

Homage to Auntie Vivi and the Women in Ravensbrück

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I CHILDHOOD

Stripe 1

1.1. Picture

*in memory of my nanny
with thanks for her courage
and love*

I'm a post-war child. The war was like a dark backdrop in our life. Knowledge existed. But in my childhood home there were only anecdotes and hints about the war, no coherent explanation and no books. When I turned 50, I hoped that the war would soon be over. Now I'm close to 60, and I need a story. Maybe angst for the cruelty, uncertainty, and guilt for my own weakness, have put a lid on the story.

1.2 Picture

I was born in 1953, eight years after the War.
My grandmother's sister was employed to look after me.
"Auntie Vivi" was 56 years old, a war invalid and unemployed.

1.3 Picture

Auntie Vivi got up late and ate breakfast by herself, a slice of bread with blackcurrant jam.
On the plate, small, red pills; they reminded me of blood and war.
She didn't say much, drank lots of coffee and smoked.

1.4 Picture

Auntie Vivi had been in a concentration camp. That's why she didn't eat cabbage or turnips.
They had soup of rotten cabbage in Germany.

1.5 Picture

Auntie Vivi had a used can under her bed.
She had afternoon naps. Afterwards there was coffee. We kids were invited to "afternoon - coffee". At her place we were "nice kids".

1.6. Picture

Auntie Vivi didn't make jokes or laugh. She often smiled, friendly. My older sister asked:
"How was the War?" She said; "Awful, there's nothing to be said about it".

1.7 Picture

Auntie Vivi left the house quietly in 1959. As a student I visited her. We sat in a flowering garden. She said: I don't believe in a God, but I do know where hell is."

1.8. Picture

Auntie Vivi quietly past away in her bed, 84 years old.

A retired seaman priest was responsible for the funeral service. On the way out I thanked him for the service - said it suited Auntie Vivi who didn't believe in God. The pastor answered with a big smile: "But what does it mean to believe?"

1.9. Picture

In 2010 I turned 56. The same year I became a grandmother.

Now I'm an older woman, who's leaning over the infant.

What am I mirroring and what do I pass on to the next generation?

II AUNTIE VIVI

1.10 Picture

Auntie Vivi (1897-1981) was my grandmother's big sister.

In 1935 her third child died of illness, a 6 year old boy.

When she received her parents' inheritance, she divorced and bought a flat in Majorstuen, in Oslo.

Stripe 2

2.1 Picture

Auntie Vivi was no winner in the family. Neither she nor her children were good at school. She was obstinate and outspoken. She could thank herself for her stay in Ravensbruck. In 2010 nobody in the family knew where Auntie Vivi was buried.

2.2 Picture

I remember my father (who died in 1990) had mentioned "Our Saviour's Graveyard". It's not in use any longer, but the graveyard is preserved and the stone is there. Norway's Home Front Museum has a recorded interview with her from 25th of July 1980.

2.3 Picture

9th of April 1940, Auntie Vivi was staying at home - earlier she had worked in a lawyer's office. The daughter was sent out of the city. The son fled to Sweden and then to England, and became a pilot. She signed up for the National Home Guard and reported at 'a place on the East side of town'. Later she worked in the Civil Air Protection.¹

2.4 Picture

In the autumn of 1942, the Nazi's began to hunt down Norwegian Jews. Auntie Vivi tells: *Kari* (the younger sister) *called and I said; I've got a 'book' for you.* A friend at Vinderen provided 'the books'. They were delivered two at the time, men and women.

2.5 Picture

The refugees were anxious. They were just sitting inside, waited and didn't do anything.

¹ (...) the anti aircraft defence managed to stay "clean" and cooperated with the underground resistance movement, see: <http://www.byarkivet.oslo.kommune.no/article63544-961.html>

Auntie Vivi didn't know them, and they didn't talk together. Most stayed for 2, 3, or 4 days. Without warning they were picked up. One woman stayed in the house for a month.

2.6 Picture

Auntie Vivi is unsure of how many there were: 8-10 persons. She tells: *When I came to Sweden after the war they knew everything about me and who had organised the whole: Which section, and which group I belonged to – I didn't know that myself.*

2.7 picture

In 1943 the daughter was summoned for work service.²

The daughter says in an interview 2nd of February 2011: *Mum didn't want me to go.* Auntie Vivi tells that she said no because she felt the daughter was too young and immature. She was against this form of Nazi indoctrination.

