La grande misère is Maisie's account of her eight months in the hell of Ravensbruck. Liberated from the camp in 1945, she completed her book in 1947 and it was published in 1948. Maisie’s narrative is impressive for her strong voice and her starkly simple style. Frank Dixon, the son of Lucienne Dixon, who was a friend and fellow prisoner in Ravensbruck, told Maisie of my interest in translating her book. I met Maisie at her apartment in the town of Vannes in September 2000. She was nearly 93 yet still profoundly affected by the time spent in Ravensbruck.

La grande misère offers a uniquely intimate account of the horrors and suffering that Maisie and others experienced at Ravensbruck but also reveals some absences or omissions in the narrative that might be expected in a text which lacks the perspective of temporal distance. During our visit, Maisie explained how for many years, she participated in the Concours de la Résistance et de la Déportation, a historical research competition on a theme associated with the resistance and deportation which is offered every year to students in the French lycée system. In 1999-2000, when Maisie's health prevented her from visiting schools in her region of Morbihan, she had prepared a written testimony on concentration camps for the students and gave me a copy of this testimony.

The narrative style of Maisie’s 1999 testimony is more objective than the style of her 1948 book. In this article I will explain how her more recent testimony fills in some of the gaps in her original narrative, which occurred either from her lack of knowledge regarding the overview of Ravensbruck or because some things were still too painful to be expressed. During the process of translating La grande misère into English, I noticed
stylistic idiosyncrasies, including terse statements and silences in Maisie's narrative. This article will focus on these characteristics of style as well as on her description of the relationships and values that sustained her through the misery and suffering of Ravensbruck. In *Testimony: crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis and history*, a book about testimony after Auschwitz co-authored with Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub observes that some historians were critical of gaps in a survivor's testimony as limitations of knowledge which challenged the entire validity of the testimony. As a psychiatrist, Laub understood the emotional context for these gaps and recognized that her interviews must respect the witnesses' silence, "the subtle balance between what the woman knew or what she did not, or could not, know." (Felman and Laub 1992, 61).

Maisie’s experience with the French Resistance began when she came to Paris in 1941 to work as secretary for the network directed by her brother, Gilbert Renault whose code name was Colonel Rémy. This group, the Confrérie de Notre-Dame, was based in Paris and was one of the key information networks of the Resistance. When General De Gaulle made his June 18, 1940 radio speech from London urging the French people to reject the armistice and continue resisting the German occupation, many French people from a variety of social, religious and political backgrounds were inspired to form or join resistance groups (réseaux) and work toward ending the German occupation through sabotage, armed conflict and intelligence.

Germaine Tillion, fellow Ravensbruck internee and life-long friend of Maisie, recalled that she, like many French people, was shocked when Pétain readily agreed to an armistice with Germany and she immediately determined to do whatever she could to continue the effort to defeat Germany and liberate France. She explains that the formation
of little groups of resisters was spontaneous and developed through social and professional affinities (Lacouture 2000). For example, Germaine Tillion was an anthropologist at the Musée de l’Homme. The workers at the Musée formed a réseau that later was simply referred to as the réseau du Musée de l’Homme. In describing the formation of this group as well as the other groups that arose in the early period of occupation, Germaine explains that it was initially a spontaneous mass movement emerging among people from a diverse variety of political orientations and social levels. In reference to the museum group, she says “They were from the left, the right, the extreme left and the extreme right” but specifies that at first there were no communists because of the Stalin-Hitler Pact.\(^1\) Saying “Gaullism is the refusal of armistice,” Germaine explained that those joining such groups were all motivated primarily by their firm rejection of the armistice which was regarded as shameful, (Ibid 78-79)

Rémy was involved in the film industry as well as conservative Catholic activities and he recruited colleagues from these arenas. The group that he directed was founded by La Bardonnie and absorbed the remains of a socialist Resistance group named Saint-Jacques thus while Rémy and some members were royalists, many were not. Rémy mentions being inspired to name the group Confrérie de Notre-Dame during a visit to the church, Notre-Dame-des-Victoires. He decided to place this group under the protection of Our Lady, saying “If Louis XIII placed France under the protection of Our Lady (Notre-Dame) then why not place this réseau group under her protection” (Fleutot).

As the leader of the Confrérie de Notre-Dame, Rémy associated with Christian Pineau and Pierre Brossolette, leaders of Libération Nord, which was a resistance movement based on the socialist and Christian trade unions. When Libération Nord
formed, Confrérie de Notre-Dame was already involved with both the French and British secret service (134). Christian Pineau was quoted in Aglan’s La Resistance Sacrifiée as describing Rémym as having different preoccupations than he and the other organizers of this non-communist trade union Resistance movement (1999, 369 note 5). Evidently he was not interested in politics or in opposing the Vichy regime but solely in his intelligence work. Rémym is described as shuttling back and forth from Paris to London passing information to DeGaulle, who states in his war memoirs:

Rémym's network, Confrérie Notre Dame, was working at full spate. For example, not a single German surface boat arrived at or left Brest, Lorient, Nantes, Rochefort, La Rochelle, or Bordeaux without London's being warned by telegram. Not a single military work was built by the enemy on the Channel or Atlantic coasts, particularly in the submarine bases, without its situation and plan being at once known to us. Rémym had, in addition, organized contacts methodically, either with other networks, with the movements in the occupied zone, or with the communists” (Gaulle 1955, 273-4).

According to Louis Vallon’s testimony of March 25, 1947 quoted by Aglan, there was a meeting early in 1942 among Christian Pineau, Pierre Brossolette, Louis Vallon, Rémym, and others in a Rue de la Pompe bookstore where they agreed that CND would materially help Liberation-Nord (Aglan 369). In spring 1943, DeGaulle assigned Jean Moulin to the task of unifying the different resistance movements, communist, socialist, Gaullist etc. (D’Alincourt in Sisters). In Sisters in Resistance, a documentary about several women survivors of Ravensbruck, including Germaine Tillion, Jacqueline D’Alincourt, Geneviève de Gaulle and Anise Postel Viney, Jacqueline mentions
working with the Moulin team and translating the code used to transmit messages. Eventually many of the resistance groups were penetrated by collaborators, resulting in the denunciation and arrest of members among whom were Germaine Tillion, Geneviève de Gaulle, Jacqueline D’Alincourt, Anise Postel-Viney and Maisie Renault. It was in 1942 when Maisie and Isabelle were both denounced, then arrested by the Gestapo while staying in the apartment belonging to Rémy. After being interned at La Santé prison, Fresnes, Romainville and Compiègne, they were eventually deported in 1944 to Ravensbruck, a concentration camp for women which was 56 miles north of Berlin.

According to Israel Gutman, "By early February 1945, 106,000 women had passed through the Ravensbruck camp. Twenty-five percent of them were Polish, 20 percent German, 19 percent Russian and Ukrainian, 15 percent Jewish, 7 percent French, 5.5 percent Gypsy, and 8.5 percent others" (1990, 1226). Behind Notre Dame Cathedral at the tip of the Île de la Cité in Paris, stands the Mémorial des Martyrs de la Déportation, which commemorates the 200,000 French victims of Nazi concentration camps. Most of these victims were Jews or members of the French Resistance. Maisie Renault and her eighteen-year-old sister, Isabelle, were among those women who survived deportation to Ravensbruck.

