

## The Camp Brothel

### The Role of the „Sonderbauten“ in Nazi Concentration Camps

Short Exposé for a PhD dissertation by Robert Sommer

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#### Topic

In May 1941 the chief of the SS Heinrich Himmler visited the Mauthausen concentration camp, where he gave an order to open a brothel for prisoners inside the camp. Consequently, in 1942 the SS started building “Sonderbauten”, “*special buildings*” - camp brothels, in almost all major concentration camps, including Auschwitz, Monowitz, Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen, Dachau, and Mittelbau-Dora. The following year, a bonus system (“Prämienverordnung”) was created in order to encourage prisoners to work harder. In this system various types of rewards were granted, including the "privilege" to visit a brothel. SS and Nazi's total exploitation of slave labor in concentration camps was extended to total sexual exploitation of female prisoners. Women from the Ravensbrück and the Auschwitz-Birkenau women's concentration camps were forced to volunteer or selected for SS-, Army-, and special camp brothels. Many of these women were given false promises of release from the death camps if they served six months as prostitutes. For many years historians in Eastern and Western Europe have ignored forced prostitution and the existence of brothels for concentration camp prisoners. Even today in death camp memorial sites, the location of the camp brothel is deleted from the camp's visitor maps (i.e. Sachsenhausen, Dachau, Auschwitz).

#### Research Development

There is little or sufficient evidence of camp brothels in testimonies from survivors of death camps. In one of the few documented exceptions, Eugen Kogon, wrote openly about the existence of a brothel in the Buchenwald concentration camp. In The SS-State (1946), the first detailed and thorough analysis of the camp system, Kogon describes the operation of the “Sonderbau” and the male camp's society reaction. The Italian writer Liana Millu describes in her novel Smoke over Birkenau (1947) a young female prisoner's encounter with the camp's prostitutes while seeking shelter inside the brothel during an Allied bombing of Auschwitz. In a second wave of published testimonies during the 1970's, camp brothels were dismissed and ignored from writers memories. Writers were fearful of portraying the complex and confusing

strategy in which prisoners experienced unconventional survival methods inside the camps. Nonetheless the harsh reality of death camps brothels did not fit into the political discourse on Nazi terror.

For the first time at the beginning of the 1990s German historians analyzed forced prostitution in Nazi Germany. The historian Christa Paul published a book on the subject of forced prostitution in state run brothels during the Nazi era. She managed to convince women who served in concentration camps and SS-brothels to speak openly about their experiences (Paul 1994). In years to follow several essays (Schulz 1994, Baumgartner 1997, Engelhardt 1998, Schikorra 2001) discussed women's overall conditions in concentration camps and provided further documentation and evidence on forced prostitution and camp brothels. In many cases, female prisoners inside the brothel barracks were the first women incarcerated in male concentration camps. Two articles discuss the history of the Flossenbürg camp brothel (Klausch 1992, Heigl 1998), another one discusses the taboo on forced prostitution and the history of the Sachsenhausen camp brothel (Wickert 2001).

Up until today no comprehensive work describing and analyzing the camp brothels as fixed institution of Nazi death camps has been written. There are attempts to understand the difficult topic of camp brothels in the context of Nazi sexual- and bio-politics (Timm 2001), but since no fundamental reliable research exists, greater accurate research on this subject needs to be conducted. Therefore the taboos which prevent former camp prisoners from talking about this particular subject need to be dispelled. My master's thesis analysed the relationship between the economic interests of the SS and the establishment of brothel barracks for prisoners. Additionally, the thesis looks at the recruitment practices of SS-officers in selecting women for camp, army and SS-brothels.

### Research Objective

The aim of my PhD dissertation is to provide detailed understanding of the "Sonderbauten" phenomena. Therefore its importance and role in the context of the camp society will be analyzed, and furthermore its significance as a bio-political institution in the Third Reich system. In the first part, the analysis will focus on three different aspects: I. the SS-point of view II. the women's conditions III. the male prisoner's perception and reaction. Thus three types of questions will be considered: 1.) What were the reasons for the SS to open brothel barracks for camp-prisoners? How was a brothel managed and regulated under the conditions of a death

camp? How did the camp's resistance movement react to opening of the brothels? 2.) What were the conditions that forced women to “volunteer” for prisoners brothel-commandos and how did they cope with their work? 3.) How did male camp prisoners react to the opening of brothel barracks in the camps? Who attended the brothel?

The second part of my dissertation will take a theoretical research approach on the subject providing an investigation on the camps brothel in the context of surveillance techniques of a totalitarian regime and the racist bio-politics of Nazi-Germany .

### Research Methodology

In the historical research three types of documents will be analyzed and used: (1) SS-documents (2) statements and testimonies by former camp prisoners (3) files and documents from trial against perpetrators. Nazi concentration camps used to be separate “universes” with stringent or specific conditions and various survival possibilities for prisoners. Thus the impact of the “Sonderbau” to social life and survival strategies has to be analyzed with every single case. In order to get a detailed idea of the reality inside these barracks, the history of each of the nine camp brothels, the conditions of the incarcerated women, and the reaction of the male prisoners will have to be examined. In this context, further questions will need to be addressed, such as questions dealing with the general role of sexuality in the context of violence and survival, camp-homosexuality, trauma and coping strategies of women in brothel barracks, architecture and surveillance techniques of brothel barracks, and the relationship between forced prostitution and the holocaust. The final focus will be on integrating the phenomena into the general prostitution politics in Nazi Germany. The idea of the camp brothels as the most extreme example of absurd Nazi bio-sexual politics will be discussed .

### Conclusion

As stated above, attempts have been made to understand the establishment of prisoner brothels in Nazi concentration camps. Since no fundamental research has yet been done, a critical and complex discussion of the topic will have to be conducted. Such understanding will have to consider the differences in the various camp societies and focus on three different perspectives (forced prostitutes’ perspective, male prisoners’ perspective and SS intentions).

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