2.8 Picture

Auntie Vivi got a written call up to Victoria terrace. She was interrogated by a German: *He was very charming and spoke good Norwegian.* The daughter tells that the German offered her mum a cigarette. She answered: *No thanks, I don't accept a cigarette from a German!*

2.9 Picture

The daughter tells that the mother said: *Those who are out of the country these days are better off than those that are in the country.* The German answered: *I'll make sure that You will get out of the country, my lady!*

2.10 Picture

Auntie Vivi says: *I was stupid enough to express some strong opinions about Germans and Nazis (...) I was taken to Grini immediately – with a hat and veil.*

Stripe 3

3.1 Picture

In the register of prisoners at Grini museum (26.09.2010) it is written:

Prisoner 12014 Grini: "Auntie Vivi" (9.1.97)

Offence: propaganda against the work service.

Stay: 8th of July 1943 – 6th of October 1943

3.2 Picture

I found something I didn't know about:

Prisoner 6825 Grini: "Auntie Kari" (14.6.01)

Offence: refugee service

Stay: 9th of March 1943 – 4th of April 1944

3.3 Picture

Auntie Vivi didn't come back home after the interrogation. Her daughter was 17 and home alone. The father had started a new family and the contact was broken. Her brother was gone. Her closest auntie was in jail at Grini.

² From 1943, also the female work service was being made obligatory, see: <http://www.arkivverket.no/arkivverket/Tema/Andre-verdenskirg-i-Norge/Naeringslivet/Arbeidstjenesten-AT>

3.4 Picture

The daughter had just one place to go. She took the tram to her mother's other sister (my father's mother) and asked for help. My grandmother said that she had to ask her husband. My grandfather was religious, a man of the church. He said no.

3.5 Picture

The daughter remembers: *Uncle was afraid that he too could be captured if I was there. Rejected and empty handed she went back to the flat. She says: I went to School of Home Economics at Stabekk at the time. The day the Germans came to talk to me the doorbell didn't work.*

3.6 Picture

It's unbelievable, but it is true. It was 8 o'clock in the morning, and the daughter was on her way out. She didn't hear anything and didn't open the door. The Germans then approached the neighbours. They told them they didn't know where she was and called her father.

3.7 Picture

The father organised to get the daughter to stay with a missionary family in Bærum. After a few weeks she moved back to the flat and stayed there for the rest of the time during the war. She didn't have any contact with her family and she received minimal or no information about her mother.

3.8 Picture

Auntie Vivi was interrogated at Grini once. She says that she was frightened to death for her son, afraid to tell that he had fled. The interrogation was interrupted by a coincidence; somebody knocked on the door and the interrogator got another errand. The question about the refugee service didn't come up.

3.9 Picture

6th of October 1943, declaration: "Auntie Vivi" taken for transport to Germany. It came as a surprise, without any court case or a judgment. Auntie Vivi says; *I was not a big criminal. The daughter was of the opinion that the German kept his promise: I'll make sure that You will get out of the country.*

III RAVENSBRÜCK

3.10 Picture

6th of October 1943 26 Norwegian women were sent by the boat "Monta Rosa" from Oslo to Århus. The day after they continued from Århus to Kiel. In Kiel they had a short stay.

3.11 Picture

The journey continued by train to Hamburg and further to Furstenberg, 80 kilometres north east of Berlin. From Furstenberg station the prisoners were taken in a truck to Ravensbrück, arrival 13th of October 1943. (Ottosen 2008: 115) (the museum poster Ravensbrück)

3.12 Picture

[Photo: Entry at Ravensbrück](#)

3.13 Picture

Frauenkonzentrationslager Ravensbrück was built by male prisoners from Sachsenhausen on orders from SS-boss Heinrich Himler. The work started in November 1938. The camp

opened in May 1939. In Spring 1941 a smaller camp for men was established next to the main camp.

Stripe 4

4.1 Picture

From 1939-1945, together 132 000 women and 20 000 men entered the camp system which constituted Ravensbrück. 92 000 women (70 %) died from hunger, illness, medical experiments and executions.

4.2 Picture

[Photo: Camp overview, barracks](#)

4.3 Picture

The first Norwegian prisoners (3) arrived 15th of November 1941. Two of these were Jews, originally from the Soviet. During May 1941 they were deported to Auschwitz and killed there. In all there were 102 Norwegian prisoners in the camp. Thanks to a great inner camaraderie and outer support, 93 survived, only nine died.