When she wrote her account of the camp in 1947, Maisie intended it to serve as testimony of the horrible conditions and abusive treatment in this women’s camp and in memory of those who did not return. La grande misère shares some characteristics with other concentration camp accounts by French women and with Holocaust survivor testimony, yet has a unique style and perspective, reflecting Maisie’s gender and her
middle-class, Catholic background. Moreover, it is written in the first person and present tense, organized chronologically almost like a diary, which gives it a sense of immediacy and drama that distinguish it from some other accounts of the camps, which were written years after the experience or a more objective style.

Maisie completed her book two years after her release. In comparison Charlotte Delbo's account, *Aucun de nous ne reviendra, None of us will return*, was evidently written right after the war but not published until 1965. Denise Dufournier's *Ravensbruck* was published in 1948 but written in the past tense, creating a perspective of temporal distance. Germaine Tillion's *Ravensbruck* was published in 1973 and indicates substantial research, combining third person documentation with first person narrative in an account that attempts to provide an overview of the events. Geneviève de Gaulle Anthonioz, niece of General de Gaulle, only recently wrote her memoir, *Traversée de la nuit* (translated as *The Dawn of Hope*). For fifty years Geneviève resisted the efforts of her family and friends to have her record her wartime memoirs. "But last year, at the age of seventy-eight, her memories overwhelmed her, or at least overcame her reticence, and in the space of less than three weeks, they…dictated themselves to her" (Gaulle 1998, viii).

Like Maisie, Germaine Tillion and Geneviève de Gaulle were raised in the Catholic faith. Throughout her memoir, there are allusions to her faith and the influence on her conscience or sense of ethical behavior. In Lacouture’s interview, Tillion mentions taking notes on her interrogations on a very small copy of the Imitation of Christ, which was given to her by the chaplain at Fresnes prison (Tillion 2000)

Relative to similar narratives, Maisie's writing avoids most literary devices and is forged mainly from her effort to describe what is almost beyond representation. In
contrast to *La grande misère*, Denise Dufournier's *Ravensbruck*, though also published in 1948, has a more apparent literary style, as for example in her description of the wretched prisoners: "The contours of their formless, emaciated bodies recalled statues of the Middle Ages which ornament the doors of our cathedrals" (Dufournier 1948, 8).

Dufournier becomes almost poetic at times, "It was like a huge fair peopled with lunatics. . .Watching this densely moving throng, I was reminded of the countless multitudes performing evolutions in Greek tragedies" (Dufournier 1948, 8).

In my process of translating *La grande misère*, I struggled with the language both because of the colloquial French and also because of the fragmented sentences, which at the same time give this text its powerful impact on the reader. It seemed essential to resist making the narrative more cohesive by filling in the gaps or connecting the fragments, which are so essential to the narrative’s tone. My solution to this dilemma was to attach footnotes to provide some information on what Maisie's silences might signify.

In her book on Holocaust narrative Andrea Reiter states, "It is quite clear that the time which elapses between an experience and a report about it has an influence at the level not only of content but also of narrative structure. The manner of presentation generally acquires greater weight with the passing of time, with reflection…and increasing knowledge" (Reiter 2000, 156). Thus later texts often have a greater emphasis on literary style and more historical accuracy than one that is written as an outpouring about recent traumatic events. As Reiter observes, "A refrain like repetition of short sentences is also frequently used when authors are describing an experience that especially affected them" (Reiter 2000, 164). My analysis will explore how *La grande misère* exemplifies this repetition of short sentences as well as a terse and fragmented
style that emphasizes the horror rather than softening it with a more cohesive, literary narrative.

As mentioned, Maisie's book was written mainly in the present tense, which gives it the tone of a journal. As Linda Pipet observes about similar narratives, this use of the present expresses a reliving of these horrifying experiences, "As if these experiences are too strong to belong totally to the past" (Pipet 2000, 41). Maisie’s description of their arrival in the camp typifies this vivid present tense.

Our turn comes, we must go to the showers. There like all those of the preceding convoys, we will be odiously searched and stripped. Completely nude, we wait to undergo the "hairdresser's" exam. With anxiety, I watch Isabelle, now on the hot seat, pass her test victorious, me also. (Renault 1948, 28).

When Maisie describes the daily deaths and horror, her use of the present is especially effective. The laconic brevity of her statement on the suicide of a Polish woman on Christmas Eve startles the reader, "An old Polish woman could no longer stand this holiday far from her family on this night of Christmas. She hangs herself at the back of the dormitory" (Renault 1948, 86).

Maisie gives a very terse description of the death of a woman she doesn’t know, who, moaning and swaying on skeletal legs, eventually falls in a puddle. Two police look at the woman with curiosity, do nothing and leave. As Maisie relates, she no longer hears the moans and assumes that, “Undoubtedly the unfortunate woman has ceased to suffer. We did not have the right to move" (Renault 1948, 69).

This simple restrained statement communicates the frustration of being forbidden to move and unable to help the woman while those in charge show only indifference,
mingled with mild curiosity toward the suffering of their victims.³ Maisie's frustrated impulse to alleviate the suffering of others is acknowledged through her compassionate concluding statement that at least in death the woman's suffering ends. As Andrea Reiter emphasizes,

The purely factual style of presentation conveys an impression of detached observation, but it may also be due to a sense of helpless outrage. In any event, this bare laconic language has a more lasting effect on the reader than effusive pathos; cool description, in which the reporter stays right in the background, allows things to stand out by themselves (Reiter 2000, 167-8).

Her laconic style, her silences surrounding events of unspeakable horror and the use of irony or black humor are consistent with other narratives of the camps. These characteristics result from the narrator's challenge of describing circumstances so horrible and so unbelievable that they defy the representational capacity of language. For many survivors, it was especially imperative to avoid giving an aesthetic account which would trivialize the criminal abuse perpetrated on the suffering victims. As Andrea Reiter mentions, "By and large, survivors seem to have been aware of the danger lurking in a pathos-filled aestheticization of their camp experience" (Reiter 2000, 166).

Reiter also observes that irony or humor seemed to uplift the prisoners and give them a sense of resisting psychologically even though this form of resistance was ineffective in reality (2000, 124). In the following excerpt, Maisie used irony to describe the incessant discomfort from infestation with vermin.

All measures of hygiene seem prohibited in our block. There is no option for us of going to the showers or sending clothes to the sterilizer as is done in the other
barracks. Before long the vermin are invading us and propagating with lightening speed. (Renault 1948, 44).

Much later in her story, Maisie uses a combination of irony and antithesis to contrast the suffering of the prisoners with the lighthearted indifference of the SS. Spring approaches and as the weather becomes milder, the SS "laugh as if they were going to some joyful picnic. We follow, our bruised feet stumble over the roots but the forest despite everything seems very beautiful" (Renault 1948, 131). Since the weather is cool when they leave camp for this work duty but warms up during the day, the prisoners sweat in their warm coats. "The lice, revived and overexcited dance a sarabande in our clothes. The Kapos, quite fresh, continue to skip along the slopes"(Ibid). This ironic description of the lice problem is contrasted in the next few sentences with a description of the women's abject condition and the proximity of the dead bodies which often remain in the block awhile before removal.

In this room where a crowd jostles each other and quarrels, amidst the unspeakable appearance of the dirty piled clothes, the naked bodies, emaciated, marked with lice bites and wounds from vitamin deficiency, lie the dead of the block continually spattered with dirty water while awaiting their transport to the morgue (Renault 1948, 44-45).

