



The prisoner's spirit, played by Hannah Hurtzig. Film still from the *Who is ID8470?* video.
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The Prisoner

A day before my execution, the guards announced a visit from a doctor – ‘a university professor’. I got excited, as I thought he could help, but when I saw him, I knew I was wrong. There was no empathy in his gaze. He asked me about my menstruation and if I was afraid of dying. His eyes cut through my flesh. It was worse than anything the guards did to me.

As much as it was disturbing to hear this spirit's – *the prisoner's* – laconic, yet poignant vignette of what might have been her last conversation before her death, it was heartbreaking and infuriating to learn more about the possible contexts of this scene. The few hints in her description refer to a gruesome chapter in the history of science, in which scientists willingly collaborated with, supported, and benefitted from corrupt and murderous power. Researching the connections between the anatomical collection of the Charité (in which the skull is kept), executed women, and the academic interest at the time in menstruation and fear of death, I came across the well-documented story of anatomist Hermann Stieve (1886–1952), who was director of the Anatomical Institute of Berlin University (precursor of today's anatomical institute at the Charité) from 1935 until his death in 1952.²⁵

[25] From the many publications on Stieve, I mainly used the following: Susanne Zimmermann, “... er lebt weiter in seinen Arbeiten, die als unverrückbare Steine in das Gebäude der Wissenschaft eingefügt sind”: Zum Umgang



Judges of the People's Court, 1944. Bundesarchiv, Bild 151-39-23 (CC BY-SA 3.0).

Alongside his work as professor of anatomy, Stieve was interested in the way external factors influence the reproductive system. After preliminary research on animals, he went on to research the human reproductive system, relying mainly on dissections of executed men and those of female victims of accidents or suicide.²⁶ However, with the establishment of the Nazi regime, Stieve had the opportunity to shift his research to

focus on the effects of extreme and chronic stress on the female reproductive system. German anatomists traditionally used the bodies of executed prisoners for teaching and research, but until the beginning of the Nazi regime, executions of female prisoners were extremely rare.²⁷ Because of the Nazi regime's use of capital punishment in civil courts for women, too, and their policies preventing family members from claiming and burying their bodies, Stieve was suddenly provided with an unprecedented surplus of bodies that were suitable for his research: healthy women of reproductive age who had suffered extreme and continuous terror and who could be delivered to his institute immediately after their deaths.²⁸ Executed at the Plötzensee Prison in Berlin, located a few minutes' ride from Stieve's institute, these women were persecuted mainly

mit den Arbeiten des Anatomen Hermann Stieve (1886–1952) in der Nachkriegszeit', in *Täterschaft-Strafverfolgung-Schuldentlastung. Ärztebiographien zwischen nationaler Gewaltherrschaft und deutscher Nachkriegsgeschichte* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2007), 29–40; Sabine Hildebrandt, 'Capital Punishment and Anatomy: History and Ethics of an Ongoing Association', *Clinical Anatomy* 21, no. 5 (2008): 5–14; Andreas Winkelmann and Udo Schagen, 'Hermann Stieve's Clinical-Anatomical Research on Executed Women During the "Third Reich"', *Clinical Anatomy* 22, no. 2 (2009): 163–71; Sabine Hildebrandt, 'The Women on Stieve's List', 3–21; Sabine Hildebrandt, 'Research on Bodies of the Executed in German Anatomy: An Accepted Method that Changed During the Third Reich. Study of Anatomical Journals from 1924 to 1951', *Clinical Anatomy* 26, no. 3 (2013): 304–26; Emily Bazelon, 'The Nazi Anatomists: How the Corpses of Hitler's Victims Are Still Haunting Modern Science – and American Abortion Politics', *Slate*, June 11, 2013; Andreas Winkelmann, 'Traces of Nazi Victims in Hermann Stieve's Histological Collection', *Annals of Anatomy – Anatomischer Anzeiger* 237 (2021): 1–12; Andreas Winkelmann, 'The "Economy of Truth": New Historical Sources Allow New Insights into Hermann Stieve's Use of Bodies of Execution Victims for Research', *Annals of Anatomy – Anatomischer Anzeiger* 241, (2022): 1–13.

[26] Hildebrandt, 'Capital Punishment', 5–14.

[27] During the Weimar Republic (1918–33), for example, no women were executed. See Hildebrandt, 'Research on Bodies of the Executed', 309.

