

## **The Camp of Silence and of Death**

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Early in 1945, as a member of the Women's Royal Air Force, I was drafted to Breendonck to act as interpreter and guide at this little-known concentration camp. The senior Royal Air Force Officer had given orders that all personnel in the area should visit the prison and it was my duty to escort them around and remind them of the atrocities perpetrated there. Thus as many service personnel as possible would learn of the sufferings of the Belgian people and the barbarism of the invader.

I will never forget that time I spent at Breendonck. Only half an hour's journey from the sophisticated city of Brussels, in the Flemish-speaking countryside of Belgium is the old fortress known as Breendonck. It has never been a beauty spot nor a site visited by foreign tourists. Yet there are many people who will never forget it nor forget its wartime name, "Le Camp du Silence et de Mort" (The Camp of Silence and of Death). Some of the survivors returned to tell me of what had happened there.

Built in the Middle Ages, many battles have been fought around its walls. The deep moat has offered protection to its occupants over the decades and its dungeons hold untold secrets of the past. However, the twentieth century saw the most terrible chapter in its history. Soon after the German forces swept through Northern Europe and occupied Belgium, they turned the medieval fort into a prison, a concentration camp. They filled it with Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, and members of the Resistance and political prisoners. In it, the conquerors fabricated their own brands of horror.

The walls, built of huge blocks of stone and surrounded by a deep moat appeared impregnable. The latest occupiers added barbed wire fences and armed guards. Inside, the cells, each a bare five-foot square and about seven feet high were cold, dank, and comfortless. Incarcerated within these cells, the prisoners had left reminders of their sufferings on the chalk walls. Many had marked off the days of their imprisonment. Others had scratched messages with their fingernails. I remember especially one, which said "trahis par ma maitresse, Leonardine de Boissons of Courtrai" (betrayed by my mistress, Leonardine Boissons of Courtrai). Another cell wall bore the face of Christ. I could only imagine the time it had taken to etch this figure on that wall.

In the daytime, the prisoners of the Germans were pinioned upright against the far wall by their ankles, their hands stretched above their heads and manacled.

There they remained the entire daylight hours. Their only relief came at mealtimes, just twice a day, when their hands were released. Then to reach the scant food offered them, pushed through a cat-hole in the door, they were forced to crouch on the ground, to eat as best they could. At night they lay on the uneven stone floor, covered only with a thin blanket.

Among the many chambers of the prison, one was especially infamous. Here the Gestapo conducted their daily sessions of torture. Prisoners lay naked on a solid wooden table, resembling a butcher's block whilst electric current was applied to the bare moist parts of their body. They suffered indescribable agonies, burns, convulsions, and even death. As they became unconscious, their torturers threw them upon a low slatted bed. Jack-booted guards stamped on their legs, invariably breaking bones, to bring them back to consciousness. The broken slats bore witness to the force used. This was not all. With a horrible sense of calculated cruelty, they forced the next candidate for torture to stand behind a screen in the chamber and listen to those screams of anguish and to anticipate their own fate.

In the courtyard, daily shootings took place; the victims tied to wooden stakes already brown with the blood of those who had died before. In a nearby area, the guards buried Jewish prisoners up to their necks and left them to suffocate and to perish. The more fortunate prisoners, not destined for immediate death, could be seen from dawn to dusk, harnessed to an enormous wheel, force to push it around for hours on end until their backs were raw. They were drawing water up from a well, the only source for the whole site. The policy of the Camp Commander aimed to eliminate the weak by any conceivable method and he pursued this policy with sadistic vigour. One of his many ways of doing this occurred during the weekly bath-time. The prisoners made to strip, waited in a compound in the open air, winter or summer, rain or shine and then were forced into baths filled with scalding water. Afterwards, once again they were subjected to a further wait outside before being permitted to dress and return to their cells. Without doubt, many already sick succumbed to the harsh measures and died. Yet despite all odds, some prisoners survived and when the Allies liberated the region in the Autumn of 1944, these broken men and women were able to tell the liberating forces of their ordeals and of the many atrocities they had witnessed.

Each morning on arriving at the fortress, I had to walk through the courtyard, which was filled with "the black ones", as the collaborators were called, mostly young Belgians who had joined the SS. troops. Each morning when they recognised me, they shouted insults and even urinated at me. My tour of duty lasted only three weeks; the memories of those three weeks remain forever etched on my mind. The world will never forget Belsen, Auschwitz, Treblinka; I will never forget Breendonck.