A stunning example of irony that verges on black humor is Maisie's attempt to communicate with a dead woman. After being transferred to a block where the facilities are dirty, crowded and cold due to broken windows, the women survey the situation and try to locate a sleeping space away from the windows and having an intact mattress. Maisie notices a bed, which appears to have only one occupant.
-Madame, are you sleeping alone?

-Madame do you hear me?

-Madame?

Annoyed, a rough voice calls out from a neighboring bed, "Can't you see that she is dead. The Blockowa was already advised at noon; maybe she will have her removed by tomorrow evening.

This said my interlocutor turns over and falls back to sleep near the corpse.

(Renault 1948, 70)

Finally they find a mattress and spend a sleepless night fully clothed yet freezing near the windows. This incident also demonstrates the unhygienic conditions of the dead bodies not being removed for some time before transfer to the morgue.

Primo Levi, a survivor of Auschwitz, discussed the inadequacy of normal language to describe the extremities of hunger, cold and fatigue continually experienced in the camps. The everyday use of words like hunger, cold, fatigue was not sufficient. In his book, *Se questo è un uomo* translated as *Survival in Auschwitz*, he states, "Just as our hunger is not that feeling of missing a meal, so our way of being cold has need of a new word. We say 'hunger', we say 'tiredness,' 'fear,' 'pain,' we say 'winter' and they are. . .free words, created and used by free men" (Levi 1996, 123). After being forced to stand in the rain and then go to a new block with broken windows, Maisie simply says, "It's terribly cold. We stretch out completely dressed without even taking off our shoes. To cover ourselves we have only our soaked clothes" (Renault 1948, 71).

To describe the omnipresent hunger, Maisie provides an example of returning to the block after work and waiting for the day's only meal. It's Isabelle's saint's day and
Maisie hopes there might be a little meat in the soup. With pleasure, she notices that the soup is thick but they are made to wait longer than usual for it to be distributed. The starving prisoners become impatient. Finally the gypsies, unable to control themselves any longer, rush at the tureens of soup. "In their haste, they push and shove overturning them and all the contents spills on the dirty ground. Not worried by our cries of indignation, they rush with their mess kits to scrape the ashes. . .Resigned, stomachs hollow, we lay down on the floor" (Renault 1948, 118). When they returned to their rooms, they discovered new arrivals had taken all their beds.

Maisie uses a variety of expressions to describe the prisoners increasingly exhausted condition. After being searched repeatedly and relentlessly by an apparently sadistic Aufseherin.5 "Nous nous sentons fatiguées, deprimées" (We feel tired, depressed) "Nous sommes toutes épuisées et nos vieilles dames n'en peuvent plus. Mme. Elbard meurt la première pendant l'appel"(we are totally exhausted and our old women are finished. Mme. Elbard dies first during roll call) (Renault 1948, 50-1). Thus she describes the escalation from tired, to exhausted, or completely "finished" in the case of the old women. Another example of this intense fatigue occurs in the following statement: "We are several now who are no longer able to climb the three steps to our block. To go up, we must raise one leg then the other with our hands." (Renault 1948, 136). One evening Maisie feels sick during the night. Already completely exhausted, she drags herself out of bed and goes to the lavatories, too weak even to put on her shoes. Once there she suddenly feels as if she's going to die.

Defeated I no longer fight. A hand rests on my shoulder. It's Lucienne. She helps me up gently…I am no longer alone. Already I feel better, leaning on her, I get
back to my bed. I truly believe that by her presence alone she saved my life that night (Renault 1948, 137).

If the intensification of hunger and cold strained the descriptive capacity of ordinary language, how much more indescribable were the horrible, deliberate cruelties, dehumanizing situations and the disappearances that usually indicated extermination. In his article, “Unspeakable,” Thomas Trezise discusses three dictionary definitions or senses of the word unspeakable. The first sense refers to being “verbally unrepresentable” as in exceeding the ability of language to express something. The second meaning of unspeakable refers to something being unspoken because it is objectionable or offensive. The third sense is “incapable of being spoken or uttered” since to speak of it would be profane (2001, 39).

These diverse interpretations can explain the various factors which might have made certain situations unspeakable for Maisie. As a "well-raised" Catholic woman, born early in the twentieth century, certain topics were not discussed, especially those relating to gendered bodies or toilet problems. Thus Maisie is fairly discreet when describing bodily matters. Because some Russians tried to escape while hiding in the bushes for toilet needs, her work group is forbidden to leave the path. "The sick must exercise their needs during the stop on the bare terrain, watched by the sentinels. When we are constrained by the dysentery that devastates us, those whose health is better thanks to the parcels that they have received at Ravensbruck, murmur disdainfully, 'They must not have any modesty'" (Renault 1948, 127).

Shortly after arriving in the camp, Maisie and her friends were subjected to a physical exam. Forced to stand naked while observed by German officers who "stare at
us behind their monocles, all the while joking," Maisie remembers an anecdote shared by Mme. Tillion, the mother of Germain Tillion who was a night and fog prisoner in the camp (Renault 1948, 38). On an occasion at Compiègne when she was awakened for roll call, she stood at her bed, wearing her long night-shirt. When a fellow prisoner exclaimed, "'Madame Tillion, you are in a nightshirt and the lance corporal is going to pass by!' Irene responded with her shrewd smile. 'Oh well, my dear friend for me a German is a chair'"(Ibid.). Maisie's reference to this humiliating exam is followed by a terse statement, "'The next day another medical takes place of which it is still painful to think'"(Ibid.).  

This might have been a gynecological exam sometimes carried out with the excuse of hygiene but often used as another way of humiliating and even infecting prisoners with non-sterilized instruments (Dufournier 1948, 32-33).  

While a proper Catholic upbringing can account for her omission of specific details about the physicals, Maisie's discretion is not the only explanation for her omissions. Sometimes she did not have complete information about the outcomes or purposes of various situations until later. One significant example is Maisie's description of the insane women and their ultimate destination in a "transport noir," or night transport.

Abruptly the door of block 10 opens and the insane, shivering under their thin shirts, terrorized by the ferocious barking of some dogs thrust at their heels, pursued by the SS whose massive silhouettes were enveloped in woolen coats, rush into the vehicle. The Aufseherinnen heads covered with black hoods, true images of evil angels, help the phantoms to ascend and. . . the voice of an old woman, victim of vengeance, cries desperately, "I'm not crazy. I'm not crazy.'
Nevertheless, like the others she was loaded and the truck left toward its sinister destination (Renault 1948, 47).

Similarly Maisie describes the children, mostly gypsy or Jewish, who play games that mimic the SS and the prisoners. "One day all of them were taken in a transport. The area of the block rang out with children's cries. Some were at least 14. Others were quite young. . .On returning from Rechlin, we learn that many of these unfortunate little ones had been gassed. Some sterilization experiments had also been practiced on those from 9-14 years old" (Renault 1948, 59).

