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Anna Müller (2018)

If the Walls Could Speak: Inside a Women's Prison in Communist Poland

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ABSTRACT

This book is a collective history about imprisoned women in post-1945 Poland. It focuses on how these women adapted to confinement and remade their lives in a prison cell through words during interrogations; through their senses, by which they oriented themselves in the prison's spatial organization and created a feeling of security; and through their physicality as a confirmation of their gender identity and a means of exerting pressure on authorities. Their creativity helped them rebuild a semblance of normal life in a cell despite confinement and the abuses that they encountered from interrogation officers and guards. The sense of normalcy was based on a return to traditional women's roles and political passivity, which was a reversal from their prewar activism. The underlying question is whether Communist ideology had any impact on these women. In oral interviews, they denied Communism had any impact on them. However, the prisons do not appear to be a school of resistance either. The women remained disengaged from prison reality, instead withdrawing into a world they created in their cells. In general, they did not reject, nor did they accept the system. Their disengagement continued after their release. They began reconstructing stories and creating circles of former prisoners in the 1980s during the time of Solidarity, but during this moment of growing opposition in Poland, these female prisoners did not participate in the outburst of independent activism.

(From the publisher's website.)