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International Women's Day under the Shadow of War

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8 March 2022 – an International Women's Day under the shadow of war in Europe. Images of fleeing women and children should have become a thing of the past, if we had learned anything from history. This war shows us once again that the story of the Second World War and the Cold War has not been told to its end, but continues to haunt us to this day. What has history taught us?



Some of the brave women who were imprisoned in Auschwitz: Lotte Brainin (centre), Margareta Glas-Larsson, Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, Ella Lingens, Anna Sussmann, Maria Moser, Ceija Stojka, Alma Rosé, Dagmar Ostermann. (c) Collage: National Fund

"The voice of reason is a soft one", Sigmund Freud once said. Today it is drowned out by the sound of artillery.

On today's International Women's Day, we would therefore like to remember the many courageous women who carried out acts of resistance during the Nazi era in the most adverse of circumstances and stood up for peace in Europe. One of them was the resistance fighter Lotte Brainin.

She was born Lotte Sontag, the youngest child of a Jewish family. Her parents had fled to Vienna from the Galician city of Lemberg (now Lviv, Ukraine) during the First World War to escape the feared Russian troops.

Lotte grew up in abject poverty in Vienna's Brigittenau. She became involved in the Young Communist League at an early age. After the "*Anschluss*" of Austria to the German Reich in 1938, she was under threat on two fronts: as a Jew and a Communist. She fled to Belgium and became involved in the anti-Nazi resistance: young women carried out so-called "*Mädlarbeit*" ("girls' work") where they tried to gain the trust of *Wehrmacht* members, to persuade them to work against the war or even to desert.

Lotte was betrayed and in January 1944 she was deported to Auschwitz. There she sought and made contact with the camp resistance and took part in important acts of sabotage: she helped smuggle gunpowder from the ammunition factory, for example, which was used in the armed uprising of the prisoners' special commando and to detonate Crematorium IV on 7 October 1944.

When Auschwitz was evacuated, Lotte was transferred to Ravensbrück women's concentration camp. During the final days of the war, she managed to escape from one of the death marches.

After the war, Lotte returned to Vienna and joined in with efforts to come to terms with Austria's Nazi past. She was an important witness at the Ravensbrück trial in Hamburg; she helped to establish concentration camp communities; and as a dedicated surviving eyewitness she passed on her memories in talks with schoolchildren and at numerous events.

In 1948, she married Hugo, the "love of her life", with whom she lived until her death.

On 16 December 2020, a few days after her 100th birthday, Lotte Brainin passed away in Vienna.

To mark Lotte Brainin's 100th birthday in November 2020 – in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic – the virtual exhibition "Lotte Brainin. A heroine of the Jewish resistance" went online. The exhibition designed by Marika Schmiedt is a digital memorial to Lotte Brainin and her family. The project was realised with the help of the Vienna Museum and curator Vincent Weisl and with the support of the National Fund.

Lotte Brainin was an important voice of remembrance, and a woman of great courage who advocated for peace throughout her life. Stories like hers give us hope, especially at times like this.

"The voice of reason is a soft one, but it does not rest until it has made itself heard."

More information about Lotte Brainin and other courageous women can be found on the website of the new Austrian exhibition at Auschwitz at https://www.auschwitz.at/biografien-opfer.