Immediately following this episode, Maisie describes the decimation of the old women by dysentery mentioning two women in particular who tried to survive in order to be reunited with a son or a grandson. She concludes this section remarking that they could recognize the look of imminent death in the eyes of the dying and then a terse statement, "The fire of the crematory oven often rises to several meters and a scorched odor spreads through the camp" (Renault 1948, 61). At this stage of her internment in the camp, Maisie undoubtedly suspected an ominous destiny for the sick and insane but lacked the certainty that she has after returning from Rechlin, the work camp to which she and her friends were sent from February 14 to April 13, 1945. She hears then about the operation of the gas chamber and the transports of old women to Jugendlager for extermination. 8

However it is very probable that at this period of her writing so close in time to the atrocities, Maisie found it difficult to discuss horrible or painful events such as the exterminations or the experiments. Referring to the "rabbits," who were usually young Polish women, she says simply, "The most dreadful things were said about them. . .they
were operated on without anesthetic, several of them were dead. We met them sometimes in the streets of the camp. They were always young, often pretty, and walked leaning on crutches" (Renault 1948, 96). By the time I had begun to contemplate the causes of her silences, it was too late to ask Maisie, who became very ill a year after our meeting. In any case, I still might have refrained from asking out of respect for her privacy.

Citing Maurice Blanchot's *L'écriture du désastre*, Linda Pipet suggests that omissions and silences, such as are found in Maisie’s writing, can present a resistance to closure. This "Writing is perpetually becoming. . .the fragment allows for the possibility of a return, a rewriting and the whiteness is the space that is left for the work of questioning" (Pipet 2000:130). Yet these blanks are also spaces where the "mute cry. . .becomes audible." Thus it seems that anyone who has undergone the devastating experience of the Nazi camps would write in a style that allows their anguish to emerge from silences that resist closure.¹⁰

In her previously mentioned 1999 Concours testimony, new knowledge and more emotional distance enabled Maisie to write a different version of her experience, filling in some of these gaps. Yet this later version of her experience is more like a supplement than a rewriting. Maisie again described the insane taken away in a transport noir but this time she concludes with "transport that led directly to the gas chamber." She mentions that "The gas chambers are now openly talked about. . .swollen legs, sores, wounds signify the death sentence. Entire blocks are full of those with typhus. They die like flies. The nude corpses, piled on carts are transported to be burned. The crematory burns day and night."¹¹ Maisie also provides more details on the experiments practiced on the "rabbits," specifying removal of muscles, sterilization, inoculation with typhus, burning
with phosphorus. Lacouture mentions that Germaine Tillion and camp comrades, including Anise Postel Vinay, Denise Jacob, Grete Buber-Neuman and Maisie Renault succeeded not only in taking photos of the mutilated legs of these Poles but conceal them during selections thus enabling to leave the camp as survivors and witnesses (165).

Maisie could see soon after arriving in the camp that anyone regardless of her previous status could be reduced to wretchedness. She reflects on an area near her childhood home that they often passed on the way to the beach, a hamlet of sordid huts, with torn and dirty underwear drying in the gardens and poor, disheveled inhabitants. They nicknamed this place the "district of misery" and now she could see in the dirty, sordid camp accommodations that they inhabited the "district of misery" (Renault 1948, 5).

Upon arriving at Ravensbruck, Denise Dufournier also observed the wretchedness of many women, humiliated, haggard having almost lost all humanity. In her book, she asks “What would it profit us to struggle to preserve our lives if we were not strong enough to safeguard our souls?” Recognizing the strength required to safeguard one's soul against this degradation that was worse than death, DuFournier explains, "To be sure, the fact that a woman is suddenly put into a dress sewn like a sack or has her head shaved does not at once lead to the betrayal of principles which, during long years, have taken root in her. But I did not doubt for a moment that these were but the first workings of a system designed. . .to lead us by stages to our downfall" (Dufournier 1948, 17).

While Maisie's book describes the gradual deterioration and death of several friends and in a sense immortalizes the memory of those who disappeared in the camps, she gives a particularly detailed description of Suzanne, who is transformed from a
healthy 30 year old woman capable of supporting and protecting her mother to a mere phantom, fading away into sickness and death after being separated from her mother.

Here is Maisie's first mention of mother and daughter: "Mme. Melot is already elderly and Suzanne is about 30 with exquisite manners, the two of them feel helpless in such an atmosphere. . .Suzanne looking after her mother who is weak and worn out, proves to be magnificent" (Renault 1948, 45). Some months later, Mme. Melot, due to her incapacity to work, is not transferred to the same block as her daughter, Maisie and the others of their little community. "Suzanne is in a panic, where is her mother? Are they going to be separated?" (Renault 1948, 69) When they find her in block 28, Suzanne is in agony, worrying how her mother will manage without her to help if she's sick or not strong enough to endure the pushing and shoving for food. "Their despair is difficult to see" (Renault 1948, 71-72).

Later Maisie remarks on the noticeable change in Suzanne, the dark pockets under her eyes. A transfer to yet another block occurs and Mme. Melot, who holds a pink card is considered unsuitable for their block. Then Suzanne, too weak to struggle "against the lice that always torment the weaker ones" is shaved (Renault 1948, 89). Next in the incident described earlier, she is forced out of bed by her bed partner because of her lice. This downward spiral continues until her mother is ordered sent to Jugendlager. "One last time Mme. Melot leans on the shoulder of her daughter; their faces are swollen with tears. In vain, Suzanne begged them to let her undergo the same fate; she is refused this joy. Arriving at the main square, the two women separate after heartbreaking farewells" (Renault 1948, 95).
In Maisie's next description of Suzanne, she is "hopelessly sluggish" and she wouldn't eat unless they take turns bringing her food (Renault 1948, 98). She falls down constantly yet every day she wanders through the Revier (infirmary) and different blocks hoping for news of her mother. When Maisie and Isabelle try to sneak into the N/N block to visit a friend, they notice Suzanne following them and don't want to acknowledge her because her destitute condition might prevent them access to the Block. "Her unlaced shoes make her stumble; her too tight coat is all torn and her face still all swollen" (Renault 1948, 99). Suzanne's despair over her mother combined with her pathetic appearance endangers them at the N/N block where no Schmutzstück is allowed. They at first tried to avoid her but the desperate woman begs to accompany them, not daring to enter alone. Ashamed of their reaction, they support her and enter the block.

Suzanne finds a friend, who is a nurse and this woman tells her a "pious lie" that Jugendlager, really an extermination camp, is a rest camp and surely her mother is comfortable there. For the first time in awhile, Suzanne falls asleep happy. A short while later she is hospitalized, "no more than a shadow of herself" (Renault 1948, 101). Without success Maisie and Isabelle try to visit her and a short time later they hear of her death. "February 7, we learn that Suzanne has just died" (Renault 1948, 102). This entire deterioration from healthy, devoted daughter to corpse has taken only a few months. By telling Suzanne's story in great detail, the suffering and horror of the camp and the high death rate are personalized for the reader. The fate of Suzanne was the fate of thousands at Ravensbruck and millions in the Nazi concentration and extermination camp system but the detailed story of one woman's deterioration from human being to Schmutzstück to corpse. Loss of self-esteem and hope usually accelerated physical deterioration.
The SS used the term Stück or pieces when counting off prisoners, "5 Stück, 10 Stück and so on we are not human, we are 'pieces'" (Laska 1983, 178). A Schmutzstück, a German word for pieces of refuse and a term used exclusively at Ravensbruck, is the female equivalent of a Muselmänn or Muslim, a word used for men in the concentration camps who had deteriorated physically and mentally. Primo Levi defines Muselmänn as a term "given to the irreversibly exhausted, worn out prisoner, close to death." According to Levi, “Muslims” are the damned, the "anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of non-men who march and labour in silence, the divine spark dead within them" (1996, 90). The “Muslim” is the camp incarnate because one can see in him all the suffering of the camp, hunger, cold, exhaustion and imminent death (Pipet 2000, 115).

