
Cultural Life in the Theresienstadt Ghetto - Dr. Margalit Shlain

[posted on Jan 5th, 2015]

People carry their culture with them wherever they go. Therefore, when the last Jewish communities in Central Europe were deported to the Theresienstadt ghetto (Terezin in Czech), they created a cultural blossoming in the midst of destruction, at their last stop before annihilation. The paradoxical consequence of this cultural flourishing, both in the collective memory of the Holocaust era and, to a certain extent even today, is that of an image of the Theresienstadt ghetto as having had reasonable living conditions, corresponding to the image that the German propaganda machine sought to present.

The Theresienstadt ghetto was established in the north-western part of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia on November 24, 1941. It was allegedly to be a "Jewish town" for the Protectorate's Jews, but was in fact a Concentration and Transit Camp, which functioned until its liberation on May 8, 1945. At its peak (September 1942) the ghetto held 58,491 prisoners. Over a period of three and a half years, approximately 158,000 Jews, from the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, Germany, Austria, Holland, Denmark, Slovakia, and Hungary, as well as evacuees from other concentration camps, were transferred to it. Of these, 88,129 were sent on to their death in the 'East', of whom only 4,134 survived. In Theresienstadt itself 35,409 died from "natural" causes like illness and hunger, and approximately 30,000 inmates were liberated in the ghetto.

This ghetto had a special character, as the Germans had intended to turn it into a ghetto for elderly and privileged German Jews, according to Reinhard Heydrich's announcement at the "Wannsee Conference" which took place on January 20th, 1942 in Berlin. The Germans also meant to use it as a "Show Camp" for propaganda

purposes – to mislead or conceal the physical annihilation of the Jews being deported from the "Greater German Reich", as well as to refute the rumors about the way the Germans were treating the Jews who were sent to the camps, and about the extermination of the Jews in the 'East'. The community life that developed in the ghetto was undoubtedly influenced by the personalities of the individuals who led it, by their beliefs and approaches. The community leaders' enormous efforts to save the prisoners, or at least to prolong their lives, were successful to the extent of creating a community that managed to preserve its morale and dignity even in the depths of despair.

Cultural life in the Theresienstadt ghetto was initiated already during the first weeks of its existence, within the existing limits, as described by Nava Shan [1] in her book *To Be an Actress*:

"I remember one of the first evenings in the camp. We were sitting in a crowded room on the muddy, bare floor... When people realized that I was an actress they requested that I "act something". I gladly complied. I knew entire poems, parts of plays and tens of monologues by heart and that's how I started to circulate, in the evenings after work, between the barracks and blocks. During working hours I only thought of what program to give in the evening, memorizing the texts in my head".

In the barracks, during the evening curfew, many felt the urge to create and to document, to write a poem or song or a diary, to read to someone or to play music and sing. These performances expressed the needs of the artists as well as the craving of the audience to hear compositions belonging to the culture from which they had been cut off. Helga Weissova was just a child when she arrived at the ghetto, which was still in its early stages. She wrote:

"In the suitcase that I packed before leaving for Terezin I put a drawing notebook, a box with water colors, chinks and pencils. The colors lasted for almost 3 years... Afterwards I used any scrap of paper that I could find. That's how I could draw almost 100 pictures... Since we could not take photos in those days, the pictures were the only documentary documentation that we had".

Until December 1942, although the Camp Headquarters strictly forbade any musical activity, some prisoners defied this prohibition. They found musical instruments in the ghetto and made them serviceable, such as a piano without legs; as well as smuggling in musical instruments inside mattresses. Ruth Elias describes the situation in her book Spirit of Life:

"There were no musical notes. The musicians played from memory by heart and without any mistakes. This really was something to be admired... The first concert that I attended took place in the attic... The musicians were sitting and the audience standing, listening in admirable silence to the beautiful music. The place was guarded properly. Guardians who stood next to the window of the attic watched the outside while others stood on the stairs. This was one of the most festive concerts of my life".

Cultural life in Theresienstadt helped the prisoners in the ghetto with their struggle to retain their humanity in the face of the degradation of their life, starvation, illness and the constant threat of deportation to the 'East'. Within the framework of the "leisure time department" of the Jewish self-administration (consisting of 276 employees) in the ghetto, they established alternative frameworks in order to maintain their cultural values: in literature, art, music and theatre; in lectures and seminars, educational

frameworks, sport, etc., all with one aim: to live the day, to preserve the self from disappearance.

