

# Mapping Women in Auschwitz

Charlotte Gibbs





Women first arrived in Auschwitz (Pink - the Main Camp) in Spring 1942 and over the course of the following three years, a total of 131000 women were registered in the camp and imprisoned in Auschwitz and Birkenau (Purple - Birkenau). Additional 50000 women not registered in the camp were kept in the so-called deposit camps in Birkenau. The SS physicians conducting the selections on the ramp (Altejudenrampe - Yellow) deemed several hundred thousand women to be “unfit” for work and sent them to crematoria to be murdered immediately.

*(Click on the area of the camp you wish to learn more about)*

# Auschwitz I - Main Camp

## First Transport

In June 1940, the first group of Polish prisoners was transported to Auschwitz and until 1942, the camp operated as a camp only for men. In 1940 concentration camps were divided as ones for men or women; in 1942, however, the RSHA (Reich main security office) sent to Auschwitz women to take over the agricultural work to free men prisoners to work in various industries. This was in line with the (Nazi) gendered thinking about division of work.

The first transport of women (who became functionary prisoners in FKL) came from another major centre - KL-Ravensbrück and was followed by the arrival of Slovak Jewish women.

The first transports of women prisoners also coincided with the other big change in Auschwitz in 1942: the industrial mass killing of Jews and the SS doctors carrying selections on the ramp.



# Auschwitz I - Main Camp

## Block 24 - the “Puff”

The puff was the brothel that the SS set up for male prisoners as a work incentive and it mimicked the one that was created at Mauthausen in 1941 (Robert Sommer). The creation of the puff in Auschwitz was tied to the economics of concentration camps. The Puff was located in Block 24 of the main camp and it was the only women’s kommando that was not supervised by women (the SS men considered the work to be inappropriate for the *Aufseherinnen* to oversee). In the camp, the women prisoners who were “employed” in the Puff were considered to be prostitutes, however, in practice these women prisoners were coerced into a form of sexual slavery.

## Stabsgebäude

In part, due to the patriarchal standards of the Nazi regime, Heinrich Himmler mandated that the women prisoners would be overseen by female guards. Therefore, the SS *Aufseherinnen* came to Auschwitz from KL-Ravensbrück, a women’s concentration camp. The women working for the SS as *Aufseherinnen* had direct control over the women prisoners, but men were still in charge of the

Frauenkonzentrationslager (FKL) as a part of KL-Auschwitz. The SS was an elite male-only organisation. Therefore, the women working in the camp were technically independent contractors for the SS, rather than SS officers or guards, as former prisoners called them sometimes in their memoirs. In Auschwitz, women prisoners and their SS overseers lived in the Stabsgebäude, located in the industrial area of the main camp. At any given time, about 300-500 Jewish women slept in the basement of the building and worked in the camp’s administration and in the laundry. Since Spring 1942, the laundry kommando was one of two women-only work kommandos. Female [Jehovah’s Witnesses](#) also stayed in this building, as the SS wives enjoyed having them as their domestic help. While the prisoners stayed in the basement, SS *Aufseherinnen* occupied rooms on various higher levels.

# Auschwitz 1 - Main Camp

## Stabsgebäude

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# Auschwitz II - Birkenau

(From left to right) Top Row: BII-g (Kanada), BII-e (Roma Camp), BII-c (Transit Camp), BII-b (Theresienstadt Family Camp), BII-a (Quarantine Camp); Bottom Row: BI-a & BI-b (the FKL - Frauenkonzentrationslager). The areas in blue were the parts of the camp where women were imprisoned only with other women and were overseen by female SS personnel. In yellow were the areas where there was also a male presence. SS (men) conducted selections from the Jewish prisoners only; these selections were officially done by SS Physicians but the Aufseherinnen would assist and send prisoners unfit for work to the “hospitals.”