4.4 Picture

(Ottosen 2008: 335): *The Norwegian prisoners had a considerable supportive system: The Norwegian government in London and the Norwegian ambassadors in the non-occupied countries in Europe, first and foremost in Stockholm. Besides, the Red Cross was doing an invaluable effort (...) Within Germany, the Norwegian Seamen priests in Hamburg and the circle around Gross Kreutz, with the Hjort and Seip families, made an impressive job.*

4.5 Picture

[Photo: Camp overview](#)

4.6 Picture

Børsum (1946: 67): *We discussed if we later would write about it or not. We agreed that we would never manage to write about this place. If we survived it, we wouldn't manage to occupy our self with something as negative as taking up again all this horror. To write about it would be tasteless and superfluous.*

4.7 Picture

5 Norwegian Ravensbrück-prisoners wrote a book: Kirsten Brunvoll (1947), Lise Børsum (1946), Sigrid Heide (194) Sylvia Salvesen (1947), Annelise Urbye (1946). Historian Kristian Ottosen (1999/2008) has summarised the stories.

Arrival

4.8 Picture

Børsum tells about the arrival in 1943 (1946: 67):

It was cold and windy even though it was July, and there was a frozen, helpless little group of new prisoners who was now going to have a stay in this hell they called Ravensbruck.

4.9 Picture

Børsum (1947: 67): *We were guided into busses and driven through Furstenberg city. It was strange to see this little town, unaware and undisturbed, close up to one of the worst horror places on earth.*

4.10 Picture

[Photo: Houses for the staff](#)

Stripe 5

5.1 Picture

Salvesen (1947: 77-8): *In the camp you'll find some of Europe's most noble and wise women, but also the female dregs here on earth (arrived July 1943).*

5.2 Picture

Salvesen (1947: 70): *Olga was one of the first to be transported to Germany from Grini. The friendship between Olga and Rakel was one of the first proofs we got that there were some bright spots in the dark.*

5.3 Picture

Salvesen (1947: 70-71): *After five years imprisonment she (Rakel) was sent to Ravensbrück, and the Rakel who arrived there was marked by hunger and loss, but ennobled by suffering. She had found a strong faith in her God, and was so content in herself that she had something to give to everyone around her.*

5.4 Picture

Salvesen (1947: 71) *She was filled with love, and offered love in small and large portions. She poured from an endless well (...) (68): How many thousands haven't you supported during their difficult first time, Rakel. For your smile and your advice (...) Your metier was to be a 'lice auntie'.*

5.5 Picture

Børsum (1946: 70) *We handed in our clothes and stood there naked. We walked in naked, one by one, for delousing. It was a thorough examination (...). We stood (for hours, still naked, and waited for the medical examination. Salvesen (1947: 69): None of us Norwegians had our heads shaven, partly thanks to the fact that we didn't have lice, but most likely because Rakel made sure (...)*

5.6 Picture

Børsum (1946: 70): *Now we met the camp's disdain for the first time. We were going to the toilet (...) We wringed ourselves in shame by this. Every single day were filled by these things (...) Salvesen (1947: 74): The worst thing about being Zugange (newly arrived) was that we're not in work yet, so we had to sit still all day.*

5.7 Picture

Urbye (1946: 57) *The bible researches (Jehovah's witnesses) made a strange solar system for themselves. They had great support within their group, but were sparse with giving light and warmth to others (...) Only we Norwegians had been on friendly terms with them, after we're lodged with them summer of 1943.*

5.8 Picture

Børsum (1946: 148): *When we arrived in July 1943 our numbers were 20 000. The next transport in October had a number of 24 000 (...) At the end, before we were released, there was a number of 150 000*

The camp

5.9 Picture

[Drawing \(Helen Ernst 1942-45\)](#)

5.10

Salvesen (1947: 76): *the camp was first built in swamp like terrain (...) The icy cold fog*

hanging over the camp every day, or more correctly; at night, when we started the assembly, was a sign of this

Stripe 6

6.1 Picture

Photo: [Inspection at Ravensbrück](#)

6.2 Picture

Salvesen (1947: 76): *Ravensbrück is a whole little city in itself. It is built up – as these groups of workman's huts are, - little by little. The levelling is done by the prisoners themselves, and the barracks partly together with the male prisoners*

6.3 Picture

Brunvoll (1947: 106): *The barrack was divided into two sections, the A- and the B-wing, which each had their living rooms and dormitory. In addition there were shared bathrooms and toilets.*

Børsum (1946: 73): *A building was 40 meter x 9 meter, in the middle of the long side; the entrance to both sides. Straight in from the entrance there were 10 toilets, 5 in a row on each side of a little entrance hall*

