Over a period of almost ten years, Alison Owings visited Germany to collect the testimonies of women who had been alive and in Germany during the Nazi years. She went initially, she tells us, with ‘the naive sisterly shaded hope ... that the German women would provide a collective sense of reflection and remorse, and perhaps persuade me that they had not supported Adolph Hitler after all.’ Not surprisingly, the hope proved vain, but she emerged with a collection of extraordinary oral histories, of which the following, with Frau Anna Fest, a concentration camp guard at Ravensbrück and elsewhere, is among the most remarkable.

A JOB IN ITS OWN CATEGORY

In the fall of 1944, the Nazis called for Germany to attain ‘totaler Kriegseinsatz’ [mobilization for total war]. Frau Fest said each company was ordered to release a certain percentage of its employees for the mobilization. She, whose stiffened hand\(^1\) relegated her to ‘the ones they could use the least,’ was among those released. She said [her employer] sent her to the local employment office, which in turn sent her to the employment office in the town of Allendorf.

There she was assigned her total mobilization job. She was told, she said, that she had been ‘drafted to watch over foreign work forces.’ She said her impression was that she would oversee their work in a factory and be helpful in whatever way she could be. She was, she added, ‘so dumb.’

‘Then with ten or twelve other women who’d also been taken from work, we were sent to what we’d been told was instruction at a manufacturing plant. We were sent, however, to Ravensbrück.’

There the women would receive two weeks of ‘instruction,’ and some searing memories. Survivors of Ravensbrück concentration camp for women considered it hell. Anna Fest, then twenty-four

\(^{1}\) She had been injured in a bombing raid on the laboratory in which she was working.
Frau Anna Fest

years old, said her group of young women was unaware of the destination and had ‘incredible fun’ on the train ride there. ‘We were being foolish, like young things sort of are, no?’ Then they asked a male passenger, a civilian from the area, where they should get off. ‘He said, “Well, don’t you know where you’re going” and he told us, and it was, of course, an insane shock.’

Yet, she said, even when she saw the sign, Ravensbrück Concentration Camp, she misunderstood. ‘I thought it was a manufacturing plant. And we thought we’d be trained to learn the manufacturing procedures and then instruct the foreign workers. There was absolutely no talk of that …’ She stopped. ‘We arrived at the holding room, sort of at the camp gate, and we saw how they were being brought in and out and guards stood there and already we saw a kick and sometimes a box on the ear too, and we began to grumble. One of the guards said, “Go ahead, you can grumble. I don’t have anything against it. But if you want to be on the inside too, that’s your business. I’d advise you to keep your mouths shut.”

‘It was such a shock to me. Even today it practically makes me crazy. When I think about it I could burst out weeping in front of you. Something so furchterlich [horrendous]. They were human beings and should be treated like human beings.’

The second year we met, she related a similar incident that ‘incredibly horrified’ her. She had been eating with her group at a table overlooking the gate area when a group of prisoners arrived from Poland. Ravensbrück’s male SS guards ‘received’ them. One guard ‘got among them and began beating a woman. I jumped up. A guard who sat next to me pushed me back down and she said, “Obviously, you are tired of living. Stay seated if you can and look away. You have no idea how many of your kind who have rebelled are already prisoners themselves.” Of course, I didn’t say another thing.’

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Frau Fest also indicated she knew the worst of what went on inside, even if she did not see it. Having been to Ravensbrück myself, I said I was told ‘the ashes’ were dumped into the nearby lake. Frau Fest responded that she and another woman had taken out a paddleboat on the lake one afternoon, that she must have noticed something, chided herself how could she have, and concluded if they did it, they must have dumped the ashes at night. Neither of us had mentioned where ‘the ashes’ came from.