

# Lidice: Remembering the Women and Children

Carmen T. Illichmann

Faculty Sponsors: Greg Wegner, Department of Education,  
Deborah Hoskins, Department of Women's Studies

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research project is to preserve the memory of the survivors of the razing of Lidice, a village in Czech Republic. On June 10<sup>th</sup>, 1942, the Nazis destroyed the village, blaming a few of its inhabitants for assassinating Reinhard Heydrich, the Nazi Protector of the country. The Nazis threatened others in the countries they occupied with this kind of brutality; Lidice served as an example of what would happen if anyone opposed the Nazi regime. All of the men in Lidice were brutally murdered, and the few survivors were women and children. Their stories are left untold, along with the many children from the village who disappeared. Thirty-three survivors still remain in the rebuilt village of Lidice and the intention of this research is to share some of their stories, as well as acquire a better understanding of what happened to the missing children and thus preserve this portion of history.

## METHODS

When first exploring the possibilities of a research grant involving the Lidice tragedy, I researched different possibilities in the Washington D.C. area and was completely unsuccessful. The little information found was either written in the Czech language or repeated the same information that was already common knowledge. I noticed that most of the information was factual and found it lacked emotional substance and human experience. More importantly, what about the women and children? The information about this part of the population was vague, even though some of these survivors still walked the streets of New Lidice.

Eventually I discovered the website to the museum in Lidice. I emailed an employee of the museum and was invited to come and research there, as well as interview a few survivors. My plan was to unravel the mystery behind these survivors, as well as achieve a better understanding of what happened to the children who never returned to the village. In August I flew into the city of Prague and began my research. The museum, built where old Lidice had once stood, was close to the Golden City. There I met with Anco Marinov, one of the head employees of the museum, who I had been corresponding with through email. With his help I walked the ruins of Lidice with a translator. I learned much more about the children and the women, those who had survived and those who sadly had not. I also had the privilege to meet and interview a woman who survived imprisonment at Ravensbruck and a child who eventually was put in a German home, to be Germanized, who now was the mayor of Lidice. I was also given information that was recently published in English to fill any void in my knowledge and improve my understanding of this portion of history.

## INTRODUCTION

This research about the village of Lidice in Czech Republic began over a year and a half ago. This village has existed for hundreds of years, but during WWII its entire existence was threatened. Under the control of the Third Reich, Czechoslovakia was ruled by a protector, Reinhard Heydrich. He was infamous for his preventative execution and martial law. While he ravaged the country, plots thickened to assassinate this monster<sup>5</sup>.

In England, Bein, the president of Czechoslovakia collaborated with the English government to plan the assassination of Heydrich. By the spring of 1942 a plan was in place and three men were parachuted into Czechoslovakia with the hope of ridding it of Reinhard Heydrich<sup>5</sup>.

The three men were able to shoot Heydrich, but his wounds were not instantly fatal. It was not until days later that he died from blood poisoning during an emergency surgery to remove shrapnel from his body. He died on the 4<sup>th</sup> of June, and instantly the search for Heydrich's assassins began<sup>5</sup>.

A little quaint village twelve miles from Prague named Lidice, was blamed for harboring his assassins, after a love letter was found that seemed to be suspicious. Though there was no solid evidence that Lidice's people had been involved in any way, Karl Hermann Frank received an order from Hitler:

1. All men to be executed by shooting.
2. All women to be sent to concentration camps.
3. Children are to be concentrated, those capable of being Germanized, are to be sent to SS families in Germany and the rest elsewhere.
4. The commune is to be burnt down and leveled to the ground<sup>5</sup>.

These orders were carried out swiftly and by the night of the 10<sup>th</sup> of June, all the men were dead and many of the women and children awaited terrifying fates. The women were sent to a concentration camp called Ravensbruck; the children deemed incapable of Germanization were sent to the Lodz ghetto and eventually Chelmno, where they all perished. Expectant mothers were sent to an orphanage, where they gave birth to their children and were then immediately sent to Ravensbruck. The children deemed capable of Germanization were put into German homes. The only children who lived through this ordeal were the children sent to Germany and those who lived in the orphanage<sup>5</sup>.

