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KL Ravensbrück Prisoner No. 7709

Subjected to a pseudo-medical experiment on 1 August 1942

Dame of the Order of the White Eagle

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OPEN LETTER

BY DR WANDA PÓŁTAWSKA TO ALL PEOPLE OF GOOD WILL

In 2011, the Polish Senate declared April a month of remembrance for the victims of the Ravensbrück German concentration camp, which was liberated in late April 1945.

April is also the month when 13 Polish women from the transport of 22 September 1941 were executed. Among them were young women, girl scouts. They were shot on 18 April 1942 in a narrow passage between the bunker and the camp wall, called Totengang, because there was no gas chamber or crematorium there as yet. A commemorative plaque was mounted on the wall in 1997 and consecrated by John Paul II during his visit to Berlin. It was later removed, and replaced by national plaques commemorating female prisoners from all countries, including Poland. Still, this narrow passage, stained with the blood of the Polish women shot on 18 April, is important for Polish memory as well.

Only now, after over 70 years, is there discussion of the events at the Ravensbrück concentration camp including the fate of the women imprisoned there and the pseudo-medical experiments carried out on Polish women transported from Warsaw and Lublin. Young people are talking an interest in the history of Ravensbrück and participating in competitions organised to commemorate its memory. And now, when young Poles, with their growing awareness of past events, visit the former camp to pay tribute to the memory of the female prisoners, we hear voices that this is Polish nationalist seeking to appropriate the memory of Ravensbrück.

Patriotism is not nationalism! The memory of the camp is most alive in our country because among its 132,000 prisoners were 40,000 Polish women. These were not victims of random roundups but political prisoners arrested for active participation in underground resistance movement or affiliation with Poland's clandestine Home Army. Among those transported to Ravensbrück were also women condemned to death. The Polish women at Ravensbrück were conscious patriots actively defending their country. For years this was a forbidden subject. Now we must not forget them.

In early 1945, we learned that on 5 January the victims of pseudo-medical experiments, called "guinea pigs", were to be executed. I was then that we wrote our testament, which included our appeal to create an international school in Europe to teach young people the value of humanity, so they would not tolerate war or criminal experiments, such as those carried out on us at Ravensbrück. We wanted to make sure that our fate would never be repeated.

Nobody is born a saint or a criminal; we must develop and nurture our humanity. I have worked with young people for years, sharing the truth about the war years. My wish is for young people to be truly humane, because in my life I have seen encountered inhuman men and inhuman women. The war is over, but its consequences are still being felt. The most dreadful of these is the debasement of the value of human life which is visible in the tragedies of abortion and euthanasia.

I repeat – patriotism is not nationalism. This is not about imposing one's sense of national identity on others. This is not politics, but a search for who we are. That is why we must remember the past in order to be able to choose goodness and beauty over evil and hate.

Wanda Tolkowa