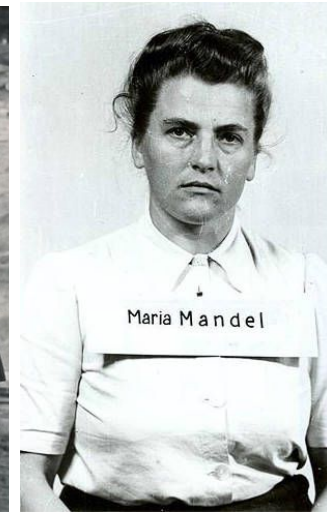
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# Birkenau - The FKL

SS began transferring prisoners from Auschwitz-1 to Birkenau in August 1942 in the middle of the typhus epidemic. At first, they moved women to BI-a and men to BI-b, but in early 1943, men were transferred to the newly built BII-d and the entire BI (BIa and BIb) section became the Frauenkonzentrationslager (FKL). The FKL stemmed from KL-Ravensbruck, where the Aufseherinnen and the camp's first women prisoners (many became functionary prisoners) came from. Johanna Langefeld, the first overseer of FKL was replaced by Maria Mandel in October 1942. Mandel stayed in her position until 1944. In a patriarchal system, men had to always overpower women and in the camp, women working for the SS modelled their behaviours after men. In their memoirs, prisoners remember Mandel as cruel. Mandel was never able to outrank an SS officer, but she modelled her behaviour after SS men through initiatives like creating a women's orchestra from women prisoners.



*Johanna Langefeld (left) and Maria Mandel (right) oversaw the FKL in Auschwitz at different times.*

Men and women prisoners were strictly kept apart from each other, with men prisoners only entering the FKL when construction needed to be done. Moreover, SS officers were not allowed in the women's camp, except for the SS physicians to carry out selections with the assistance of the Aufseherinnen. This was for two main reasons: first, in general women prisoners were guarded by other women as it was conceived to be natural; the second, standards of modesty.

# Birkenau - The FKL

## Living Conditions

Rudolf Höss, one of the commandants of Auschwitz, wanted to save the farmland where the original site was proposed for Auschwitz-II and so the SS built Birkenau on marshy ground. The mud extended to inside the barracks. Throughout the duration of the FKL, foundations were gradually added.

Women were sleeping on three-story bunks with 5-9 other women in overcrowded barracks. Women who slept on the top bunk woke up covered in snow over them in winter, while women on the bottom bunks, would get covered in mud. Due to the overcrowding, the bunks would sometimes collapse onto the women below them. The middle section was the common area, with the heater, that was rarely lit in winter due to a lack of supplies for prisoners.

The FKL was moved to Birkenau after four months in July 1942, in the middle of the Typhus epidemic and living conditions there were especially bad there because it was built on swamp ground. Moreover, BI-a did not originally have latrines. Rather, women would relieve themselves in a large ditch. The typhus epidemic began affecting also SS staff and their families. This meant that the epidemic could spread to Germans settlers in the area. Due to this, SS finally built latrines in the FKL.

*“Dysentery is propagated by the toilets. These are colossal vats of cement placed in line with the wires. Lengths about eleven yards, width about two yards. These vats are always full, always uncovered, and their edges slippery.”*

- *Seweryna Szmaglewska*

Another aspect of life in the camp was prolonged starvation leading to many women losing their periods. This would have been the loss of a biological marker of their womanhood and femininity.

Whilst it is often argued that under the same conditions as male prisoners, women prisoners were more likely to survive. However, women often lived in worse conditions than men in Auschwitz meaning that this statistic does not extend to Auschwitz.



# Birkenau - The FKL

## Children

Some non-Jewish Polish children were imprisoned in Auschwitz from 1942 onwards. These children came from the Zamość region. Upon their arrival in Poland, the Nazis deported and rehomed [non-Jewish Poles](#) to make “living room” for [German settlers](#) and from Warsaw from the uprising in 1944.



*Murals were painted on the walls of the children's barrack in the FKL by other prisoners.*

## Motherhood

The history of women in Auschwitz is closely intertwined with the history of children in Auschwitz. Some children were imprisoned in the Gypsy Family Camp (BIIf) and the Theresienstadt Family Camp (BIIf). There were very few children in Auschwitz, as the SS were unable to use children for slave labour. Upon arrival, children were gassed (the SS did register teenagers who looked like they could work). The SS sent [mothers](#) to the gas chambers with their children and mothers have been remembered as martyrs by survivors for doing so. Women who chose not to go to the gas chamber with their children were sometimes seen by contemporaries as rejecting their motherly duties. The SS sent also to the gas chambers women who arrived visibly pregnant. To the Nazis, Jewish women were seen as particularly dangerous as they had the ability to create a new generation of Jews. Therefore, in the eyes of the SS, Jewish women and children were a danger to the camp and Nazi society at-large as children were unproductive and women were reproductive.

