

## Testimonies of Four Women who Survived the Ravensbrück Surgical Travesties



[Władysława Karolewska](#) (excerpt) testimony at the Nuremberg Doctors Trial: “On the 22nd July 1942, 75 prisoners from our transport that came from Lublin were called, summoned to the chief of the camp... On the 14th of August, I was called to the hospital and my name was written on a piece of paper. I did not know why. Besides me, eight other girls were called to the hospital. We were called at a time when usually executions took place and I was going to be executed because before some girls were shot down. In the hospital we were put to bed and the hospital room in which we stayed was locked....

”I lost my consciousness and when I revived I noticed that I was in a regular hospital room. I recovered my consciousness for a while and I felt severe pain in my leg. Then I lost my consciousness again. I regained my consciousness in the morning and then I noticed that my leg was in a cast from the ankle up to the knee and I felt a very strong pain in this leg and the high temperature. I noticed also that my leg was swollen from the toes up to the groin. The pain was increasing and the temperature, too, and the next day I noticed that some liquid was flowing from my leg. The third day I was put on a hospital cart and taken to the dressing room. Then I saw Dr. Fischer again. He had an operating gown and rubber gloves on his hands. A blanket was put over my eyes and I did not know what was done with my leg but I felt great pain and I had the impression that something must have been cut out of my leg.

Those present were: Schildauski, Rosenthal, and Oberhauser. After the changing of the dressing I was put again in the regular hospital room. Three days later I was again taken to the dressing room, and the dressing was changed by Dr. Fischer with the assistance of the same doctor, and I was blindfolded, too. I was then sent back to the regular hospital room. The next dressings were made by the camp doctors. Two weeks later we were all taken again to the operating room and put on the operating tables. The bandage was removed, and that was the first time I saw my leg. The incision went so deep that I could see the bone. We were told then there was a doctor from Hohenlychen, Doctor Gebhardt, would come and examine us....

On the eighth of September I was sent back to the block. I could not walk. The puss was draining from my leg; the leg was swollen up and I could not walk. In the block, I stayed in bed for one week; then I was called to the hospital again. I could not walk and I was carried by my comrades. In the hospital I met some of my comrades who were there for the operation. This time I was

sure I was going to be executed because I saw an ambulance standing before the office which was used by the Germans to transport people intended for execution.

Then, we were taken to the dressing room where Doctor Oberhauser and Doctor Schidlauski examined our legs. We were put to bed again, and on the same day, in the afternoon, I was taken to the operating room and the second operation was performed on my leg... And, this time I saw again Doctor Fischer. I woke up in the regular hospital room and I felt a stronger pain and higher temperature.

The leg was swollen and the puss flowed from my leg. After this operation, the dressings were changed by Dr. Fischer every three days. More than ten days afterwards we were taken again to the operating room, put on the table; and we were told that Dr. Gebhardt was going to come to examine our legs. We waited for a long time. Then he arrived and examined our legs while we were blindfolded. Then we were carried on hospital cots back to our rooms. After this operation I felt still worse; and I could not move. While I was in the hospital, cruelty from Dr. Oberhauser was performed on me.”

She then testified about resistance efforts and a written protest that they drew up in February 1943:

“Dr. Oberhauser called us and said, "Those girls are new guinea-pigs"; and we were very well known under this name in the camp. Then we understood that we were persons intended for experiments and we decided to protest against the performance of those operations on healthy people. We drew up a protest in writing and we went to the camp commander. Not only those girls who had been operated on before but other girls who were called to the hospital came to the office. The operated on girls used crutches and they went without any help.”

On August 15, 1943, she was forcibly operated on in a bunker:

“We stood for a while near the camp gate. We were afraid that SS men would come to take us so we ran away and mixed with other people standing before the block. Then Binz and the camp police appeared. They drove us out from the lines by force. She told us that she put us into the bunker as punishment; that we did not follow her orders. In each cell were put five prisoners although one cell was intended only for one person. The cells were quite dark; without lights. We stayed in the bunker the whole night long and the next day. We slept on the floor because there was only one couch in the cell.

