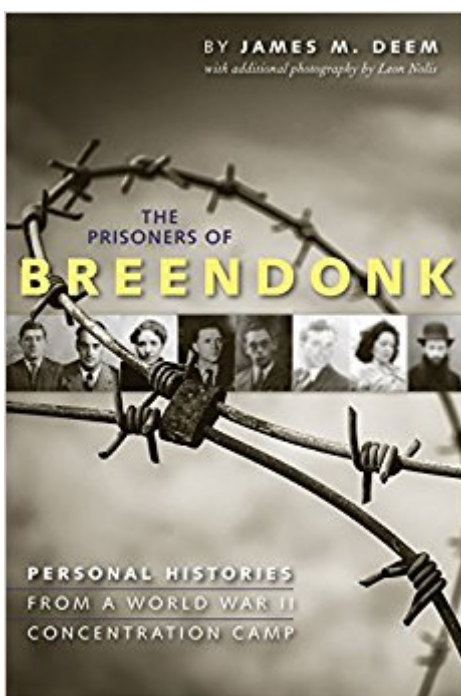


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# The Prisoners Of Breendonk: Personal Histories From A World War II Concentration Camp



## Synopsis

Fort Breendonk was built in the early 1900s to protect Antwerp, Belgium, from possible German invasion. Damaged at the start of World War I, it fell into disrepair . . . until the Nazis took it over after their invasion of Belgium in 1940. Never designated an official concentration camp by the SS and instead labeled a "reception" camp where prisoners were held until they were either released or transported, Breendonk was no less brutal. About 3,600 prisoners were held there--just over half of them survived. As one prisoner put it, "I would prefer to spend nineteen months at Buchenwald than nineteen days at Breendonk." With access to the camp and its archives and with rare photos and artwork, James M. Deem pieces together the story of the camp by telling the stories of its victims--Jews, communists, resistance fighters, and common criminals--for the first time in an English-language publication. Leon Nolis's haunting photography of the camp today accompanies the wide range of archival images. The story of Breendonk is one you will never forget.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 352 pages

Publisher: HMH Books for Young Readers; 1st. edition (August 4, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0544096649

ISBN-13: 978-0544096646

Product Dimensions: 6 x 1 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.6 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 27 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #1,124,229 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #86 in Books > Teens > Biographies > Political #94 in Books > Teens > Education & Reference > History > Holocaust #106 in Books > Teens > Education & Reference > History > Europe

## Customer Reviews

Gr 8 Up • This title sheds light on the Nazi prison camp Breendonk. Never designated as a concentration camp, Breendonk (an old fort intended to defend Antwerp, Belgium, in World War I) was referred to as a "reception" camp. Regardless of its title, Breendonk held about 3,600 prisoners between 1940 and 1945. Jews, communists, common criminals, and freedom fighters all found themselves subject to incarceration. Life in Breendonk was no different than that in any of the better-known camps. It served as a "feeder" to Mauthausen, Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen, and several other camps. This narrative is told through the lives of various prisoners who lived (and

died) there. Liberally illustrated with black-and-white photographs of the camp, its officials, and the prisoners, the book is well written and well organized. Many drawings done by one of the prisoners are also included, and captions add to the content. An afterword concludes the stories of some of the prisoners. VERDICT The overall quality of this volume makes this title about a little-known camp a strong choice. —•Eldon Younce, Anthony Public Library, KS

\*\*\*"Liberally illustrated with black-and-white photographs of the camp, its officials, and the prisoners, the book is well written and well organized." —•School Library Journal, starred review \* "A sobering study of man's inhumanity to man, and an important book that demands serious consideration and discussion." —•Booklist, starred review "Breendonk does not share the infamy of such Nazi concentration camps as Buchenwald or Dachau, but in this insightful and revealing history, Deem rescues this Belgian prison from near obscurity and tells the stories of some of the thousands who suffered and died there." —•Kirkus "Deem tells a chronological history of Breendonk by weaving together dozens of personal histories...For many, Breendonk had been only the beginning, and by following a handful of prisoners to their various ends, Deem illustrates that each story had a unique trajectory." —•Horn Book Magazine "Deem's unflinching look at the prisoner experience at Breendonk...gives voice to Breendonk's victims...a thorough history." —•VOYA

This account of Breendonk is a lucid and clearly written account of a little known place of torture and abuse for holding political prisoners in central Belgium. Personal narratives, documents, and photographs build a layered and compelling picture. A strong visual layout supports all text. Because Belgium's history is often written in French and Dutch, an opportunity to look at these issues closely in English is rare. The author's many trips to Breendonk to unearth the detail prove his dedication to his subject matter, and I noted the careful steps of his research with appreciation. Deem is also a hands-on educator, so the book is written with young adults in mind as well as a mature reading public. Having visited the Dossin Kazerne (down the road from Breendonk in Mechelen) but never Breendonk itself, I felt I had been able to fill this gap in my own learning journey through Deem's well researched work. Recommended for readers interested in Occupied Belgium in World War 2.