# Birkenau - The FKL

Women would still give birth in the FKL. It is estimated that around 700 babies were born at Auschwitz, but it is very likely that this number is higher (Voices of Memory 5). In 1943, due to the labour shortages, the SS began killing only the babies. Rather than the SS killing mothers with their babies, other [women who worked as doctors, nurses, and midwives in the camp](#), would murder the newborns. By telling the SS that the baby died during childbirth, the mother was saved from the gas chambers.

*“As soon as a baby was delivered at the infirmary, mother and child were both sent to the gas chamber. That was the unrelenting decision of our masters. Only when the infant was not likely to survive or when it was stillborn was the mother spared and allowed to return to her barrack. The conclusion we drew from this was simple: the Germans did not want the newborn to live; if they did, the mothers, too, must die.*

*One day we decided we had been weak long enough. We must at least save the mothers. To carry out our plan, we would have to make the infants pass for stillborn. Even so, many precautions must be taken, for if the Germans were ever to suspect it, we, too, would be sent to “the gas chambers - and probably to the torture chamber first.*

*And so, the Germans succeeded in making murderers of even us.”*

- Olga Lengyel

# Birkenau - the FKL

## Sisterhood

Feminist Holocaust scholars have written about a “Jewish Sisterhood” that emerged inside concentration camps. This sisterhood is often used to explain certain survival techniques used by women, such as “cooking by imagination”, organising food, water, and medical supplies ([resistance](#)), and keeping living quarters clean (Saidel 54; Delbo). This notion of sisterhood also extended to non-Jewish women prisoners. Feminist premise of the idea of sisterhood as a gender based alliance.

"In the morning, clutching my companions, still mute, haggard, lost, I let myself be led—or rather they watched over me, since I was deprived of all reflex action, and without their help would have walked into an SS as easily as into a pile of bricks, or failed to keep my place in the ranks. I would have been shot...

Carmen came back. She and Viva, having made sure the way was clear, grabbed me under each arm, taking me into a recess between a piece of wall and the pile of shrubs we were supposed to carry. “Here!” Carmen said, showing me a pail of water. It was made of zinc, like those used in the country to get water from a well. A large pail. Full. I tore myself from Carmen and Viva, threw myself on the pail of water. Actually fell upon it. I knelt near the pail and drank like a horse, dipping my nose in the water, plunging my whole face."

- Charlotte Delbo

# Birkenau - the FKL

## Other considerations

Within the added context of a sisterhood, the reasons for female SS personnel exclusion from this sisterhood can be further examined from the perspective of broader feminist scholarship. Concepts from Black feminist scholarship may help to answer the questions as gender is always racialised.

Wendy Lower's exploration in *Hitler's Furies* into involvement of women in colonial practices of the Nazi expansion in Eastern Europe teaches that German women to further their careers or rise above the formula of "Kinder, Küche, Kirche." On one hand, the Third Reich reinforced the idea of Kinder, Küche, Kirche, while on the other created other opportunities for unmarried women.



*SS Maidens photographed at Solahütte. Photograph from Karl Höcker's personal album.*

# BIIg - Kanada

“Kanada” is the prisoner name for the warehouses which stored the property that the SS plundered from people deported to Auschwitz, mostly from Jews murdered in the camp. The prisoners working there would help to collect belongings Jewish people brought with them and sort them in the warehouses.

The first Kanada warehouses were in the industrial zone of Auschwitz I. In Birkenau, Kanada warehouses were in the BIIg sector and were one of the few places where imprisoned men and women were able to interact. This would be important for prisoner women, as explained by the gaze theory, which suggests that the male gaze makes women feel like women while the presence of women makes men feel like men. Women who worked in the camp would have access to extra food and clothing, and information from the men’s camp.

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In addition to the warehouses in BIIg, barracks where prisoners working in Kanada slept were built for the arrival of Hungarian Jews. Prior to 1944, women would live in their sectors of the camp and walk to work in Kanada. However, not all workers were moved to BIIg, such as Halina Birenbaum, who trekked to the Kanada located in Auschwitz I.



*Photograph taken either by Ersnt Hofmann or Bernhard Walter. The SS man photographed the arrival of Hungarian Jews. One can see the piles of plundered belongings in between the two trains - these would be soon taken to Kanada.*

# BIle - Zigeunerlager



*Dina Babbitt,  
created these  
portraits of  
imprisoned  
Roma in the  
Zigeunerlager.*

The Zigeunerlager was the camp for Roma and Sinti (called at that time “Gypsy”) families, who the SS persecuted alongside Jews as a racial threat. The SS considered “Gypsies” to be genetically anti-social and Nazi eugenicists attributed their perceived criminality as an inherent trait, thus relegating them as a racial threat to the Nazi society. In the Zigeunerlager, 25 000 people were imprisoned and women and children accounted for around 11 000 inhabitants.