6.4 Picture

The Norwegian women in Ravensbrück didn't live together in separate huts like the Norwegian men in Sachenhausen did, maybe because more than 30 were *Nacht und Nebel*-prisoners.³

The Administration

6.5 Picture

Brunvoll (1947: 110): *All the concentration camps were managed by a relatively small number of military personal, because to a large extent prisoners were used in the camp*

6.6 Picture

Brunvoll (1947: 118) *Every block had approximately 800 prisoners (...) (ibid: 106) and a block officer and two house officers, one for the A-wing and one for the B-wing. Every block had their female SS 'Blockleiterin' who was responsible for the block, and who each day controlled the assembly. Above these ranked a SS 'Oberaufseherin'.*

6.7 Picture

(the same): *The highest level of management was the male 'Lagerkommandant' and 'Schutzhaftlagerfuhrer'. In addition there were SS-men and -women employed in the camp's administration and in the industry within the camp, in the kitchen, the hospital, work-office, the storage etc.*

³ *Nacht und Nebel*-prisoners, NN-prisoners, ca. 1000 Norwegians became NN-prisoners (see: http://snl.no/Nacht_und_Nebel-prisoners). "Night and fog" was a German decree released by Adolf Hitler, 7th of December, 1941, the purpose being that the political activists should disappear in German camps (see: http://no.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nacht_und_Nebel).

Picture (not provided)⁴

Børsum (1946: 74) *The chief of the block, a SS-Aufseherin, controlled us every day. Blockaltesle (the chief of a block of prisoners) had the task of counting and controlling the stock of the block. Below the Blockalteste was the 2.Stubenalteste, and beneath them were those who had Zimmerdienst, called waiters.*

6.8 Picture

Salvesen (1947: 73): *The dormitory had: 140 beds, three beds in the heights, two and two beds were always standing next to each other. Every bed was equipped with a straw mattress, a straw pillow, a doona cover and a pillow cover, and – if lucky – two blankets if there two in the bed.*

6.9 Picture

Børsum (1946: 71): *We often tucked ourselves inside the doona cover. That was our only protection against all the shit.*

Clothing

6.10 Picture

We were equipped with uniforms. They had a prehistoric pattern, and the pants were equipped with weird ties and patents. It took time to sort it out.

Stripe 7

7.1 Picture

Børsum (1946: 71): *the blue cotton uniforms we got were always either too wide or too tight. For the feet we got some sort of wooden slippers with a cap for the toe and a strap around the heel. They were called 'pantiner'. The strap always slipped off.*

7.2 Picture

Brunvoll (1947: 101) *Then we got a blue grey striped prisoner dress and jacket, head scarf, grey stockings and string serving as garters, wooden clogs (arrived winter 1943)*

7.3 Picture

Brunvoll (1947: 105): *We got our number and stripes (...) The stripes made it clear which group we belonged to. Red stripes for political prisoners (...) The prisoner's nationality was set with the country's initial in the stripe (...) All we Norwegians had a red stripe*

7.4 Picture

Brunvoll (1947: 120): *We hadn't been long in the camp before we had to hand in the jackets. They shouldn't be worn except for in the middle of winter. Not long after, the stockings were taken as well, even from those who had their own.*

7.5 Picture

Brunvoll (1947: 120): *By no, already, most had large wounds on their legs, which were hard to heal. As soon as there was a bit of wind, the black slag dust would find its way into (...) the wounds that easily got infected.*

7.6 Picture

Børsum (1946: 71-2): *The bathroom was a purgatory (...) The prisoners stayed in the bath*

⁴ This is part of the narrative, but has obviously fallen out in the hand writing of the text.

the night before they were to go on a transport (...) It happened that the sick ones who were waiting to go in the gas oven stayed there. And here, the scabies patients were showered

7.7 Picture

Børsum (1946: 72): Births were given in the bathroom as well (...) Scissors were non-existent, they had to use their teeth, as animals. In the bathroom were naked menstruating women. Schwein, schwein, female SS yelled at them.