In 1945, the survivors of this unfathomable tragedy came home to fields and pastureland. Nothing was left of their village. Lidice has now been reconstructed and a memorial has been built for the casualties of the Nazi's brutality, there and in other villages in Europe who were dealt the same fate<sup>5</sup>.

The aim of this project, based both on oral and written history, is to focus on the fates of those who survived the razing of Lidice, the woman and children and sadly those who did not.

## OVERVIEW OF MR. ZELENKA'S EXPERIENCE

Vaclav Zelenka, born on the 9<sup>th</sup> of September 1938, was a regular Lidice child. His father, like most, worked in the Steelworks in Kladno and his mother was a housewife. He was nearly four years old when he experienced the razing of Lidice. After being taken from his home, along with the rest of the women and children, he was placed in the gym in Kladno, a nearby village. The day after the arrival of the women and children, himself and two girls, were selected by the Gestapo. At that moment Vaclav had no idea that he was being dealt a fate much different and much more humane than most of the children of Lidice<sup>4</sup>.

Vaclav had been especially chosen for a Nazi program called Lebensborn. This program dealt with many things involving racial purity, and in Vaclav's case, he was chosen for something called Germanization. Germanization was the Nazi's selection of those who looked German to be put into childless German families. Three days later when all children were taken from their mothers, Vaclav, along with the two other girls, was taken to a different place than the others<sup>4</sup>.

Vaclav describes his experience of that fateful night and part of his childhood in a German family, back home to his original mother<sup>4</sup>.

### Vaclav Zelenka

#### *What was the Wagner family like? How did they treat you?*

The Wagner family changed my name to Rolf. My new father, Karl, was very loving. He treated me like his own son. His wife, Hana, was not. She was mean at times and sometimes beat me. Luckily, the Wagners were not Nazis. Karl was a worker and Hana a housewife. They were nice people and for the most part I had no problems<sup>4</sup>.

#### *Did you have any recollection of your mother during your stay with the Wagners?*

I would sometimes dream of a woman in a long dress, later I realized that this was my mother I was dreaming about<sup>4</sup>.

#### *How were you found after the war?*

The authorities found me on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May in 1947, in a town named Lohsa. Scars on my chest from a childhood illness helped the Czech inspector to identify me. I was scared to go back to Lidice. I did not want to leave. I was told that my mother was back and that she wanted me back, also. Mr. Wagner cried when I left to go back to Czechoslovakia<sup>4</sup>.

#### *How was life after returning to Czechoslovakia?*

When I came back I remembered nothing of my former life, but slowly memories came back to me. I only spoke German and the Czech children thought of me as being German because of this.

They would not speak to me. It was very lonely. After a time I was accepted again, as a Czech, not being the only child who had come back from an orphanage. My mother was surprised when after a time I began to inform her of the animals we had had in Old Lidice. I was even able to draw how our old house had been organized<sup>4</sup>.

***How did you relearn the Czech language and where were you placed in school because of this language barrier?***

I began in first grade, at the age of nine. This was the beginning grade for Czech children. After a difficult three months I was able to speak Czech fairly well and was put in second grade. After Christmas I was able to go to third grade because of my quick progress<sup>4</sup>.

***Looking back at the situation, were you angry about the position you were put in?***

As a child I was not angry with the Nazi's for the position I was put in. Mr. Wagner was like a father to me<sup>4</sup>.

## OVERVIEW OF MRS. KALIBOVA'S EXPERIENCES

Miloslava Kalibova's fate was much different than that of Vaclav's. At the tender age of nineteen, she was sent to Ravensbruck when the Nazis invaded her small village. Once the women and children were separated, her along with almost all of the other women of Lidice over sixteen were taken to this sub-camp of Auschwitz. The few women not dealt this fate were either executed along with the men in Lidice or later at a mass execution in Prague-Kobylisy. On the 14<sup>th</sup> of June, 1942 arriving at Ravensbruck with her sister, she would suffer for three years, until she was brought back to Czechoslovakia the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June, 1945<sup>3</sup>.