In the Zigeunerlager, families were living together. This meant that mothers, fathers, and children all lived in the same barracks. In the other family camp (BI Ib, the Theresienstadt Family Camp), men and women were separated, however in both camps, the family dynamics and people’s roles within their families changed. Since the SS provided food, the domestic functions of women changed. They were not solely responsible for cooking for their families, but an inadequate amount of food caused a variety of obstacles.

Josef Mengele, an infamous SS physician, conducted his criminal medical experiments in his hospital in the Zigeunerlager.

# BIIC - Durchgangslager

BIIC (along with BIIB and BIIe after their liquidations in 1943 and 1944 respectively and BIII - called by prisoners “Mexiko”) became a combination of transit and quarantine camps. Some deportees in these camps never formally became prisoners in Birkenau, and were just interned there while the SS decided their fate based on their need of prisoner labour. In 1944, the SS used these sectors primarily for the large number of Hungarian Jews and Jews from the Litzmannstadt (Łódz) ghetto. For newly arrived prisoners, this was the place where they were taught by functionary prisoners how to be a prisoner in Birkenau. It was here that new women learned the routines of the camp.

The conditions in these areas of the camp were particularly bad, with significant overcrowding and lack of basic structures. All the barracks in the BII deposit camps were wooden with three-tiered bunks. Around 900 women had to sleep there, compared to barracks in other sectors of the same size which housed 500-600 prisoners (Private Communication).

The SS liquidated the FKL in November 1944 and placed women into BIIa, BIIB, BIIC, BIIe, and BIII. In January 1945, the SS transported women to camps in Germany. On the death marches, some women survived by escaping, but many died.

# Blc - Durchgangslager

“The Lager was surrounded by a high-voltage electric wire fence, and only those ready to kill themselves ventured near it, which was an everyday occurrence. It was impossible to escape, so why was it then necessary to count us twice a day, morning and afternoon? As long as the numbers were right, there was no problem, but woe to us if the Appell numbers were off. At such times, we did not get away with merely standing in the rain for three or four hours. Instead, the whole Lager had to kneel until they managed to figure out, after re-counting two or three times, where they made an error.

The Appell was followed by the distribution of supper and we had to wait outside for this as well, at times almost collapsing from exhaustion....However, on this first evening, we newcomers did not receive any supper. We aren't hungry anyways, so filled with the day's horrors that we would not have been able to eat.

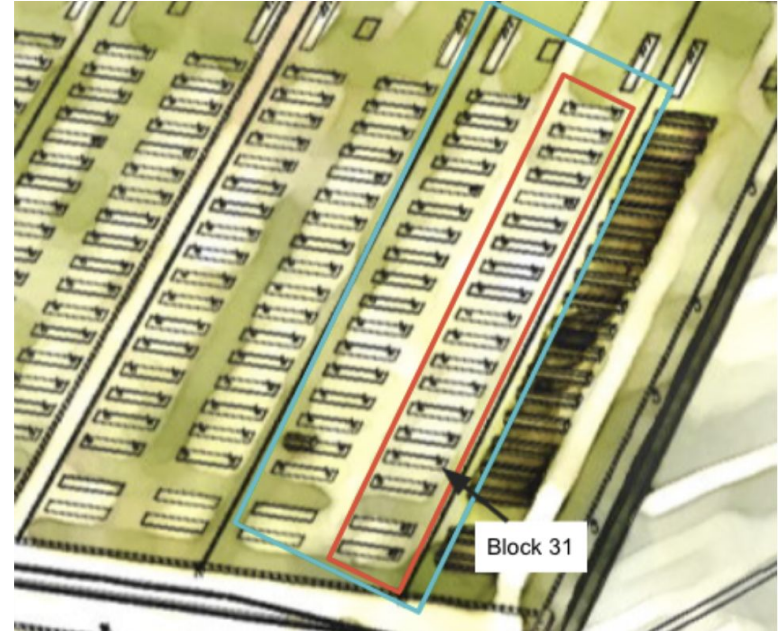
At last, we returned to the block, some of us, like me, to sit in a puddle of water again to have our rest. Then the [Blokova](#) entered – the one we were supposed to call Miss – stepped up onto the heating flue to give a speech...She then called our attention to the fact that this was an exemplary block, where she would not tolerate any disorder, and that we had better take care of ourselves while our health held out. We cried ourselves to sleep after the sufferings of the terrible day and we woke with our hearts racing at three in the morning, at the sound of the awful shouting. “Aufstehen!” (Get up!) “Quickly, Quickly! Get Coffee!”