The "leisure time department" organized thousands of lectures and reading evenings as well as theatre performances, such as *The Grave* by Jiri Wolker; *The Marriage* by Nikolay Gogol, directed by Gustav Schorsch and décor by Frantisek Zelenka; the one-man show: *The Man's Voice* by Jean Cocteau, played by Nava Shan; and children's plays that she directed, like *Fireflies* based on the story by the Czech author Jan Karafiát, together with ballet dancer Camilla Rosenbaum, and *Mowgli* by Rudyard Kipling; as well as a puppet theatre at the children's homes. The department's administration held weekly meetings to decide on events, determined by ideological and esthetical aspects. In view of the enormous interest of the ghetto inmates in these cultural events, it was necessary to stage the same plays again and again, mostly in the crowded attic. All events were of a quality and quantity that can be compared to the available cultural events in a big city in our own time, despite each event involving many difficulties and immense efforts. The Czech author, Norbert Fryd stated in 1984: Till today I meet acquaintances who whisper in my ear: between you and me, such abundance of culture as we had in Terezin I did not find anywhere else.

In her book *Whole Fractures*, Ruth Bondi, wrote about theatre in Theresienstadt and its importance to those who were imprisoned there :

"It was in the Terezin Ghetto that I experienced the immense power of theatre. In spite of the monstrous drama taking place around them daily, with endless transports arriving at the Ghetto and transports leaving to unknown destiny, the prisoners were craving for theatre, as actors or as spectators, and not only for light comedies that allow to forget, at least for an hour, the depressing present and the

threatening future, or satirical cabarets that transform pain into laughter – but rather for theatrical plays that were detached as it were, from all the here and now, like *The Marriage by Gogol*. The Ghetto prisoners were willing to pay with their food for the right to study acting, or to attend a play, or to give up a precious hour destined for packing belongings on the day of transfer to the East in order to watch a play till the end – they were the actors, they were the spectators, they were the tragedy".

Humor and Satire helped the prisoners of Theresienstadt to overcome their dread of the deportations, their hunger and homesickness, and brought them some comfort and illusion of "life as if". This is attested to in the stories that were published in serial form in the children's magazines: "The fate of the Meiselschwein family" in the *Kamarád*, or in the "Rambles through Terezin" section, in *Vedem*; as well as texts of cabaret performances and especially in the humoristic newspaper *Hello Friday*. Some of the satirical shows bravely attacked the Jewish administration and the inhuman conditions in the ghetto. The Czech artist Karel Svenk [2] established the first cabaret. He wrote, composed and directed plays and parodies in which he participated, including *The Lost Food-Ticket*, *Long Live Life*, and *The Last Cyclist*, a daring absurdist allegory that expanded a gallows-humor joke being told by Jews in Europe in the years between the two World Wars. Later, Berlin-born Kurt Geron [3] also created a satirical cabaret, *Carousel*, with music by Martin Roman, played by the jazz ensemble of the ghetto, the *Ghetto Swingers* [4].

After the Council of Jewish Elders finally obtained permission from the Camp Headquarters to keep musical instruments and to play music in public, musicians organized various ensembles. They wrote compositions under the harsh conditions in the ghetto and musical activity blossomed. Concerts of symphonic and chamber music by composers such as Mozart, Beethoven, Verdi, Brahms and Janacek took

place, and evenings of song, and operas such as Carmen by Bizet, Tosca by Puccini, The Marriage of Figaro by Mozart, and The Bartered Bride by Smetana – all with the participation of orchestras and choirs; as well as cabaret performances by Svenk, Gerron and others, with the participation of professional and amateur artists. The musicians were prepared to play under the most minimal of conditions, in the darkness of the barracks, after working hours. They undertook to write complex musical pieces and to perform before audiences. The many initiatives of the performers resulted in the establishment of a musical sector within the "leisure time department". This sector was headed by Viktor Ullmann [5] and was responsible for the organizational aspects of the performances and minimal compensation to the performers.

Theresienstadt brought about the strengthening of my musical activity, not the opposite, wrote Viktor Ullmann, the senior and most famous of the ghetto composers. By no means did we sit and cry by the rivers of Babylon. Our artistic efforts were equal to our passion for life – and I am convinced that anybody who had to fight for his life and his art will agree with me.

The prisoners went to every performances they could, seeking even one hour of joy and escape from the hardships of the ghetto. No less important was the opportunity to meet family and friends from whom they were otherwise separated. In the appallingly crowded conditions of the ghetto this was mostly the only way to meet. They listened in total silence to the piano recitals by Gideon Klein [6] and James Simon [7], to the string quartet founded by Egon Ledeċ [8], and orchestras under the baton of conductors like Karel Ančerl [9].