### Miloslava Kalibova

Lidice was a normal village. Most of the men worked in Kladno in the steel factories, most women at home. There were fourteen farms in Lidice. I lived with my mother, father, and sister. My father was a cook. He worked in Moravia during the summer and in Lidice in the winter, until the Nazi occupation in 1939. The SS came in the night of June 10<sup>th</sup>, 1942. There was little time to feel anything, everything happened so suddenly. We were told to dress and take food for three days, along with any gold or valuables that we had. When my father was separated from us, his last words were, "We must believe that God will help us"<sup>3</sup>.

***When you were separated from the men, what did the Nazi's tell you?***

We were told nothing. Before six o'clock in the morning all women and children were sent to Kladno. We were there for three days. Mothers and their children were taken to a classroom where they were questioned about their children. The SS was trying to find children capable of Germanization<sup>3</sup>.

***Did you know where you were going when you were sent to Ravensbruck?***

On the third day away from Lidice, several Gestapo officers came into the gym where we were staying in Kladno and said, "You know what happened at Lidice and therefore you have to be sent to a camp. The children will go by bus, it will be more comfortable for them, the women by train and when you get to the place, the children will already be there." After two nights and one day in the train, we exited the train. Soldiers and dogs brought us to a gate that said "Work will set you free". Inside we were brought to a large building with wooden barracks. This was Ravensbruck<sup>3</sup>.

***Describe what it was like at Ravensbruck.***

Once we arrived we asked about the children. We were told that there were no children in the camp. After a month we were allowed to send a letter and we of course asked about the men and children from Lidice. We were told that the men were at a different camp and that the children were in Poland. We hoped to meet them after the war. Within a month I became accustomed to the cruel life of the camp, suffering from cold, hunger, and inhumane treatment. We suffered beatings from SS men and women. Life for us, as Lidice women was much different than others. Many of the women were alone there, but we were women of three generations. We knew each other well and when one suffered, it affected all of us. We lived for the hope of seeing our families again<sup>3</sup>.

***Describe your liberation.***

We were evacuated from Ravensbruck in April of 1945. We were forced to walk, what is known as a death march, only the ill were left at the camp. The SS officers stayed with us for two or three days, but after this time they disappeared to save their own lives. We came to a village and found many people in our same situation. We were told we should keep walking or we would be shot.

In May, the Russian army passed through the area, and we were free! Still many people had go by foot, through Germany for weeks before reaching there desired destination<sup>3</sup>.

**Describe your arrival in Lidice.**

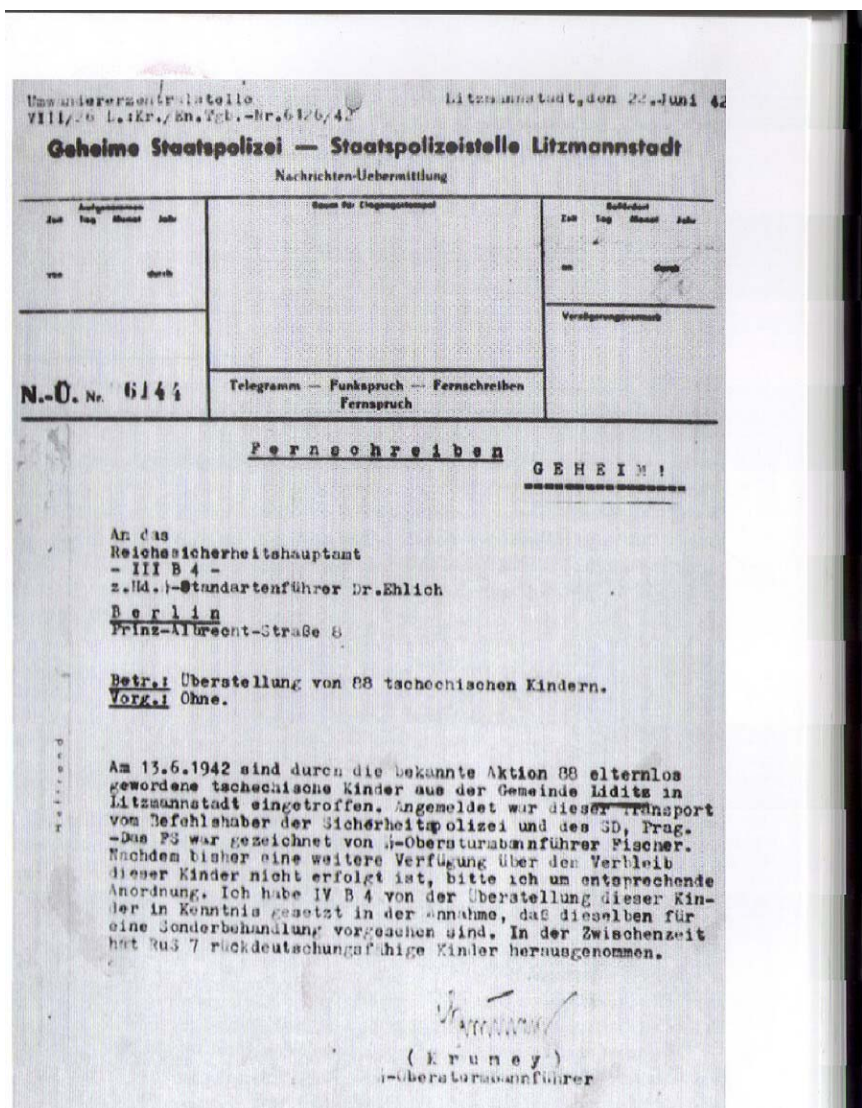
When we reached Lidice we had no idea what the fate of the village had been. The letters we had sent to relatives all said the same thing; the men were in a camp and the children had written from Poland. Even other Czech prisoners in Ravensbruck did not tell us the truth, due to warnings about how it would affect our already poor physical state. Arriving home, we found only barren plains. We discovered that all of the men had died three years ago. Our hope in finding the children was soon exhausted...out of one hundred and five children only seventeen were found. Six had died and eighty-two had been gassed at Chelмно<sup>3</sup>.