According to Tillion, Schmuckstück or "little jewel" (homophonous with Schmutzstück) is used to refer to a "seemingly human creature, the likes of whom I had never seen anywhere but at Ravensbruck, far past what is usually called emaciation and almost at a fatal stage of malnutrition. . .incapable of personal or social discipline, unwashed, resigned to the lice, clothed in unbelievable rags and covered with every kind of running infected sore" (Tillion 1975, 24). They were beaten more often, they would lick up soup spilled on the ground. To sum up, they were "without friends, hope or dignity and apparently without thoughts transformed by fear and hunger and finally destined to be gassed like rodents after one of those manhunts known as 'selections'" (Tillion 1975, 24).

The Muselmänner or Schmutzstücke were borderline people, a threat to the boundaries of class, health and disease and even life and death. In addition to her
reference about reluctantly allowing Suzanne to accompany them to the N/N since she appeared deteriorated and all Schmutzstück are rigorously chased from the N/N Block, Maisie makes other references to Schmutzstück in her book. On first arriving at Ravensbruck she observes that, "We were incorporated little by little into the people of Schmutzstück and we knew the abyss of all miseries" (Renault 1948, 23). Maisie recognizes that the camp could reduce anyone to Schmutzstück regardless of background, unless the individual struggles to hold onto some values, some sense of self-esteem and responsibility.

There was a constant threat in the Nazi camps of being reduced to a stück or piece since prisoners were treated as pieces of cattle and later, when incapable of work, as pieces of refuse to be exterminated. The physical hardships of hunger and disease broke down the healthy body into a sickly, emaciated body, a fragmented body of parts functioning to various degrees, a mechanical body, incapable of consciousness. This body was objectified and humiliated when the women were forced to stand naked for exams while the male officers observed with cool indifference. Similarly the women with cystitis or dysentery are forced to relieve themselves in front of everyone on the path to the work site. This exposure to others' gaze denied the women any expectation of privacy or any right to modesty. The women could see their bodies physically deteriorate and they could see their dehumanized status in the eyes of their oppressors.15 Maisie describes the treatment of prisoners as cattle and slaves when they are lined up to be selected for transport.

Here is the cattle merchant. We have thus nicknamed a German officer named Pflaum, who designates the able women for transports. Generally when the
destination of the convoy is a factory, the director of the firm accompanies him and in the slave market, the two of them make their choice (Renault 1948, 61).

The fragmentation of bodies and the fragmentation of identity were compounded by the fragmentation of community. Criminals were mixed with political prisoners. Nationalities were mixed thus making communication difficult. Maisie's narrative often reflects this fragmentation. A short account of an incident might be inserted between two longer episodes as when she mentions that Pierrette from Block 6 came to borrow a comb. The woman's eyes had a fixed expression and she died that night (Renault 1948, 130). Then Maisie resumes with an account of the exhausted prisoners dragging their weary bodies to the work site in contrast to cheerful SS women skipping along in the early spring weather.

In other sections she uses sentence fragments: "Our roll numbers are said in German. 35.000 it's Denise's series. She has not delayed in leaving the row and hastens to return. 40.000…50.000…57.000 Attention! Our turn comes, 57.908. That's me. Isabelle should have preceded me but undoubtedly there was an inversion of our two names (Renault 1948, 128). This fragmented narrative seems to occur especially when describing tense situations as when she feels anxiety in being separated from Isabelle or in the following air raid episode. "Hurry grossen alarm, kaputt." I can't run… I’m exhausted. Isabelle, who already supports Jeannot sees me ready to fall. She grips me and pulls me along; the mad race continues. We reach the first trees; It's close. The bombs begin to fall" (Renault 1948, 137-8).

In the midst of forces that fragment bodies, identities and relationships, the women resist by trying to stay among their French comrades, by creating their surrogate
families, specially trying to keep their group intact, and by struggling to maintain their ethical or religious values. Those who study such narratives have noted significant gender differences in the tendency of women to form surrogate families while men tended to remain independent. Women's behavior in the camps was clearly a product of their socialization as women previous to incarceration even though there were cases of asocial women, prostitutes and criminals who didn’t exhibit typical female behavior.

According to Myrna Goldenberg, "Although political and family affiliations were the stimuli for these supportive relationships, virtually all women, as revealed in scores of memoirs, formed surrogate families because as one German and Jewish survivor of Auschwitz explained, it was 'the best way to survive'" (Goldenberg 1998, 337). Though, as Goldenberg notes, this bonding was not exclusive to women, the evidence indicates that men did not take care of one another to the extent that women did. Goldenberg also mentions some other distinctive features of women's experience in the camps, the gender specific vulnerability and humiliation, evidenced in Maisie's account of the male officers observing their nudity and the reliance on domestic skills as coping strategies (Goldenberg 1998, 335). In Maisie's story, there is an example of women being able to alter clothes and also of sharing recipes as a means of briefly forgetting their hunger.

Maisie and her French comrades try to create surrogate families and to keep their group intact. In particular La grande misère's account of the role of surrogate families and mutual support that allows some women to survive longer is typical of other women's testimonies from the camps. Mentioning that they survived because of a “friendship experience in Ravensbruck which will endure until we die,” Genevieve de Gaulle quotes Malraux, “the only response to absolute evil is fraternity.” (Sisters) The connection
between Maisie and Isabelle as sisters is central to Maisie's surrogate family. When Maisie is sick with a fever and sent to the infirmary, Isabelle comes to visit her every day at her window. Isabelle and Maisie as well as the wider circle of friends try to stay together and not be split up for work or for transports. As their conditions worsen, they watch and worry about one another. "Isabelle loses weight terribly but since I worry about her, she always replies that she feels very strong. As for me, I feel myself dying a little each day. I no longer have the strength to lift the pick to break the ice. But at a distance, Isabelle watches me and she takes hold of the heavy tool instead of me" (Renault 1948, 75). Yet Maisie doesn't idealize this mutual support in their little community. The hardships of their lives create tensions and they often feel frustrated with one another.

Even between Isabelle and I, there is no longer the beautiful harmony of the beginning. One of us is affected by cystitis, the other with dysentery. We disturb each other during the night. . .the bond of blood makes us still worry about each other but the sufferings of daily life ceaselessly divide us. The other day I clumsily let one of my shoes fall to the lower level. It was immediately stolen and I had to go to work with one bare foot. The ground was covered with snow. Isabelle pitied me but evidently I should not have been clumsy (Renault 1948, 72).

The sisters feared being separated from one another more than they feared death. During one roll call, Isabelle's number isn't called. It turns out to be a mistake but Maisie panics, thinking she will "die here on this bed" if she loses Isabelle (Renault 1948, 45). After her repatriation by the Swedish Red Cross, Maisie almost dies of typhus in a
Swedish hospital. She is upset that the doctors aren't being forthright with her and thinks, "Why don't they understand that death doesn't frighten me and that I simply wish to see Isabelle and a priest" (Renault 1948, 164). It's apparent that many of the women are able to endure their sufferings because they have to some extent transcended themselves through their love and concern for family and friends. This is not always sufficient to save their lives in the end but undoubtedly it prolonged life because those separated from loved ones seemed to lose hope sooner.

Denise Fournaise, only 20, was painfully separated from her mother in May 1944 when her mother was too sick to leave the infirmary at Romainville. Denise is eager for news of her mother from Maisie and others arriving in transport from Romainville. They inform her that her mother and the other sick women were probably released the day of their departure. Denise is happy to hear this news and hopes that her father who was hospitalized at Saint-Denis was also freed. "For two months already we have known that he is dead but we do not have the courage to cause her such great sorrow" (Renault 1948, 32).