Those who most influenced musical life in Theresienstadt were Viktor Ullmann and Rafael Schächter in the classical category; Karel Svenk in cabaret; and Hans Krása

[10] with his children's opera *Brundibár*, which offers a symbolic portrayal of the victory of Good over Evil. The opera was performed 55 times in the ghetto, with the participation of many children, who too often had to be replaced following transports to the death camps. *Brundibár* was also performed before representatives of the International Red Cross during their visit to Theresienstadt in June 1944 and it was later filmed for a Nazi propaganda film of the ghetto.

Viktor Ulmann headed a workshop in the ghetto for modern music and musical performances. He composed music for piano, songs (*Lieder*), and chamber and symphonic music, the most important of which was his opera *The Emperor of Atlantis* (1943) with a libretto by Peter Kien. This is an allegoric work, defying the Nazi regime. The imaginary Emperor of Atlantis declares a world war and invites his veteran ally, Death, to join him. Death, however, resigns from his post by breaking his saber. From now on, no-one can die. After Death becomes inhuman he loses all significance. The authority of the Emperor collapses, a revolt ensues, and the Emperor suffers and begs Death to return. Death agrees on condition that the Emperor will be his first victim. Having no choice the Emperor submits, regretting only that he was unable to destroy the human race before his death. The opera ends with the song:

"Come Death and dwell in our hearts. We learned to respect pain and the aching of our brethren. Please do not utter the name of Death in vain".

As time went by the Germans permitted the Jewish prisoners more intensive cultural activities in the ghetto because this allowed them to present Theresienstadt as a showcase for Nazi propaganda purposes. Concomitantly, however, one of the measures taken by the camp commanders as collective punishment was to temporarily order a halt to artistic activities. In September 1943 the conductor and

pianist Rafael Schächter [11] was ordered by the SS to conduct Verdi's Requiem, for which he formed a chorus of 150 singers and four soloists. Since deportations to the 'East' continued without pause, the chorus had twice to be formed a new, as most of the singers were deported to Auschwitz. In June 1944 Schächter was instructed to perform before the International Red Cross delegation, Adolf Eichmann and other SS officers. In October 1944 Schächter and all the members of the chorus, as well as other musicians, were sent to Auschwitz to their death.

From the beginning of activities in the camp a framework of thousands of scientific lectures was set into motion, attracting large audiences that formed study groups on different subjects, such as history and Jewish philosophy under the guidance of Rabbi Dr. Leo Baeck, Rabbi Dr. Benjamin Murelstein (the third "Judenältester" in the ghetto) and Rabbi Regina Jonas. Dr. Paul Eppstein, the second "Judenältester" in the ghetto, founded a seminar on political economy. He gave and organized lectures in ethics, mass psychology and more. The literature lectures, for example, discussed Shai Agnon and his works. An oral newspaper existed in the ghetto that served as a platform for public discussions on ongoing problems there. Philipp Manes [12] established The Manes Lecture Group, which for two years gave over 500 lectures and reading evenings in the framework of the "leisure time department."

The lectures by the "Youth Welfare" department ("Jugendfürsorge") were unequalled, aimed at filling the free time with high-school and university courses, including mathematics, physics, history, literature, art history, technical subjects, and agriculture. Schooling was officially forbidden and took place clandestinely and under the guise of the "Youth Welfare" department, headed by Egon (Gonda) Redlich of Prague, whose deputy was Fredy Hirsch of Germany. Redlich's line of teaching was Jewish-Zionist, but each instructor could educate according to his own beliefs: Zionist, Communist, National-Czech etc.

The Jews who were deported to the ghetto were of the generation in which Poetry, Writing and Reading occupied an important part of their lives. Many had brought with them poetry and other loved books, enabling establishment of a library containing thousands of books. They wrote poetry and diaries from a deep internal drive, and as they took most of these with them when transported from the ghetto, only a small part of what had been written has remained.

Ilse Weber [13] from Moravia wrote around 100 poems in German and Czech, in which she expressed the hardships of the ghetto and her longings. Alisa Ehrmann-Shek [14] from Prague wrote a diary, as an observing witness to the Theresienstadt existence:

"I will write to the best of my ability a testimony that will survive after me... to tell the world and time that what has happened here... in exile, 1944".

Philipp Manes wrote a diary of 1,000 pages, describing in detail characters and daily life, till his deportation to Auschwitz. After the war his diary was published under the title *As if it were life: a WWII diary from the Theresienstadt Ghetto*.