**CONCLUSION**

These two people that I had the privilege of interviewing were only a very small population of the women and children who were subjected to Nazi persecution. Where were the rest of the children? Where were all the women? I saw some of their faces walking past me on the stone streets of New Lidice, others, their grave stones decorating the Lidice graveyard, their faces shown on a plaque in the Lidice museum.

Eighty-two children's' fate to this day is a mystery. These children were deported by busses to Lovosice and then traveled by train to Lodz in Poland. A telegram from the chief of the security forces gave license for the mass murder of these children<sup>2</sup>.

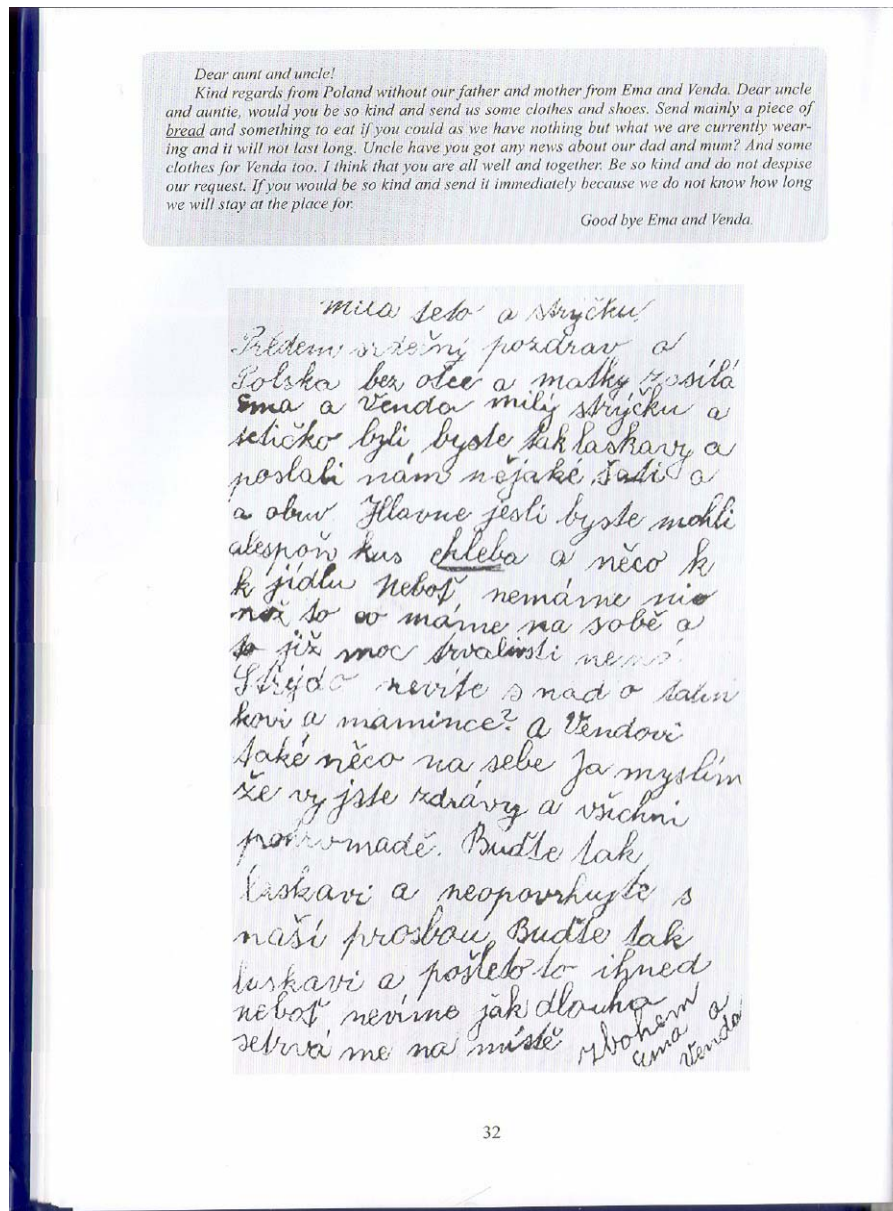
This letter, the confirmation letter, is the letter that supposedly sent these children to their death. After being turned over to the state police in Lodz only speculations can be given as to the fate of these children. Various testimonies support the theory that these children, who were found incapable of Germanizing, were deported to Chelмно, an extermination camp and gassed. Proof of their arrival in Chelмно, given by a gardener, Andrezej Miszak, claims that two lorries with Czech speaking children, ages from very young to about fourteen, came in July of 1942<sup>2</sup>.



