a good impression on the prisoners, as they feared reprisals by the approaching Allied forces.

This did not mean, however, that the situation for prisoners improved as the end of the war grew near. On the contrary, chaos and inhumane conditions of imprisonment prevailed. There were regular air raids and alarms, during which air raid shelters were most often open only to staff and a few groups of prisoners. In October 1944, the prison facilities near the front were abandoned, and in February 1945 institutions located further inland, in the “Old Reich”²³ (*Altreich*), were vacated and the prisoners moved even further inland. The prisoners had to travel in part on foot, occasionally also by train, without being equipped for the winter weather. For more than a few of the prisoners, these marches used up the last bit of strength they had left. Thousands of political and criminal prisoners who were classified as “dangerous” were left behind and murdered by firing squads.²⁴ But, as far as is known, there was no massacre in women’s prisons comparable to those that took place in a few of the men’s prisons.

At the end of the war, some Nazi prisons made a peaceful transfer to the allied forces.²⁵ At other institutions, officials and administrators simply took off, leaving the prisoners to await their liberation by allied forces. When the Red Army liberated the Waldheim women’s prison on May 7, 1945, Eva Lippold was no longer there. She was one of the few political prisoners who, after serving her time, had actually been released and not sent to a concentration camp.

In the postwar period, the Waldheim women’s prison remained a penitentiary for only a few years, after which it became a psychiatric institution and, in 1967, closed. In the early 2000s, the building complex was mostly demolished, whereas the men’s prison remained in use throughout the East German years and until today.

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²² Lippold, *Leben, wo gestorben wird*, 176 and 242.

²³ The territory within Germany’s 1938 borders was considered by the Nazis to be the *Altreich*.

²⁴ Wachsmann, Nikolaus. *Gefangen unter Hitler. Justizterror und Strafvollzug im NS-Staat*. Munich: Siedler, 2006. 371f.

²⁵ Möhler, *Strafvollzug im ‘Dritten Reich,’* 171.