The community of Maisie, Isabelle, Denise, Suzanne and Lucienne help and support each other. Maisie is especially protective of Denise. She and Isabelle visit her in the infirmary and Isabelle gives her a little medal. Later when Denise is transferred to another room, Maisie agrees to join her, knowing how frightened Denise is at being separated from her friends. Yet this relationship is affected by their terrible circumstances. One evening Maisie feels disgusted with Denise, who seems unable to make any effort to help herself. After pushing through the crowd to get some food, she notices Denise very pale, coughing continually and feels her anger vanish. "Eagerly she
grabs three miserable potatoes that I bring her and excuses herself humbly" (Renault 1948, 80).

Maisie’s surrogate family is composed mostly of French women or French speakers and there is even a regional connection with some of the Breton women. This seems to apply to other nationalities as well. Their ability to communicate and their shared cultural values connect women from the same country and equally often separate them from those of another country. For example when the French women are in a work convoy together, they can cheat by slowing down and chatting. Yet when they are mixed with the Poles and Germans, "who work like maniacs," they are quickly noticed for not keeping up with the others. Once when the Polish woman distributing soup notices that the soup is thick after calling the French women first, she corrects herself and calls her fellow Polish women first.20

In addition to the support of their surrogate family, Maisie and her companions also resisted the camp’s dehumanizing process by striving to understand and resist the camp system which was intended to exploit and eventually destroy the women. In her letter to Germaine Tillion presented as a preface to *La Traversée du Mal*, Geneviève de Gaulle-Anthonioz explains that Tillion’s interpretation of the camp system immensely helped the women to resist this system. She states, “In listening to you, were no longer Stücks, but persons; we could fight since we could comprehend.” (Tillion 2000, 6). In their interview, Lacouture discusses with Tillion her ability to use her ethnological expertise to analyze and understand the concentration camp system in order to better resist the death and degradation which were the intended outcomes for the prisoners. He also mentions her collaboration with her camp comrades in documenting the camp
environment with the intention of using this evidence later to obtain justice for the
victims. He refers to the others like, Germaine de Gaulle, Denise Jacob, Maisie Renault
and Marie-José Chombart de Lauwe, who joined together with Germaine in “rebellious
ethnography.” (167)

In their previous lives, many of these imprisoned women held a respectable social
and economic status. Now they were mingled with all sorts of people, including those
who had been prostitutes and criminals. "Oh the horror of this miserable enforced
intimacy. This I believe is what we suffer the most. Women covered with ulcers, wounds,
having sojourned in the prisons several months, women become crazy from having seen
their entire family killed by the barbarous SS. . .refusing to eat to die more quickly; poor
creatures, human scraps with whom we must share the abominable soup" (Saint-Clair
1945, 71).

Intimacy with a mixed population exposed the women to the risk of disease and
death due to the very unhygienic conditions of sharing blankets and mess kits with those
who were contagious. This proximity also involved a different sort of contagion, a
possible deterioration of one's values in the midst of Nazis who didn't value life and
criminals or thieves who would steal and deal in the black market to survive. This
enforced mingling, combined with the dehumanizing treatment by their guards, was
degradating and threatened to undermine their socialization, which was shaped by family,
class and religious or moral values. This group of mostly Catholic French women
collectively maintained the ethical standards acquired during their Christian education
and in their families. Thus they often engaged in a rigorous examination of conscience
and conscious self-awareness despite the objectifying circumstances of their internment.
As Viktor Frankl mentions in *Man's Search for Meaning*, "Under the influence of a world which no longer recognized the value of human life and humandignity...the personal ego finally suffered a loss of values. If the man in the concentration camp did not struggle against this in a last effort to save his self-respect, he lost the feeling of being an individual, a being with a mind, with inner freedom and personal value" (Frankl 1984, 60). In *Sisters in Resistance*, Jacqueline states that as she was raised Christian, she was “taught our Christian duties to help our neighbor.” (2000?) In her 1999 Concours testimony, Maisie mentions that Mademoiselle Talet, director of the lycee in Angers (she died in Ravensbruck) gave her wise advice, “Given the principles in which you have been raised, you must be an example and help the others...you will see that it will also help you” (Renault 1999). In Tillion’s letter of April 22, 2005, she explained Maisie’s scrupulous camp behavior as based on “absolute moral principles that she applied in the terrible daily life of the camp: never complain, go to the limits of your strength and help others. This absolutely correct conduct was guided by a strong sense of dury and undoubtedly by her Christian education.”

As Mademoiselle Talet advised, Maisie tried to maintain her middle class Catholic values and therefore not steal or will she trade on the black market. Once when Maisie does exchange a spare spoon for an extra ration of soup for Isabelle, the SS punishes them by assigning them to hard labor the next day. Isabelle declares, "From now on, we will give away but we will no longer sell anything" (Renault 1948, 133). Maisie preserves her integrity in a fragmented world through self-awareness. She examines her behavior and her motives and can admit her mistakes in judgment, even her self-righteousness when she wants Denise to move over so they can let an elderly woman
share their bed. "Poor exhausted Denise that I treated so harshly this evening. . .I could well have moved, but not for a minute did I think of giving up my place." (Renault 1948, 121). In another example of this self-examination, Maisie gives a detailed account of her internal conflict over whether to take a sip of the milk that she has procured for a sick woman at Andrée's request.

I am so hungry! If I drink only one swallow of it, it seems to me that I would feel better and no one would notice it. Moreover, I am inconvenienced by a stranger; ordinarily all those who agree to serve as intermediaries take a little commission.

Will I drink or ..won't I drink? (Renault 1948, 102).

Finally she decides that if the passage back to her bed is clear, she won't take a sip. Odds are the passage won't be clear but it is and she doesn't sip the milk.

To survive dehumanization and fragmentation of identity, it was essential to maintain this capacity for self-examination and self-reflection. While the gaze of the SS objectified the prisoners thus depriving them of subjectivity, some prisoners like Maisie Renault and Germaine Tillion resisted objectification by reasserting their subjectivity through acquisition of knowledge about the concentration system and by examination of their behavior and values. The "I's" fragile sense of wholeness can be vulnerable to fragmentation under conditions of torture and oppression that force regression to an archaic, survival oriented stage of consciousness. Yet when the physical and mental identity of the self is changed dramatically through traumatic circumstances, this does not always result in a complete breakdown of identity and integrity.

As mentioned earlier, Denise DuFournier as well as Germaine and Maisie were well aware of the systematic methods of the camp which were used to break down
identity, self-respect, moral principles and even the desire to live. Dufournier mentions that when they arrived in Germany, “henceforth we were no longer individuals but a mass of undifferentiated beings, scraps, stücke as we were already being called. (5)

Lacouture quotes Tillion’s remarks in her book on Ravensbruck, “If I survived I owe it primarily to luck, then to anger, to the determination to expose these crimes and, finally to the coalition of friendship—for I had lost the visceral desire to live.” (10-11).