The original telegram of H. Krumey, sent to the Main Security Office III B 4 (translated on the next page).



Letters written by these children in Lodz camp, are the last proof of their livelihood. The return address given on these letters did little good because the children by this time had completely disappeared. It is a common belief that the children were murdered in Chelmno. To this day, it is what most hold as truth - because all of the evidence points to this conclusion<sup>2</sup>.



Another fact about these children that provides strong evidence of their deaths comes from a nurse who accompanied the children in Lodz. Not only were the children, even those very sick, not allowed to go to the hospital (which allowed all nationalities), but also no photographs or records were compiled of the children. It was as if the Nazi's wanted the children to disappear just as the village had<sup>2</sup>.

Other children from Lidice were also unanswered for. These children were not born at the time of the tragedy. Their mothers were taken to a Prague asylum. Very soon after these children were born they were taken away from their mothers and the mothers were taken to a concentration camp or prison<sup>2</sup>.

Not one of these children lived beyond one year of age. Their death certificates varied, only one mother being left with a sure notion as to the fate of her child, because she gave birth in Ravensbruck, rather than Prague. Her tragic experience is best expressed in her own words, "Only once I heard his voice, the first and last cry of his. I was not even allowed to cradle him." Her

child was killed soon after<sup>2</sup>.

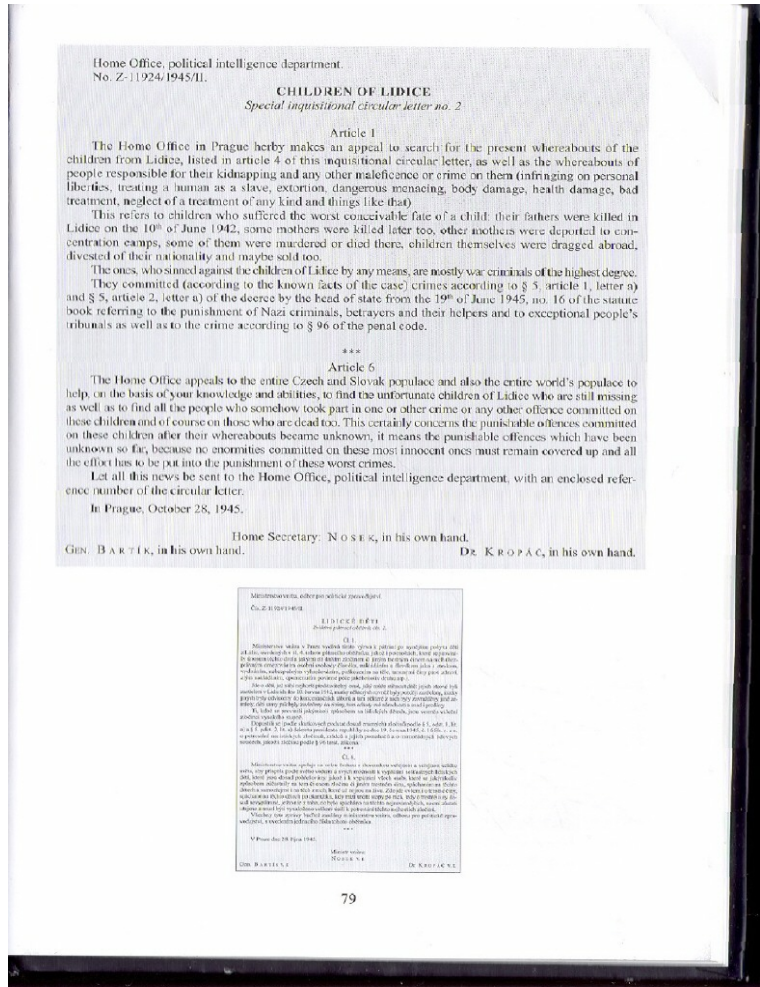
The children who did survive, all seventeen were eventually returned to Lidice. An inquisition on the behalf of these surviving children circulated in October of 1945. All of these children were found by May of 1947, Vaclav Zelenka, the last child to be found<sup>2</sup>.

The women of Lidice were no more spared than the children of the village. A few were executed with the remaining men of Lidice in Prague on the night of the 16<sup>th</sup> of June. When the other women and the children were separated, the women were taken to Ravensbruck, a concentration camp. Here they stayed, their rags adorned with a red triangle, which symbolized a political prisoner. This badge also had their number. They no longer answered to their name, but to this number. After three brutal years of treatment, sadly not all of the Lidice women returned home. In the summer of 1945 those that did, were confronted with the realization that their village no longer existed and their men were dead<sup>1</sup>.