Anna Molnár Hegedűs



# BI Ib - Theresienstadt Family Camp

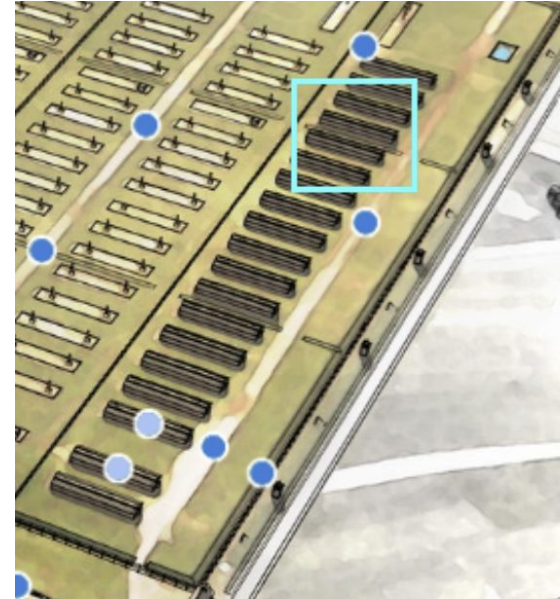
The SS transported some Jews from the Theresienstadt Ghetto into BI Ib: the Theresienstadt Ghetto Family Camp. In the family camp, prisoners in this camp did not have their heads shaved nor receive tattooed numbers; this was because Theresienstadt ghetto was to be used for Nazi propaganda in case of Red Cross visit. Men and women lived in separate barracks (men in the even numbered ones and women and small children in the odd numbered ones) (Voices of Memory 12). Prisoners set up a nursery and kindergarten in Block 31. Women in BI Ib were able to keep their belongings and hair, as well as remain in (modified) family units. This impacted the experiences of women in the camp. The SS liquidated the BI Ib family camp in two stages.



*The blocks in BI Ib were separated by gender, with the odd-numbered blocks (in red) for women and small children. Block 31 became the nursery for the children. These children would not have survived the liquidation in July 1943.*

# BIIa - the Quarantine Camp

Women and men were both held in BIIa. BIIa opened in spring 1943 (Szmaglewska). Women were held in blocks 3-6. Prisoners were to remain there for their first couple weeks in the camp to prevent spread of possible disease throughout the larger camp, however, in practice, SS held prisoners there for different periods of time, indicating the lack of standard procedure. Often, the SS sent women straight into the FKL, or, if they were sent into the quarantine sector, women could be there for a couple nights or a couple months.



*The SS imprisoned women in blocks 3-6 (outlined in blue).*

# The Altejudenrampe

People deported to Auschwitz between 1942 and May 1944 in transports arrived at the Alte Judenrampe located next to Birkenau and the SS physicians conducted selections of Jewish prisoners there. A new railway extension and platform was built inside Birkenau for the mass deportations of Hungarian Jews. The ramp is where most selections would happen. Upon their arrival, newcomers were divided by gender (men to one side, women to the other) and young children would go with their mothers. Patriarchal understanding of motherhood translated into sending mothers with their children to the gas chambers. The SS selection practices also meant that the idea of fatherhood ceased to exist during the selection and together with substantial changes to traditional family relationships.

Upon entry into the camp, prisoners (except those in the Roma camp and the Theresienstradt Family camp) walked to the bathhouses where they were forced to strip, have their heads and bodies shaved, were tattooed, and given a uniforms (camp clothing depended on when prisoners entered the camp). SS practices of the registration process were the same for all prisoners, but various groups experienced them differently depending on their age, nationality, race, religious and cultural associations, and gender. For instance, men recount the loss of hair in terms of a loss of “autonomy and dignity” (Kremer 10). Roma and Sinti experienced the loss of hair not only as shameful, but as a physical destruction of their culture. In the case of women, the shaving of the head (and body, but the head in particular) was the removal of a marker of their femininity. For some devout Jewish women experienced the shaving as a sexual assault.

# Prisoner Women

## Jehovah's Witnesses

Jehovah's Witnesses were imprisoned during the war as their religious beliefs prevented them from partaking in the war effort.

