

Monika Herzog, Christiane Hess

“Resistant material”

1: drawings and other artifacts of the Ravensbrück Memorial’s collections

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A graduate in history at the Humboldt University in Berlin. Positions held: director of the Birkenwerder Memorial (1972-1986), head of the Collections and researcher at the Ravensbrück Memorial (1986-2012). In her research work she focused on history of the women’s camp at Ravensbrück as well as prisoners’ art in the Nazi concentration camps. She is an author of numerous publications, e.g. Herzog/Strebel: *Das Frauenkonzentrationslager Ravensbrück*. In: *Frauen in Konzentrationslagern. Bergen-Belsen. Ravensbrück*, Bremen 1993; Herzog: “Hoffnung, die in uns lebt“ – *Ravensbrücker Häftlingszeichnungen*, Fürstenberg 1994. Also she is an author of permanent, temporary and travelling exhibitions which were displayed all over Germany. She has participated as a lecturer and educator in various projects, seminars and conferences, e.g. the exhibition for German and Ukrainian students “Die Tränen verwandeln sich in Tauben und fliegen zur Sonne”. *Neue Perspektiven auf die Geschichte der NS-Konzentrationslager*, Berlin: Metropol 2011; Christiane Hess; Félix Lazare Bertrand: *Dessins du Camp de Neuengamme*, in: *Témoigner: entre histoire et mémoire; revue pluridisciplinaire de la Fondation Auschwitz*, Bruxelles, N° 109 (2011), pp. 222-234.

In the Depot of the *Ravensbrück* Memorial (Mahn- und Gedenkstätte Ravensbrück) near Berlin you can find a large number of drawings, sketches, carvings and other artifacts. They are catalogued and by now even digitized. Among them is the following drawing.

A little child depicted as Baby Jesus is standing on a cloud with a halo on his head. He is wearing striped clothing and on his left arm one can see the red triangle, the sign for political prisoners [Abb. 1]. The drawing was given to the Memorial in 1950s by the Czechoslovakian Former Prisoners’ Organization. There are no further clues as to where and when the picture was drawn, there is no signature or any other clue to the identity of the woman who produced it.

In the Nazi concentration camps, there were few if any opportunities for the prisoners to depict what they saw and experienced. Drawing was the only medium available to them for visual documenting of their daily lives or producing portraits of their fellow prisoners.¹ Both professional and amateur artists drew—from some only a few pieces have survived, from others more than a hundred. “The essence of an archive is its gaps, its holes” the art historian George Didi-Huberman declared in his treatise on *The Archive*. By that he did not only mean the archive in its formal sense, but more broadly, as the collection of what was known, said, written about a certain period and within a certain period or—as in our case—drawn in a certain period.² These gaps must be taken into consideration and therefore Didi-Huberman goes on asking: “Whenever we look at a picture should we not think about what prevented its destruction, and what stopped it vanishing?”³ It is not only important to know and to reconstruct, what

1 For the few photographs made secretly by prisoners in the concentration camps see Clement Chéroux (Ed.), *Mémoire de camps: Photographies des camps de concentration et d’extermination nazis (1933–1999)*, Paris 2001.

2 One of the objectives is to analyze practices of archives and its approach to researching knowledge. Cf. Knut Ebeling, Stephan Günzel (Eds.), *Archivologie. Theorien des Archivs in Philosophie, Medien und Künsten*, Berlin 2009.

3 George Didi-Huberman, “Das Archiv brennt,” p. 7 in: Georges Didi-Huberman, Knut Ebeling, *Das Archiv brennt*, Berlin 2007.

drawings still exist, why and how they were handed down, but also which pictures were destroyed and why they were lost or forgotten?

Nearly twenty years later, in 1972, the Czech former concentration camp prisoner, dancer and choreographer, Nina Jirsiková refers to that drawing in her written memories of "cultural life" in the concentration camp.⁴

"Some of the women had been working as craftswomen and so they brought me pieces of paper, pencil stubs, and colored pencils. That was how my first artistic work started in the camp. There wasn't much art involved though. It was just what some of us wanted to have, mainly birthday or saints' days cards for their friends ... My Baby Jesus was very popular with them. It was a baby in striped camp clothing with a halo and the red triangle of the political prisoners on the sleeve. What an awful lot of Baby Jesuses I drew from Christmas 1942 onwards."⁵

This story gives us the first clue as to who made this little picture. Not only do the drawings reflect the experiences of the prisoners in the camp but their experience of the world before and outside the camps can be seen in them.⁶ The art historian Detlef Hoffmann describes these artifacts as having the same power of religious relics that must be seen comprehensively within their narrative style and their mode of expression.⁷