The tragedy did not end there. In hopes of finding their children, only seventeen returned home. To the best of the knowledge of the Lidice women, their children perished at Chelmno. But-Lidice prevailed<sup>1</sup>.

Today, where the original village once stood is a vast memorial and museum, where people can learn about the tragedy of Lidice. A new town was built near this site and is known as New Lidice. Here survivors and their families have made a new life for themselves, proving to the world that good prevails<sup>1</sup>.

Pavel Pokorny, the translator during this research project explained the difference between this village and the others surrounding it. An entire village is united by this tragedy. He calmly told me that his mother was a survivor of the destruction of Lidice. He pointed to her picture on the wall next to us, a tribute to those who had passed on since the tragedy. Though she had passed away, he had heard her story, as had all of the children of these survivors. This town was rebuilt on survival, on the perseverance to live. As I walked the streets of this quaint village, I knew the foundation of these houses was made of more than stone, these foundations were built on the will to survive.



**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I wish to express appreciation to Mr. Anco Marinov, who helped make this research project possible with his invitation to Lidice. I would also like to thank Mr. Pavel Pokorny, my translator throughout my stay. Mrs. Kalibova and Mr. Zelenka, I would like to thank for their willingness to accept an interview with me. Without their stories this project would not be possible.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Eduard Stehlik, *Lidice: The Story of a Czech Village* (Lidice: The Lidice Memorial, 2004), 90, 104-105, 115.

<sup>2</sup> Jolanan Mackova and Ivan Ulrych, *Fates of the Children of Lidice* (Lidice: The Lidice Memorial, 2004), 18, 24,27-29, 32,41,45-46, 79, 82.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Miloslava Kalibova, August 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Vaclav Zelenka, August 2004.

<sup>5</sup> John Bradley, *Sacrificial Village* (Prague: Orbis Press Agency, 1972), 24, 36, 66, 78, 94.