[28] When writing here about executions under the Nazi regime, I am referring only to executions following legal proceedings in civilian and military courts, not the millions that were killed outside of the judiciary system, such as in concentration camps and under the Aktion T4 (Nazi involuntary euthanasia program).

for opposing, resisting, or not complying with the Nazi regime.²⁹ Some of them were part of resistance groups, such as Rote Kapelle, Baum-Gruppe, and Steinbrink-Gruppe, as well as the Czech, Polish, and French resistance. Others resisted outside of organized groups.³⁰ Some women were executed merely for voicing critique of and disagreement with the regime and were reported to the authorities by acquaintances, colleagues, and neighbours. Others were executed for various crimes, such as theft or arson. Among them were very young forced labourers who were abducted from German occupied territories and enslaved in German farms and businesses.³¹

The Nazi Ministry of Justice (Reichsjustizministerium) regulated the distribution of the bodies of the executed by connecting the different anatomical institutions to specific execution facilities and by preventing the families of the executed from claiming and burying their bodies.³² Stieve, for his part, maintained a beneficial relationship with the Plötzensee Prison – he was regularly notified ahead of the executions and had even managed to get the time of executions changed to better suit the schedule of his dissections.³³ In addition to the basic information that Stieve received from the prison ahead of the executions (such as a victim's name and verdict, and sometimes date of birth), he gained access to intimate information, such as these women's health condition, number of births or pregnancies, their menstruation, duration of imprisonment, and even of cases of rape.³⁴ This information was vital for his research, which focused on how the victims' terrible experiences – Gestapo interrogations and torture, prolonged imprisonment, sexual abuse and rape, constant fear of death, and the dreadful announcement about their execution – influenced their reproductive organs and their function. Although it has not been proven whether Stieve himself interviewed the victims before their executions or had others gather these intimate details for him, such data were found in his notes. He used this information for his research and teaching and published it in his academic papers.³⁵

Since it is not possible to assert that Stieve personally engaged with prisoners before their executions, I continued searching for other cases and

[29] Johannes Tuchel, *Hinrichtungen im Strafgefängnis Berlin-Plötzensee 1933 bis 1945 und der Anatom Hermann Stieve* (Berlin: Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand, 2019).

[30] Hildebrandt, 'The Women on Stieve's List', 6–7.

[31] Hildebrandt, 'The Women on Stieve's List', 7.

[32] Andreas Winkelmann, *Sezieren und Sammeln. 300 Jahre Berliner Anatomie 1713 bis heute* (Berlin: be.bra wissenschaft verlag, 2018), 42–43.

[33] Bazelon, 'The Nazi Anatomists'.

[34] Winkelmann, 'The "Economy of Truth"', 9.

[35] Winkelmann, 'The "Economy of Truth"', 9.



Harro and Libertas Schulze-Boysen from the Rote Kapelle resistance group, 1935. Both were executed in 1942; Libertas is one of Stieve's victims. Unknown photographer, from the collection of the German Resistance Memorial Centre (public domain).

found many examples of German and Austrian doctors, anatomists, and researchers who were active during the Nazi regime and, in pursuit of their research, personally engaged with victims before their deaths. These researchers designed and conducted a variety of experiments and investigations that were forced on the victims, often involving torture and death.³⁶

Unlike most of the other spirits whose stories I have captured, *the prisoner's* true identity – her real name and biography – could theoretically be identified. She was

probably a victim of the Nazi regime, and thus her story is much closer to our time than that of the other spirits I encountered, and enormous biographical research has already been carried out to commemorate many of this era's victims. This is especially true in the case of the executed women that Stieve dissected; several lists, altogether comprising the names of 226 women that were executed in Plötzensee and dissected by Stieve, have been published so far.³⁷ Some of these victims' biographies, especially of members of the now-celebrated resistance groups,

[36] Anatomists Max Clara, August Hirt, and Johann Paul Kremer are known to have engaged with execution victims before their death for the purpose of their research and experimentation. See Andreas Winkelmann and Thorsten Noack, 'The Clara Cell: a "Third Reich Eponym"?', *European Respiratory Journal* 36 (2010): 722–27; Hans-Joachim Lang, *Die Namen der Nummern. Wie Es Gelingt, Die 86 Opfer eines NS-Verbrechens zu identifizieren* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 2004); Hans-Joachim Lang, 'August Hirt and "Extraordinary Opportunities for Cadaver Delivery" to Anatomical Institutes in National Socialism: A Murderous Change in Paradigm', *Annals of Anatomy – Anatomischer Anzeiger* 195, no. 5 (2013): 373–80; Nicolas Mariot, 'Bypassing Birkenau, Autumn 1942: Re-examining the Diary of SS-Doctor Johann Paul Kremer in Auschwitz', 20 & 21. *Revue d'histoire* 139, no. 3 (2018): 111–27. Other than these anatomists, there were many doctors, medical staff and researchers who have performed experiments on victims or were otherwise involved in their killing during the Nazi regime. See, for example, Gerhard Baader and Ulrich Schultz, *Medizin und Nationalsozialismus. Tabuisierte Vergangenheit – ungebrochene Tradition?* (Berlin: Verlagsgesellschaft Gesundheit, 1980); Jay Katz, 'Abuse of Human Beings for the Sake of Science', in *When Medicine Went Mad: Contemporary Issues in Biomedicine, Ethics, and Society*, ed. Arthur L. Caplan (Totowa: Humana Press, 1992), 233–70; Götz Aly, Peter Chroust, and Christian Pross, *Cleansing the Fatherland: Nazi Medicine and Racial Hygiene* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