Rudolf Höss approved that Jehovah's Witness women could work in the homes of SS as domestic help on September 30, 1942. German wives, as noted by camp kommandant Rudolf Höss, enjoyed having the Jehovah's Witnesses in their homes as they spoke German and helped raise their children in a way they approved of.

These women were able to leave the camp and would interact with local Polish women and girls and the German families of the SS.

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# Prisoner Women

## Medical Personnel

Medical personnel were needed in the camp to work in the Krankenbau (hospitals) to address the widespread of ailments. The medical personnel inside the camp were medical professionals in their pre-war lives.

Doctors had to work in less than ideal conditions (overcrowding) and were often unable to treat prisoners effectively (due to lack of supplies).

These doctors had unique opportunities to save other women - women who gave birth to their children in the camp were often sent to the gas chambers with their newborn babies & these doctors came up with a plan to save the mothers

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# Prisoner Women

## Resisters

Heroism before, during, and immediately after the Holocaust was defined by victims and survivors in gendered terms. “Heroes” were often conceptualized in relation to war efforts, and therefore heroism was inherently a male attribute. Therefore, in women’s memory-based texts, acts of heroism by women are not defined as such by authors.

Resistance in the camp took many forms, and in one of the most frequent ways was done under the term “organization.” Organization could mean a number of different things, but often meant the acquisition of tools for survival, such as food, clean water, medicine, and information.

There are also cases of imprisoned women resisting in traditional (masculine) ways too. Ella Gärtner, Estera Wajcblum, Regina Safirsztajn, and Róża Robota were all involved in the smuggling of the gunpowder used in the Sonderkommando Revolt in October 1944.

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# Prisoner Women

## Privileged Prisoners

A Blokovas, kapos and the Blockälste (oldest prisoners), were imprisoned women in privileged positions which could be taken away from her at any point. In these positions, women were in charge of other imprisoned women and often responsible for their behaviour.

Kapos were frequently criminals and were in Auschwitz serving a prisoner sentence. Blokovas and Blockälste were older prisoners who were tasked with informing newly arrived prisoners how the Camp operated and of the expectations of prisoner behaviour.

These women are often not remembered fondly, as many considered them to be collaborating with the perpetrators.

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# Victims

## Jewish Mothers

Jewish women who the SS murdered upon their arrival were never registered in Auschwitz, and therefore cannot be classified as “prisoners.” The SS selected those who were capable of working to be registered in the camps, which meant that those who looked under the age of 15 and over the age of 40 were sent to the gas chambers. However, Jewish mothers between the ages of 15 and 40 who were healthy were often sent to the gas chambers with their young children.

This was due to cultural notions of motherhood which made it obvious to the SS that mothers must accompany their children to their death.

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# Aufseherinnen

The SS employed the Aufseherinnen, or overseers, as independent contractors. This is because women were unable to be a part of the elite (male) organization of the SS. In the Auschwitz, they had duties similar to that of the SS guards, which included conducting selections.

Aufseherinnen are often remembered in survivor's memory based texts as "soldiers" or "SS women," however both of these terms are incorrect. The Aufseherinnen were not members of the SS nor the Wehrmacht. The impression that the Aufseherinnen had on imprisoned women is what is important; in prisoner's understandings of what happened to them, they have identified their oppressors.

Aufseherinnen are often depicted in art created by victims and survivors, and in memoirs, described similarly to animals, such as horses.

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# German Wives

The German families of SS personnel inhabited the homes of expelled Poles in the town of Oswiecim, renamed Auschwitz under Nazi Germanization efforts. These women subscribed to the “Kidner, Kirche, Küche” creed, meaning children, church, and kitchen. These women were raising their aryan children and homekeeping, while their husbands worked in Auschwitz.

These women would have domestic help, in the form of Polish women and girls from the region, as well as Jehovah’s Witnesses imprisoned in Auschwitz.

These women and entire SS families benefited greatly from the looting of Jewish arrivals’ possessions.

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# Polish Women and Girls

Poles not expelled from the region surrounding Oswiecim (usually women and children) were required to report to the *Arbeitsamt* (employment office) from the age of 14. From there, some Polish women and girls were employed in the homes of the SS as domestic help.

These Poles would do a number of daily tasks, including cleaning, cooking, child rearing, delivering packages to the SS men they worked for inside the camp. They were also in a unique position to be a part of resistance efforts as SS men would not see them as threats due to their gender

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