I also noticed some men in operating gowns... also one German nurse ready to give an injection. That made it clear to me that I was going to be operated on again in the bunker. I decided to defend myself to the last moment. In a moment Trommel came with two SS men. One of these SS men told me to enter the cell. I refused to do it, so he forced me into the cell and threw me on the bed. Dr. Trommel took me by the left wrist and pulled my arm back. With his other hand he tried to gag me, putting a piece of rag into my mouth, because I shouted. The second SS man took my right hand and stretched it. Two other SS men held me by my feet. Immobilized, I felt that somebody was giving me an injection. I defended myself for a long time, but then I grew

weaker. The injection had its effect; I felt sleepy. I heard Trommel saying, "Das ist fertig", that is all.

I regained consciousness again, but I don't know when. Then I noticed that a German nurse was taking off my dress, I then lost consciousness again; I regained it in the morning. Then I noticed that both my legs were in iron splints and were bandaged from the toes to groin. I felt a strong pain in my feet, and a temperature. In the afternoon of the same day a German nurse came and gave me an injection, in spite of my protests; she gave this injection on my thigh and told me that she had to do it. Four days after this operation a doctor from Hohenlychen arrived, again gave me an injection to put me to sleep, and as I protested he told me that he would change the dressing, I felt a higher temperature and stronger pain in my legs."

In September 1943, she underwent yet two additional operations in the bunker in which a piece of her shin bone was removed: "When I woke up after the operation that I underwent in the bunker, I noticed that my feet were dirty, covered with mud, that they had not been washed before the operation."

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**Jadwiga Dzido** had studied to be a pharmacist:

"In 1942 great hunger and terror reigned in the camp. The Germans were at the zenith of their power. You could see haughtiness and pride on the face of every SS woman. We were told every day that we were nothing but numbers; that we had to forget that we were human beings; that we had nobody to think of us, that we would never return to our country, that we were slaves, and that we had only to work. We were not allowed to smile, to cry, or to pray. We were not allowed to defend ourselves when we were beaten.

"I was operated on November 22, 1942... I don't remember whether I got an injection or whether a mask was put on my face. I didn't see the operating room.

When I came back I remember that I had no wound on my leg, but a trace of a sting. From that time I don't remember anything till January. I learned from my comrades who lived in the same room that my leg had been operated on. I remember what was going on in January, and I know that the dressings had been changed several times.

"On the 15<sup>th</sup> of August [1943] a policewoman came and called ten girls... We didn't want to let our comrades out of the block... We were driven out of the block into the street... Binz read off the names of ten girls. When they refused to go because they were afraid of a new operation

and were not willing to undergo a new operation, she gave her word of honor that it was not going to be an operation...”

The girls were locked up in their cell without food or air as a punishment for revolting:

“My comrade, who knew German answered that we were not revolting, we didn’t want to be operated on because five of us died after the operation and six had been shot after having suffered so much. Then Binz replied ‘Death is victory. You must suffer for it and you will never get out of the camp.’ Three days later we learned that our comrades had been operated on in the bunker... (Vivien Spitz. *Doctors from Hell: The Horrific Account of Nazi Experiments on Humans*, 2005)

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In 1983, Vera Laska, a Czechoslovakian survivor of Nazi concentration camps who earned a doctorate in American history at the University of Chicago, edited the book, *Women in the Resistance and in the Holocaust: The voices of Eyewitnesses*, in which she relates the testimonies of three Ravensbrück “rabbits” – Maria Cabaj, Dagmar Hajkova and Hana Houkova.