A powerful story from an inspiring story teller. This book is well researched and filled with fascinating details that kept my 11 year old engaged. My husband and I also thoroughly enjoyed the book.

I learned there is so much I don't know. James M. Deem painted vivid pictures in my mind that I cannot forget.

James M. Deem's *The Prisoners of Breendonk: Personal Histories from a World War II Concentration Camp* is an account of a relatively small prison in Belgium during the Second World War. Deem takes the investigatory path of many recent Holocaust scholars: he concentrates on a few individuals in a camp, both the victims and the tormentors, and through their story, tells the story of the camp at large. What we get is almost a day-to-day account of life in Breendonk. He charts the course of the prison as the war proceeds, details how prisoners were tortured and killed, what they ate and where they slept. The prison was photographed for propaganda purposes, to show how well treated the inmates were. Despite this, the wealth of photographs can't hide malnutrition and physical abuse. One prisoner was an artist, and the camp commander commissioned him to sketch prisoners for his private collection. The artist drew one for the commander, and one for himself. These drawings are startling, giving an inside, unexpurgated view of camp life. Suddenly, reading about the Holocaust is quite important again. As the world contracts toward ridged nationalism and parochialism, reading accounts of the end result of this process, its most raw and inhuman form, is extremely important.

Although I've read a number of books recently relating to the circumstances surrounding the incarceration of Jews and others in Nazi concentration camps during WWII, I found *The Prisoners of Breendonk* to offer intriguing and unusual insights. The book is lavishly illustrated, many of the illustrations being sketches by Jacques Ochs, a prisoner himself. Ochs had been the director of the Academy of Fine Arts in Liège, Belgium, and had published an uncomplimentary cartoon of Hitler, which led to his imprisonment. Frankly, I think this book would be worth it for these illustrations alone, but of course the histories are fascinating, as are the numerous photographic illustrations of the prison camp itself. This book is both extremely readable and extraordinarily informative about many of the sidelines of a prison camp. Breendonk, utilizing as it did a previously-built structure that had been one of a series of forts surrounding the city of Antwerp, was not a "death camp" as such, and had an intriguing arrangement of prisoner quarters in what had at one time been barracks for the garrison. The individual insights and character studies are especially as enhanced by Ochs's caricature portraits are incredibly poignant.

The more I read about the Holocaust, the less I know. There are piles of books in my library, fiction and non-fiction – they all point me to the forgotten moments, the unseen suffering, the unnamed heroes. And so it goes with the book *THE PRISONERS OF BREENDONK*: a passionate book thoroughly researched, strongly written. I feel hidden from the world. My grandfather, my heritage, comes from Belgium, yet I have never heard of this concentration camp just north of Brussels, guarding the south borders of Antwerp. Here, though not considered by the SS as a concentration camp, 303 of the 3,590 known prisoners died under abuse, starvation, or execution. There were no gas chambers here: it was death by brutality. 1,741 of those prisoners were later transported to other camps, to their eventual deaths. The combination of written word, paired with pictures throughout, offers a staggering perspective. I've learned so many stories, how Belgians, both citizens and those retreating from other countries, both Jew and even non-Jew jailed from previously hating the German regime – all suffered. The book builds in narrative, highlighting personal stories, group travesty, and the overall history of Breendonk. The author, James M Deem, begins with the story of Israel Neumann, who once came through Ellis Island, residing in America, returned to Belgium, to his personal hell. The story concludes with the eventual liberation and the current standing of Breendonk today. This is not the story you've heard or seen about other concentration camps, but it is equally as powerful. The conversations and events have been carefully reconstructed through written documents, family history, court cases, and the author's many trips to Breendonk itself. If you are at all interested in learning more: this book will stick with you for a long, long time.

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