7.8 Picture

Brunvoll (1947: 121): *Once in a while we got a warm shower (...). We never had the time to wash our hair and body at the same time. One time you did the hair, the other time the body. The furious speed was mainly because of the huge overpopulation in the camp. While we were in the bath, the clothes were checked for lice.*

7.9 Picture

Brunvoll 1947:122: *We had one set of underwear. We had to keep them clean ourselves. While we washed it, we walked around without underwear (...) We only had cold water and no soap (...) If we hang them up (the clothes) to dry, they were stolen.*

Food

7.10 Picture

Børsum (1946: 75): *Every morning we got so-called coffee. A bit of boiled water with colour (...) We would get a quarter of a bread daily, three quarter of a litre of soup made from turnips or swedes together with three, four potatoes*

7.11 Picture

Brunvoll (1947:106): *Dinner was nothing exciting. It was always soup. Most of the times Steckruben-soup, with a kind of turnip and potatoes. Now and then there were three to four potatoes together with the soup*

7.12 Picture

Brunvoll (1947: 106): *We received three meals a day. Breakfast around 5, dinner at 12, supper at 6pm. The bread was always handed out in the evening. It was two slices for supper and two for breakfast. Most were so hungry that they ate it all at once.*

Health

7.13 Picture

Brunvoll (1947:111): *In the infirmary (the ward) we're met by a horrible sight. The big entrance was full of exhausted prisoners, some of them with open, ill smelling wounds, infections and abscesses which leaked. Some were scattered with scabies*

Stripe 8

8.1 Picture

Brunvoll (1947: 133): *They didn't cry and they didn't complain. They were like silent animals. Only a couple of years ago, they had been beautiful, thinking human beings. The SS camp had made them like this. This is how political prisoners died in German concentration camps.*

8.2 Picture

Brunvoll (1947: 131): *During summer (1943) we got a typhoid fever epidemic. The prisoners sank down during the assemblies and were carried to the infirmary (...) (132:3): thousands of*

women didn't have the will to live, or the energy that was needed to keep going. They didn't eat and they didn't get up. They got themselves dirty and were beaten and bullied for this

8.3 Picture

Brunvoll (1947:133): *In the infirmary there were between 3 to 400 patients. All had straw mattresses which had to be done every day. Afterwards the floor looked like a barn (...) (135) There were always someone who scuffled pass the bed on their way to or back from the toilet. Most had incurred cystitis due to standing in cold, hour-long assemblies.*

8.4 Picture

Brunvoll (1947: 135): *The toilets were indescribable, and one had to take the utmost care not to become fouled. The walls were smeared. There was no toilet paper.*

8.5 Picture

Børsum (1946: 165): *There were long periods between their menstruation among most of the prisoners, they swelled up and got infections. We didn't feel good, even though it could be quite practical*

8.6 Picture

(same): *Gradually as the stock increased (...) there were no rags or cloths to be found (...) In the parcels from Denmark (from the Red Cross) which arrived faithfully and regularly, we found what we needed⁵*

8.7 Picture

Brunvoll (1947:145): *One evening, Sylvia came down to Block 7. She had been employed at the sick ward and lived there. Now she looked distressed and told us that everyone with a yellow card had to go on an ambulance transport, the Norwegians as well (..) Everyone was aware of that this was a 'transport to heaven' or a transport to hell*

The day

8.8 Picture

Børsum (1946: 76). *The first siren went off half past four. We had half an hour to do the beds, wash our self, queue for coffee, eat the dry bread, go to the toilet and tidy up the cups and plates. Then the sirens went off for the assembly. We had to stand straight for an hour or two (...) We were absolutely freezing.*

8.9 Picture

Børsum (1946: 78): *12 noon the soup was handed out (...). After dinner it was Schwigestunde (Swigestunde meant that we should be quiet (...)) It was a relief when the sirens for the evening roll call howled (...) The roll call in the evenings usually lasted longer (...) The first howl could be heard eight o'clock. Halve past eight was the last one, after that it was "Lagerruhe".*

8.10 Picture

[Drawing \(Helen Ernst 1942-45\)](#)

⁵ The packages from Denmark were picked up by Wanda Heger and others from the environment around Gross Kreutz and was passed on to the prisoner camps (see: http://no.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wanda_maria_Heger#Hjelpearbeid_for_fanger).

Work

Stripe 9

9.1 Picture

Drawing/aquarelle (Helen Ernst 1942-45)

9.2 Picture

Børsum (1946: 123). *A new system had started in the camp. After assembly there was a big tally. Then we had to line up for different work groups according to the type of work (12): The Germans never let us get comfortable. There were always changes, either of work place or blocs*

9.3 Picture

Børsum (1946: 123): *Thousands of women were employed outside of the camp and had to pass the main gate, in and out (...) The largest contingent was in the Simens- factories; they worked in big halls and made radio components.*

9.4 Picture

Drawing (Helen Ernst 1942-45)

9.5 Picture

Brunvoll (1947: 108): *Simens had large work barracks, about 10 minutes outside the camp. They always needed new prisoners (...) Many of the prisoners worked in the fields or did gardening. Some farmers picked up female prisoners for farming.*