In her recollection Nina Jirsiková refers to Arts and Crafts as a section within the Ravensbrück concentration camp. Since 1941 about 150 women, mainly Polish, worked in this section. They worked as straw plaiters and embroiderers and had to produce badges for the "Winterhilfe," a national-socialist program for collecting money and gifts in kind. At the same time they often used the opportunity to draw secretly or to walk off with material to give to other inmates. Producing a history of "commissioned works of art" in the Ravensbrück concentration camp still has a high priority as far as

4 Nina Jirsikova, *Über die künstlerische Arbeit im Konzentrationslager Ravensbrück*. Translation in the library of the Ravensbrück Memorial. Nina Jirsiková was born in 1910; from 1936 she worked as an artist, dancer and choreographer at a theatre in Prague; 1941—production of *Das Märchen vom Tanz*; arrested in 1941, from Pankrác prison in Prague transferred to Ravensbrück; Forced laborer, inter alia in the furriery and later for Siemens-Halske; she returned to Prague in 1945; died in 1979.

5 Ibid.

6 See Nicholas Stargardt, "Children's Art of the Holocaust," in: *Past & Present*, No. 161 (Nov. 1998), pp. 192–235.

7 Detlef Hoffmann, "Relikte aus dem Kraftfeld der Kunst. Bilder, gefertigt in deutschen Konzentrationslagern," in Anne Bernou-Fieseler, Fabien Théofilakis (Eds.), *Das Konzentrationslager Dachau: Erlebnis, Erinnerung, Geschichte. Deutsch-Französisches Kolloquium zum 60. Jahrestag der Befreiung des Konzentrationslagers Dachau*, Munich: Medienbauer 2006, pp. 271–293.

historical research is concerned.⁸

This article concentrates on the drawings and sketches, their restoration and how they are preserved. At the moment we can name more than 50 women, who either drew pictures in the concentration camp or shortly after the liberation.⁹ As early as 1945 or shortly after, former inmates published their written reflections and reproduced their artistic work or used drawings to illustrate their accounts.¹⁰ Already in the early historiography of the concentration camps we can find references to the phenomenon of cultural or artistic activities there.¹¹ In 1990 and again in a new edition of 1993 the *Ravensbrück National Memorial* published a brochure with selected drawings under the title *Hoffnung, die in uns lebt...– Ravensbrücker Zeichnungen* (Hope which lives in us eternally: Drawings from Ravensbrück).

Since 1997 the Dr. Hildegard-Hansche-Foundation has published collections of drawings by Edith Kiss, Helen Ernst, Aat Breur, and Eliane Jeannin-Garreau. Drawings from Ravensbrück have also been put on display in various special exhibitions.¹² At the same time books and biographies have been published on individual artists, who were imprisoned in Ravensbrück itself or in its satellite camps.¹³

The history of the collection

The origin and the development of the collection of the *Ravensbrück National Memorial* with its different departments such as the archive, the depot, a special archive for photography, the library, and the multimedia center are interwoven with the history of the memorial itself. Following a call by the Kuratorium zum Aufbau nationaler Gedenkstätten in Buchenwald, Ravensbrück und Sachsenhausen, the

8 Concerning this subject only Urszula Wińska (1985) has published reports and statements. In: *Die Werte siegen: Erinnerung an Ravensbrück*, Gdańsk 1985 (German translation in the Ravensbrück Memorial's library).

9 This is a result of the current work of Christiane Hess on her dissertation about drawings from Ravensbrück.

10 Cp. e.g. Violette Rougier-Lecoq, *Témoignages: 36 Dessins à la plume*, Paris 1948; France Audoul, *Ravensbrück, 150000 femmes en enfer. 32 croquis et portrait faits au camp 1944–1945*, without date (presumably 1966).

11 Eugen Kogon, *Der SS-Staat. Das System der deutschen Konzentrationslager*, Munich 1946; Dagmar Hajkova et. al.: *Ravensbrück*, Prague 1960; Wanda Kiedrzyńska, *Ravensbrück, Kobiety oboz koncentracyjny*, Warsaw 1961; Urszula Wińska, *Zwyciężyły wartości. Wspomnienia z Ravensbrück*, Gdańsk 1985.

12 For example, *„Wir sind die letzten Zeugen (...We are the last witnesses)*. Eliane Jeannin-Garreau. *Drawings 1944/1989*, special exhibition of the Memorial Ravensbrück (12/2000–08/2001).

13 See e.g. Dunya Breur, *Een verborgen herinnering. De tekeningen van Aat Breur-Hibma uit Ravensbrück*, Amsterdam 1983; Hans Hübner, *Helen Ernst – Ein zerbrechliches Menschenkind (1904–1948)*. Athen, Zürich, Berlin, Amsterdam, Ravensbrück und Schwerin – Stationen einer Künstlerin im Widerstand, Berlin 2002; Helmuth Bauer, *Innere Bilder wird man nicht los. Die Frauen im KZ-Aussenlager Daimler-Benz Genshagen*, Berlin 2010.