A person can resist the effects of traumatic forces if their integrity is based on a core of self-awareness and internalized values. Maisie made a conscious decision to behave according to what is acceptable within the value system that she had internalized. This was often challenging for the prisoners since one consequence of various overwhelming events during the twentieth century, especially two world wars and the Holocaust, is that "Values have to a significant extent been jeopardized by trauma and evacuated by banalization" (LaCapra 1994, 201). The women drew support from one another so that the collective effort toward mutual support and ethical behavior sustained them when as individuals the women might have abandoned efforts of maintaining the values, which were essential to their self-respect and thus to their will to survive. As Lacouture mentions, the group around Germiane, included some communists, some very militant Catholics like Maisie and even some women physicians. According to Lacouture, these "‘convicts’ had a strong influence on the youngest women, the apolitical ones and the defenseless ones” (166).

On several occasions, Maisie mentions their religious practices, which were important because they allowed the prisoners at least temporarily to forget the camp reality and to anticipate a future after the camp. "December 25th, we return to Block 15 to
hear the mass that a prisoner reads in front of a humble crucifix." (Renault 1948, 86)

Near the end of the war when they are bombed and the women are in danger, Maisie recites the rosary and Isabelle responds. After Maisie and Isabelle have been eliminated from the group being repatriated, Isabelle feels despair. Maisie goes to the lavatory for water and finds a medal of the "miraculous virgin" in the mud. (Renault 1948, 153) She returns to Isabelle with the medal saying, "You see we don't have the right to despair."

As Victor Frankl noticed during his internment, faith in the future, the belief that there could be an end to one's suffering was essential to the prisoner's survival. "The prisoner who had lost faith in the future- his future- was doomed. With his loss of belief in the future, he also lost his spiritual hold; he let himself decline and became subject to mental and physical decay" (Frankl 1984, 82). In Sisters in Resistance, Germaine mentions being sustained by the thought that someday she would again be in a Paris café having milk and a poached egg with her mother. When Maisie and Lucienne are disappointed that they will not receive a noon meal on their work duty, they console themselves with a fantasy of a future beyond the camp. Maisie tells Lucienne about the area around the Gulf of Morbihan, the boats, the Isle of Monks.

Together we go over the moors, the little shady paths; the thatched cottages of sailors seem very near to us with their bright colored shutters and their flower-filled little gardens. Lucienne is filled with enthusiasm; she wants to buy a house there. . .Finally I discover one whose description charms her, very roomy with sunny rooms and a terrace that overlooks the gulf -on one side there's a view over the verdant shores of Arradon on the other one finds the island of Arz with a
desert-like appearance and in front some islands. Lucienne is delighted; her choice is made (Renault 1948, 113-4).

This fantasy sustained them for several (days?) and signified a faith in the future that was essential for survival. Later after her release, Maisie wrote this book while residing in Arradon, a testimony to the power of hope and imagination to transform her Ravensbruck fantasy into reality.

Maisie's narrative begins with her deportation and ends with her return to Brittany after being repatriated by the Swedish Red Cross. Yet the fortuitous outcome in Maisie's case is constantly being undercut by her awareness of barely avoiding a different outcome of death instead of survival. When Maisie, Isabelle and Lucienne expect to be on the repatriation convoy, they are eliminated -Lucienne as an American, the sisters by order from Berlin. A week later all French women are called to the Lagerstrasse. Again they hope to be included but again they are eliminated. Finally the "hostages" are told to gather in front of the showers. Two officers come toward them, one of whom is the notorious Pflaum. Without being told to exchange their prison clothes, the anxious women are led on the road that goes toward the gas chamber. At the fork with the gas chamber to the left, they are directed toward the right and told they are free (Renault 1948, 155).

Even after the former camp internees arrived in Sweden, survival was not certain since many carried germs that later developed into terrible diseases and may even have resulted in death. In fact Maisie nearly died of typhus in a Swedish hospital. After she recovered, a letter from Lucienne informs Maisie that her brother Philippe is dead when
the boats filled with prisoners evacuated from Neuengamme were sunk because of their German insignia.

As she concludes her testimony, Maisie pays tribute to the memory of those friends who died at Ravensbruck, losses that will haunt her all her life. She was motivated to write this memoir as witness for those, especially her close friends, who didn't survive. *La grande misère* concludes with her remembrance of those who died in Ravensbruck.

On leaving Ravensbruck, I did not want to look back but I was not able to forget. The physical miseries have lessened; but Suzanne so frail and especially so valiant, Denise with her bright smile, yet close to tears, Nicole with an expression a little fearful and all those that we have left, rise up suddenly in my memory marked by the acuteness of their suffering (Renault 1948, 174).

This role of witnessing is a typical feature of concentration camp narratives. Many survivors feel a responsibility to tell the stories of those who didn't survive. These memoirs also serve a therapeutic purpose. The survivors apparently need to tell the story of this most significant episode in their lives in order to move forward to a future after the camp. "The tendency for a given subject-position to overwhelm the self and become a total identity becomes pronounced in trauma, and a victim's recovery may itself depend on the attempt to reconstruct the self as more than a victim" (LaCapra 1994, 12). These narratives are important primary sources and it is through the variety of perspectives that they represent that a comprehensive picture of this horrifying period of history emerges.

There is never a déjà vu in Holocaust literature, unless you read the same book twice. All victims, fighting or hiding, resisting or captive, lived through their own
individual purgatories and hells. . .They should be listened to, for they are the eyewitnesses, the 'primary sources' and time is running out on them (Laska 1983, 39).

In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, M.D. explore the concentration camp and Holocaust survivors' need to bear witness to their painful experiences. "Bearing witness to a trauma is, in fact, a process that includes the listener. . .the witnesses are talking to somebody, to somebody they have been waiting for for a long time" (Renault 1948, 70). Dr. Laub as psychiatrist who listens to and treats trauma survivors is especially concerned with the listening of psychoanalysts and the listening of those who interview survivors as she has done for the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale. Yet a broader concept of "listening" to those who bear witness applies to readers of memoirs and testimonies and viewers of Shoah as filmed testimony.

The listener therefore, has to be at the same time a witness to the trauma witness and a witness to himself. . .[the listener] needs to know that knowledge of trauma dissolves all barriers, breaks all boundaries of time and place, of self and subjectivity, that the speakers about trauma on some level prefer silence so as to protect themselves from the fear of being listened to and the fear of listening to themselves (Felman and Laub 1992, 58).

There is definitely a risk in hearing or witnessing stories of camp survivors. The listener cannot maintain a safe distance from her or his exposure to profound suffering. Laub summarizes a variety of defensive reactions, including fear of merging with the
suffering, anger at the victim for exposing the listener to the atrocities, withdrawal, obsession with facts to avoid emotional content, and sanctifying the survivor to avoid intimacy with their painful experiences (Felman and Laub 1992, 72). For Laub, the act of witnessing such testimony forces the listener to face profound issues such as the meaning of life, loss of loved ones etc. "For the listener who enters the contract of the testimony, a journey fraught with dangers lies ahead. . .trauma -and its impact on the hearer -leaves no hiding place intact" (Felman and Laub 1992, 72).

According to Lawrence Langer, secondary witnesses are those who "through a labor of listening and attending" expose themselves to "empathetic understanding and to at least muted trauma" (LaCapra 1994, 198). Felman asserts that telling one's story to a willing listener is essential for recovery of self-esteem and healing of the guilt that was internalized through Nazi propaganda and loss of significant others. According to Felman and Laub,- "The survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their story; they also needed to tell their story in order to survive" (Felman and Laub 1992, 78). When I actually began translating the book, my engagement with Maisie and her story shifted from reader to witness in this deeper process of “listening.”