9.6 Picture

Brunvoll (1947: 108): *It was not that thing in this society that wasn't performed by women. It was also women who had built the brick houses outside the camp (...) and it was women who had built the roads*

9.7 Picture

Drawing (Helen Ernst 1942-45)

9.8 Picture

Brunvoll (1947:110): *Female prisoners were sold as slaves to the factory owners. The factory owners paid a certain amount per prisoner to the camp*

9.9 Picture

Børsum (1946: 123-4): *There were many workplaces in Furstenberg. There were clogs factories where the work load was so enormous that after a short time the women were worn out. There were mending cottages (...) private tailors for SS-families higher up (...) competent tailors (...) sowed suits and coats to the wives, and cute clothes to the children. They were all stolen goods.*

9.10 Picture

Drawing (Helen Ernst 1942-45)

9.11 Picture

Drawing (Helen Ernst 1942-45)

9.12 Picture

There were clothing industry (...) knitting factories, fur and coat industries (...) There were large halls where the clothes were sorted, there were enormous depots where all the stolen

goods where stored.

Børsum (146): *We were often asked if we wanted to sign up to work in a brothel (...). There were prostitutes who were used to this from before, who joined.*

Life in the camp

9.13 Picture

Børsum (146: 136): *One day a transport from the Auschwitz-camp arrived (...) We had heard about gas chambers (...) about thousands of emaciated, naked women who had to run past a batman who picked them out (...) (137): We heard about gypsies and Jews who were picked up straight from the railway station and taken to the gas chambers, about how they filled up trucks with people, tilted the flatbed and emptied the content, the people, on the ground.*

Stripe 10

10.1 Picture

Børsum (1946: 137): *We heard about prisoners and SS and beastly acts being perpetrated, and we couldn't believe it. But after a while, we realised that it was true (...). There were even worse places than Ravensbrück.*

10.2 Picture

Photo: Prisoners at work outdoors

10.3 Picture

Børsum (146:147): *Slowly, we started to get a picture of the camp. We realised what a mixed group it was. Robbers and murderers. Thieves and foetus terminators, even sexual offenders. They were all here.*

10.4 Picture

Photo: Prisoners at work outdoors

10.5 Picture

Børsum (146:279): *The children soon got the pulse of the camp. We could watch young and older kids playing assembly with selections for gas chamber and transport. They stood in rows, with one of them screaming and scolding and yelling "Achtung"*

10.6 Picture

Børsum (146:126-7): *She was guilty of thousands of deaths (...) there was a relationship between her and Brauning. I often wondered how (...) they could still love each other after their diabolical day of work? Did they lie together in bed during night, planning what to do with us the next day? (...) They loved their animals. Their offices swarmed of dogs. As gentle as they were towards their animals, as gruesome they were towards us*

10.7 Picture

Photo: Prisoners at work

Camaraderie

10.8 Picture

Salvesen (1947:175): *The saddest part for all of us, were when we had friends at the sick ward. And unfortunately, most had not only one, but many gruelling stays here. We were all worried for 'Live' for a while.*

10.9 Picture

(same): *Her heart was not good, and even though our Czech friend Milena (...) assured me there were no danger, I didn't feel sure before Wisia, my 'camp-daughter', had examined her. "Rest assured, she is very strong", she said.*

10.10 Picture

Photo: Prisoners at work

Stripe 11

11.1 Picture

(same): *And yes, "strong" was just what Live (auntie Vivi) was, not so much physically as spiritually –everybody could see that Live was a force in the household. We could imagine her whirling around with pots and pans, - but it was also the way her eyes shined as soon as we mentioned ski trips in the mountains. We could easily picture her on skis down the mountain sides. The force she possessed was so great, and it was especially useful here in Ravensbrück*

11.2 Picture

Faye (born in 1917 and who was auntie Vivi's "camp - daughter") has told the daughter: *For a period Mum was in the sick ward. She was so sick that she couldn't stand on her feet. Fellow prisoners had to help her stand up straight during the assemblies, they held her up, otherwise she would have been taken and exterminated*

11.3 Picture

Auntie Vivi was set up for transport to Auschwitz, Kirsten Brunvoll came back, another person was sent to Mauthausen and died there. Auntie Vivi tells: *It was the trip I should have been on. There was only one trip – 3 to 4 who went (...) It was Sylvia Salvesen who got me crossed off the lists because she was in the sick ward*

11.4 Picture

Salvesen (1947:175): As mentioned before, by now we Norwegians were spread around, but luckily there were always some of us together here and there in the blocks (...) (177): *Some of our young Norwegians were also separated from us because of their work in the "Simens factories"*