[37] For an overview of the various lists, the differences between them, and their sources, see Winkelmann, 'The "Economy of Truth"', 8.

have been thoroughly researched.³⁸ Although my project is centred on the notion of ‘turning the numbers back into people’, and I would have loved to present *the prisoner’s* real name and biography, there are a few challenges in finding and publishing this information. First, there were 334 women executed in Plötzensee during the Nazi regime, significantly more than the 226 names that appear on the lists connected with Stieve, which might mean that these lists are not yet complete. But even if all the names were known, and even if the spirit narrative would have provided more specific information about her identity, there would still be a second challenge in publishing it.

As has been discussed by several scholars, revealing the names of executed victims of the Nazi regime poses ethical dilemmas.³⁹ On the one hand, publishing the victims’ names and stories can serve to remember and commemorate them. By naming them, we resist their perpetrators’ intention to objectify them – to turn them into numbers and objects of research and experimentation. Remembering them can counter their perpetrators’ wish to erase them. Commemorating them honours and validates their struggles and sacrifices and those of their families and loved ones. Publishing their stories can help new research and commemoration, support and hearten the victims’ descendants, and encourage a society of compassion and solidarity.

On the other hand, some information connected with their victimization can still be hurtful or pose various difficulties for their families and descendants – and indeed, some families have asked scholars not to publish the names of their loved ones.⁴⁰ There is often sensitive and intimate information about the victims that their families might want to keep private, especially in the context of Stieve and his research on the reproductive system of the victims. In the case of the victims of the Aktion T4, for example, family members might be worried about stigma and other implications of association with psychiatric and other illnesses. Although being part of the resistance against the Nazi regime is broadly celebrated nowadays, this has not always been the case, and in the past,

[38] See, for example, *Du hast mich heimgesucht bei Nacht. Abschiedsbriefe und Aufzeichnungen des Widerstandes 1939 bis 1945*, ed. Helmut Gollwitzer, Käthe Kuhn, and Reinhold Schneider (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1954); Hildebrandt, ‘The Women on Stieve’s List’; *Ehrenbuch der Opfer von Berlin-Plötzensee. Zum Gedenken der 1574 Frauen und Männer, die wegen ihrer politischen oder weltanschaulichen Einstellung und wegen ihres mutigen Widerstandes gegen das faschistische Barbarentum in der Strafanstalt Berlin-Plötzensee von 1933–1945 hingerichtet wurden*, ed. Willy Perk and Willi Desch (Berlin: Verein der Verfolgten des Naziregimes Westberlin, 1974); ‘Die Toten von Plötzensee’, website of Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand (German Resistance Memorial Center), <https://www.gedenkstaette-ploetzensee.de/totenbuch/recherche>.

[39] Winkelmann, ‘Traces of Nazi Victims’, 2; Hildebrandt, ‘The Women on Stieve’s List’, 4–5; Zimmermann, ‘er lebt weiter in seinen Arbeiten’, 18.

[40] Zimmermann, ‘er lebt weiter in seinen Arbeiten’, 18.

there were families who were reluctant to have this connection published for fear of social alienation and retribution. Similarly, stigma is also of concern for families of victims who were executed for other crimes (or what the Nazis considered crimes). Eventually, publishing about the torture, abuse, and objectification that the victims suffered before and after their death might involve the risk of resurfacing and perpetuating the victims' and their families' suffering.

Different scholars have taken different approaches to these dilemmas, with the goal of respecting the wishes of the families and the dignity of the victims, and in compliance with ethical considerations. Some have refrained from publishing names, some have published names but kept the reason for execution hidden, others have kept sensitive medical information to the necessary minimum. In the *Who is ID8470?* video, the spirits themselves have chosen how much information to provide. Since *the prisoner* did not say her name, I decided not to explore further.