As Benjamin has asserted in "The Task of the Translator," there is always something elusive in translation because the language of the original and the language of the translation are not equivalent and thus the meaning that the words of the original carries is not the same as the meaning of the words in the translation. The translator must distill the original and create something different that yet represents the sense of the original. Translation is much like being a secondary witness to historical testimony. The translator's failure is a "Failure to witness history in its original occurrence."
impossibility of witnessing is paradoxically inherent in the very position of the translator whose work is nonetheless to try to render -to bear witness to- the original" (Felman and Laub 1992, 159). Despite the "impossibility of witnessing," an attempt must be undertaken with full recognition of these limitations. Maisie cannot truly speak for her friends who disappeared in Ravensbruck and I cannot transparently speak with Maisie’s voice but the alternative is invisibility and total silence for the victims and a limited audience for such memoirs.

During my visit with Maisie, she autographed my copy of her book with a note that her purpose in writing the book was to ensure that these horrible events would not be forgotten. When Olga Wormser-Migot questioned the accuracy of the prisoners’ memory about the gas chambers and extermination at Ravensbruck, some Holocaust deniers used her challenge to the existence of gas chambers in certain camps to create doubt about the existence of gas chambers in any camp. Germain Tillion, a night and fog prisoner in the camp whose mother was exterminated in Ravensbruck, relied on the testimonies of former prisoners such as Maisie to prove the existence of a gas chamber at Ravensbruck. All of these women who later wrote about their experiences, including Maisie, knew that they must write their accounts as testimony of the crimes committed by the Germans. If Maisie is discreet about bodily matters and the humiliating exposure of her nudity to the gaze of male officers, this is a reflection of her gender and her upbringing. When Maisie examines her conscience for her behavior towards friends and fellow prisoners, she reveals the influence of a middle class Catholic education. When she emphasizes the collective, the mutual support in her group of French women, rather than individual heroism, this is typical of female camp narratives.
Testimonies such as Maisie's book emphasize the survival role of values, not those of political or religious ideologies but rather broadly human values, including compassion, mutual support and forgiveness. As Maisie states in her conclusion, the memory of those who died at Ravensbruck served to remind her, "To drive out all hatred and to understand that the only joy in life consists in spreading happiness" (Renault 1948, 174).

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Renault, Maisie. Personal Interview. 18 September 2000.


After Maisie and Isabelle were arrested, their mother, three sisters and brother, Philippe, were also arrested. The mother and three sisters were released on February 28, 1944. Philippe died when a German ship evacuating him from Neuengamme was sunk by the British in May 1945. Maisie and Isabelle along with Germaine Tillion and about 300 other French women prisoners were repatriated from Ravensbruck by the Swedish Red Cross in April 1945. Maisie Renault, who was made an officer of the Légion d'Honneur and awarded the Croix de Guerre and the Médaille de la Résistance, died in 2003.

Saint-Clair comments on this indifference to the dead when a corpse is taken to the lavatory. "Is she French," asks one woman. Another responds, 'No Polish.' That's the only funeral oration." (Saint-Clair 1945, 175).

Saint-Clair is appalled by the lack of respect for the dead, "I have seen the naked corpses, dragged on the ground, hoisted onto the cart by the arms. . .I have seen the corpses brutally thrown against one another in this Dante's inferno that is the morgue" (Saint-Clair 1945, 115).

Aufseherinnen were the uniformed female SS guards. "Unlike the SS men, a sizeable percentage of whom fell into that universal category of true physical misfits -bowlegged, slope-shouldered, etc.- the Aufseherinnen were, in general, stout, strong and healthy women" (Tillion 1975, 67).

For the medical visits, the women were forced to publicly undress in cold temperatures. "Officers and soldiers passed and laughed derisively at the unwonted sight of this army of naked shivering women. The spectacle that we presented was pitable, but that which was revealed to us led us to a closer acquaintance with misery than we had ever before experienced. Bodies so emaciated that they were mere skeletons, clad or unclad, were moving about, displaying gaping, septic wounds" (Dufournier 1948, 32).

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The ill, aged and fatigued prisoners were asked to "make themselves known so that they could be sent to a convalescence camp known as Jugendlager." In January 1945, they began transporting the ill and aged there for extermination. A gas chamber began operating in December, so exterminations formerly done elsewhere through "transports noirs" could now take place locally (Tillion 1975, 94-96).

"Fanny tells me at length how the most beautiful girls among the Polish women were chosen for experimental operations. Tibias and fibulas are fractured to make some attempts at bone grafts. Others are sliced thinner to get some statistics on the strength according to thickness. Hundreds of these beautiful young girls are thus disabled for life" (Saint-Clair 1945, 223).

Geneviève DeGaulle has a recurring dream that she is called before a tribunal to describe life in Ravensbruck but "I see that my deposition is rife with all sorts of gaps and memory blanks. . .and I have the terrible feeling that I'm simply not up to the task" (DeGaulle-Anthonioz 1998, 72).
"The certified nurses instituted courses on the life of lice, their species, their habits, their reproduction, and gave an impressive dissertation on the dangers of exanthematous typhus as we were completely impotent to arrest such a scourge, we could do nothing but wait, philosophically, until we recognized the first symptoms of the typhus bite" (Dufournier 1948, 31).

The pink card designated the women exempt from work and later destined for Jugendlager (Tillion 1975, 142; 245).

The NN section and part of Block 15 were the only semi-blocks where the French were a majority. The NN section was a 'special' block for which the Germans had planned an initial period of harassment, to be followed by extermination, women from the Resistance reached a proportion of 80 per cent" (Tillion 1975, 33).

See Julia Kristeva's discussion of abjection in Powers of Horror (Kristeva 1982).

"I was struck with the absolute certainty that there was indeed a fate far worse than death; the destruction of our souls, which was the purpose and goal of the concentration-camp universe" (DeGaulle-Anthonioz 1998, 16).

Nicole Thatcher sees a feminine perspective in Delbo's writing though Delbo herself declares she was not writing as a women. Thatcher interprets as feminine Delbo's emphasis on mutual group support, the mother figure, and the prominence of the body (Thatcher 2000, 41-51).

"The mortality rate among men in the camps was higher than that of women. . .women have a greater ingenuity in many things touching directly on the simple preservation of life; nursing their sick, sewing and knitting clothes from scraps and discards" (Tillion 1975, 39).

"This tenuous web of friendship was, in a way, almost submerged by the stark brutality of selfishness and the struggle for survival, but somehow everyone in the camp was invisibly woven into it. It bound together surrogate 'families', two, three or four women from the same town who had been arrested in the same 'affair' or perhaps a group formed within a prison cell or in a railroad car at the time of their deportation" (Tillion 1975, xxii).

The soup consisted of a yellowish liquid with frozen swedes or dehydrated vegetables floating about in it. The noxious effects of this conglomeration were not long in making themselves felt in the form of acute and almost general cystitis, or more exceptionally dysentery. . .within three days of contracting the disease [dysentery] emaciation was considerable" (Dufourier 1948, 36-37).

"The Frenchwomen, along with the Russians, were the favorite targets for SS hatred, and consistently produced the lowest profit for them. We were also systematically excluded from the easiest and most advantageous jobs, as well as from the most important ones; there were no French Blockovas, Stubovas or Lagerpolizei" (Tillion 1975, 33).

"NN was the only block where the troc -the camp's infamous black market- had been banished and replaced by a system of fraternal sharing" (Tillion 1975, 34).