11.5 Picture

Salvesen (1947: 177-8): ... *I still remember a day "Faye" came, and I realised how much I had longed for just seeing her. Faye was one of those women who had what all other women want the most, "charm"*

11.6 Picture

(Same): *I had already noticed her at Grini. You could 'feel' her as soon as she was around – which reveals a force that will enable her not only to make a husband happy, but also to be in charge, of women as well as men. Faye will surely take part in building the new Norway.*

11.7

Auntie Vivi's daughter tells: *Faye was like a daughter for mum – she stayed with us for many years after the war, she was like a big sister for me. (Faye has told): There were piles of corps they could walk pass. Suddenly they would see nails that were coloured and they found that very strange. Many who slept in the beds together, slept with all their belongings*

Parcels

11.8 Picture

Børsum (1946: 163): *I cannot remember exactly when the Swedish Red Cross sent us the lovely clothes. We can thank the Swedes and our government in London for all the Swedish parcels (...) We all got the following: A woollen dress, an apron, a pair of stockings, one pair of shoes, a set of bed linen and a pair of gloves. We were beaming with happiness.*

11.9

(same): *It was strange to see the change among us when we got the Swedish clothes (...) Wherever we went we were treated with more respect (...) Even the SS were interested (...) the parcels with food also poured in to us*

11.10

Børsum (1946: 170): *It was not clear to us who made the decisions in the parcel office (...) But, we know that a lot of it disappeared; whole parcels or parts of them. We figured we received only 40 percent of all the small parcels that were sent to us from Norway.*

Christmas

Stripe 12

12.1 Picture

Brunvoll (1947: 143): *It was Christmas night 1943. On Christmas Day we woke up from beautiful singing. It was the Polish, and the Jugoslavs, who walked around in the sick wards singing their hundreds of years old Christmas hymns. It was wonderful (...)*

Skilful prisoners had made kind of a puppet theatre which was supposed to be Virgin Mary and Josef and the baby in the manger. They walked among the beds and displayed the crib. Sick and dying prisoners reached over the edge of their bed, not to miss a second of the beautiful scene

Børsum (1946: 275-77). *More and more children arrived in the camp. Children in all ages (...) When Christmas came, some arranged a collection for the kids. I made a doll (...) to a lost gypsy - or Jewish child. But when Christmas Eve arrived I didn't find the child*

12.2 Picture

Ilse Unger (Ottosen 2008 – 157). *At Christmas 1944 the SS allowed a Christmas party for the children, about 400: In every block, women were busy occupied with sewing, knitting, embroidery and mending, and out of the smallest bits of waste the most beautiful children's toys were made (...) Then Christmas Eve arrived (...)*

The puppet theatre started (...) and when the children's laughter broke out (...) silent joy spread amongst us. Something was released, and the determination to keep going and do good, grew in us all, even after all the wrongdoings against these young, sad human beings.

12.3 Picture

[Drawing: Women at a coffin \(Helen Ernst 1942-45\)](#)

IV CONCLUSION 1945

12.4 Picture

SS-doctors performed medical experiments on healthy Polish women. In December 1944 the gas chamber was ready. By the 30th of April 1945, 5800 women had been gassed to death in

the camp. Of 8-9000 children only 8 survived.

Børsum (1946: 149): *In November (1944) the Norwegians from the quarantine block came to us at Block 7 (...) They assured us that the war was soon over (...) Every morning they had to line up after the assembly (...) usually they were outdoors shuffling sand. When they got back home they were blue with cold and dead tired, they got influenza and diarrhoea*

12.5 Picture

Brunvoll (1947: 255) *Many of the Norwegians were signed up for transport and were already moved to the transport block (...) the crematorium had the fire going night and day. The atmosphere was sinister.*

Auntie Vivi: *We were really scared of being eradicated, because there were rumours about it, they said that the camp was undermined*

12.6 Picture

Saturday 7th of April 1945: the white busses arrive, declaration to the Scandinavian prisoners: Transport! The night is spent in the shower in the bathroom (...) Departure Sunday 8th of April 1945 to Sweden (Ottosen 2008:298-300)

Brunvoll (1947: 256-7): *We got in the bath. Here we got clothes without stripes or crosses and without number. We were told that we should stay in the bath during the night (...) 4 o'clock in the morning we were 'woken up'. I don't know if anyone slept that night (...) 5 o'clock all of us were let out of the bath and lined up, 5 and 5*