[Maria Cabaj:](#)

“They chose the most healthy women, those who were the youngest and best built. I was young and healthy—my life was before me... I was in the hospital ward for two days and two nights waiting for my operation. I was not given anything to eat and the living conditions there were deplorable. On the third day, SS women and nurses carrying syringes and razors came round the ward. I was given an injection of morphine in my thigh; I was dazed, but knew what was going on. I was told to get into a stretcher and was wheeled to the operating theatre. I saw the hangman Dr. Rosenthal coming toward me; from the corridor where I was lying on the stretcher, I looked through the window at the sky and thought I was looking at it for the last time. I was given an intravenous injection; I don’t remember what happened afterwards.

When I awoke, I felt very bad pain in both legs and the whole of my body seemed to be paralyzed. I had a very high temperature. They operated on me four times more in the course of six weeks. In the end they put my legs in plaster up to the knees. I lay in the Revier [hospital] in this condition for three months. Then I was sent to a general barrack where, in conditions of hygiene defying description, I spent another two months without any care, without proper food, hungry and in a bitterly cold barrack." (Nuremberg Trials 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, *Dimensions, A Journal of Holocaust Studies*, Fall, 2006)

[Dagmar Hajkova and Hana Houkova](#) described their ordeal:

"The ten Polish women were brought in, and behind closed doors they were examined. It took a long time, and nobody was allowed to be even in the corridor. The next morning we found out that five of the Poles had been admitted to the [hospital]. Their room was under lock and key, and the SS nurse Erica Milleville was in charge.....

The first day they operated on two. Two days later on three others. The screams never ceased from the chamber of torture. The [hospital] was full of them. The girls were not given any pain killers, so that the course of the experiment would not be impaired in any way. Dogs that had undergone the same experiment received strong doses of morphine for five days.

After a few days the first Pole, a girl of seventeen, died. Her leg was huge, swollen, monstrous, blue with red wounds, and the stench emanated from them was nauseating. The Poles from the [hospital] told us that Gebhardt cut the leg off and took it with him.

Oberhauser was telling us that these were great scientific experiments that should solve a number of important questions in the treatment of gunshot wounds and other war injuries, and especially the gangrene and bone transplants.

There were two kinds of experiments. In the first type gangrene, tetanus and staphylococci bacteria were implanted or injected into artificially cut wounds of healthy extremities. This happened in the case of the first five, who were desperately and hysterically screaming and who all died, one of tetanus, two of gangrene, one of blood poisoning, and one bled to death.

"The other operations were called by the "scientists" bone, muscle and nerve surgery. In such cases, for instance, parts as large as two inches (5 cm.) were removed from the shin bone and replaced with metal supports or not replaced at all; in this case the doctors were waiting "how the organism will help itself." Muscles and nerves were removed and replaced by others taken from another healthy woman. The bone transplants were supposed to prove that without the periosteum bones could not grow; muscle and nerve operations served research on regeneration of tissue. Such operations took two or three hours. They repeatedly removed from some women's hips and calves larger and larger parts of muscles; naturally, this resulted in ever increasing weakening and deformation of the extremities.

In order to carry out better and more detailed “research,” they removed some women’s entire hips, shoulder joints or the whole upper extremity along with the shoulder blade. Then the professor, or his assistants, also physicians from Hohenlychen, like Grawitz, Kogel and Schultz, wrapped these in sheets and carried them to their car. Naturally, the women thus operated on were immediately killed by an injection.”

“Clearly, all these operations had terrible consequences, especially when the experiments were repeated on the same “rabbit” twice, three times, even six times by both methods. If a wound caused by gangrene or some other suppurating infection healed, it was opened again and re-infected, or the limb opened at another, still healthy spot. New sections of bones were cut out, or other parts of nerves from the calf removed. As a result of the putrefaction and excised muscle tissues, the poor women’s legs became several centimeters shorter and of course weaker. Healthy beautiful people were artificially transformed into cripples; healthy, beautiful legs became grotesquely twisted limbs of skin and bone. It was the more ghastly because in the majority of cases the victims were young girls.” (Vera Laska, ed., *Women in the Resistance and in the Holocaust*, 1983, 225-6.)