Brunvoll (1947: 257): *We drove, left. We fell into each other's arms. We squeezed each other's hands (...) This was so wonderful that we didn't dare to believe it (...) We drove the whole night (...) At around 12 noon, we were close to Copenhagen*

Brunvoll (1947: 257): *It was a big moment when we entered the Swedish ferry and our SS-guards were left behind on the wharf. At last we were free. Genuinely free (...) In Malmø we got (...) a wonderful bath and clean clothes (...) (261-2) Then they were driven to Ramlosa Bath where they stayed until the 8th of May 1945.*

Auntie Vivi tells: *I feared going home, because I thought I was so different. We barely had any feelings – because we had to get rid of those (...) It was all about surviving*

12.7 Picture

Auntie Vivi sat in imprisonment for 22 months. The interviewer asks her if she thought she was going to survive? Yes

The daughter lived alone at home. She tells that the mother rang from Sweden and said: "It's mum!". "Which mum?", she answered.

The daughter tells that the mother arrived after a 1 month's "fattening up cure" - she was a bit plump – in Sweden: *It was a lot of people. We were packed like sardines at 'Jernbanetorget', the central station. I saw mum at the stairs at the station and yelled; 'MUM'. I throw myself into her arms and cried and cried, I couldn't stop. Mum couldn't understand why I cried; She didn't understand that I cried of joy.*

12.8 Picture

[Drawing: Women comforting each other \(Helen Ernst 1942-45\)](#)

12.9 Picture

The daughter remembers that the mother a couple of years after the war said: *I wouldn't have been without the imprisonment, I wouldn't have missed it. The daughter says: I still cannot understand it.* – The daughter tells: *She (the mother) never talked to me about what she had gone through, so I had to ask her friend from Hammerfest. She would say something, but mum never said anything, she just said: "I don't like talking about that".*

V Reflections

12.10 Picture

Brunvoll (1947: 263):

Can something be done to avoid a new Armageddon? We are all responsible. We're responsible for every thought we have, every word we say, every action we take, for the atmosphere and the environment we create around us. Sooner or later it will have consequences for us or our descendents. It is up to us, each and every one of us, whether we want to create a good world or a bad one.

Sylvia Salvesen (1890-1973) was a witness in the Nürnberg-court, in the trials after the war. She writes (1947: 329): *Are any of us without guilt? And how can we pay our debt? What have we learnt today? Where do we start? What if we start with ourselves.*

12.11 Picture

(1947: 330): *Democracies cannot only be defended, they must be recreated. If you want to win world peace, you first have to find peace within yourself (...)* (331): *"Actions not words" is the title of the last little book our beloved Queen gave me. – This last greeting (...) I hand over to the Norwegian nation and the world of today. – Actions, not words. Forgive – but don't forget.*

My journey

The Dutch historian Geert Mak (1946-) says that "History" can never be told objectively, it can only be narrated through a given perspective and by a personal approach.

I visited Ravensbrück late May 2010. A friend, daughter of a war-invalid father, followed me. We stayed at the youth hostel in the previous SS-quarter.

12.12 Picture

Difficult to relate to the entrance, the remains: concrete fences, steel wire. Difficult to tread on the paving stones. Someone cut them out - hands placed them here. Perfect work, the pavement is still intact. We went back to the city and had a cake. Auntie Vivi and her prisoner girlfriends would have liked this.

I find Aunt Vivi on the list. I find her tin box in a glass case. In front of the big book, in the museum, with neatly written names of 92 000 dead, I tremble. My friend cautiously touches me and says: "Grete, you won't find Auntie Vivi on this list. She didn't die, she survived!"

12.13 Picture

It's strange to stand in the Assembly square, knowing that it was here they stood: 130.000 brave European women, many of them communists, nuns and artists. They dared to stand up against Nazism. On the other side of the water is the seaside village, the castle and the restaurant with beer, beef and deserts. We touch the trees. Look at the roots. They are more

than 70 years old. We're standing, shoulder by shoulder, supporting each other. The chestnuts are in flower, light red in colour. It's over now. It's cold and very quiet.

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Thanks

Live Carlmark
Heimefrontmuseet
Gallery Vera/Vera Olsnes
Travel for Peace/Helga Arntzen
Photographer Mark Cabot
English translation/Petter Carlmark
German translation/Theresia Ødegaard
Reviewer/Rakel Christina Ganås
Graphic design/Alexander Refsum Jensenius
Travelling company Ravensbrück/Ingunn Rimestad
Travelling company Grini/Siri Refsum
Litterature/Jørgen Jensenius