Painting represented another artistic aspect that was developed in the ghetto. Many used their free time to paint, draw or work at handicrafts. Painters and graphic artists who worked at the technical department of the Jewish self-administration under the leadership of Bedrich Fritta [15] had to prepare technical designs for the use of the ghetto and the German command. They drew landscape paintings too of the ghetto, and other paintings, depicting it as a so-called "normal" city. Making use of the availability of materials they also painted in secret, as an alternative to photographic evidence. They made hundreds of drawings that exposed the harsh reality of life in the ghetto and the misery of the people, especially the elderly. Some of these paintings were smuggled out. They took these risks knowingly, and in July 1944 the

leading painters, Fritta, Otto Unger, Leo Haas [16], Norbert Troller and Felix Bloch, together with their families, were sent to the Gestapo prison in the "Small Fortress" near the ghetto, where they were tortured and killed

Among the artists who undertook the documentation of daily life in the ghetto were Peter Kien [17], Dr. Karel Fleischmann [18], and Jo (Joseph) Spier [19]. Unlike them, the artist Friedl Dicker-Brandeis [20], who was one of the important Bauhaus artists of her time, did not paint often in the ghetto. Rather, she dedicated her time to being an art teacher to thousands of children who, thanks to her, could occupy themselves with creative activities. Even under the conditions of the ghetto she was able to exploit to the extreme any material, through synthesizing and adopting the system of Montessori education, and the philosophy of art therapy of the Bauhaus School. This system helped the children to explore and understand their feelings and their threatening environment, and rehabilitated their shaken consciousness. Friedl and most of her pupils were murdered in Auschwitz. Their spirit and legacy, however, will remain forever in their paintings, which express the creativity and vitality that existed even during the height of the horrific period of the Holocaust.

Some of the prisoners in the ghetto objected to the accelerated development of cultural life, which reached its peak during 1944 due to the German efforts to "beautify" the camp towards the visit of the International Red Cross delegation to Theresienstadt in June 1944. The head of police, Dr. Karl Loewenstein, likened the work of the "leisure time department" to: a dance on top of a volcano, and Egon Redlich described in his diary the extremes of life in the Ghetto: "My god, what a life! Diversified, horrible, full of contrasts and flowing quickly, very quickly. On the one hand a cabaret performance but on the other hand children and old people dying". The actress Nava Shan, on the other hand, justified the intensive cultural activities that took place as a means to preserve the humanity of the Jews imprisoned there.

In the collective memory of the Holocaust, the prisoners of the Theresienstadt ghetto acquired a mythical dimension, in spite of the daily misery, hunger, sicknesses and fear, as noted by Ruth Bondi, the ghetto researcher :

"Some people are under the impression that the prisoners of the Ghetto went from theatre to opera, from lecture to lecture, from concert to concert – but this was not at all the case. In the 18 months that I stayed in the Ghetto I was lucky to attend one opera and one play. Many of the prisoners did not have even get this much, and not out of disinterest in culture. The hard work, the standing in line for food or water or the toilet, the longing to meet a parent, husband or wife, child or friend before curfew that mostly started at 8 in the evening, as well as dread of the transports and the mourning for father or mother that had passed away in the Ghetto – all energy was needed first and foremost for daily survival".

The struggle to preserve life, culture and Jewish identity in the Theresienstadt ghetto, deserves our esteem. In the midst of destruction, against the German efforts to eradicate their humanity – to turn people into numbers – into naught, the Jewish prisoners created a society upholding humanist values and dignity, despite the unavoidable end.

Footnotes:

- * Margalit Shlain, Ph.D. A Holocaust researcher, academic advisor, Beit Theresienstadt, Givat Haim Ihud, Israel
- [1] Nava Shan (Vlasta Schoenova) (1919-2001), actress born in Prague. She was sent to Theresienstadt in July 1942 and worked there as actress and stage director. She survived the ghetto.
- [2] Karel Svenk (1917-1945), artist born in Prague, was sent to Theresienstadt in November 1941. He founded the first cabaret, wrote, composed, directed and participated in plays and parodies. In October 1944 he was sent to Auschwitz and died during the Death March in April 1945.
- [3] Kurt Geron (1897-1944), born in Berlin. An actor and film director who was deported to Theresienstadt in 1943. He founded there the cabaret and musical show Carousel. In 1944 the camp commander instructed him to direct and produce a propaganda film about the ghetto to be called Theresienstadt – A documentary from the Jewish Settlement / Theresienstadt - Ein Dokumentarfilm aus dem jüdischen Siedlungsgebiet. Scenes from the film included Cabaret Carousel, symphonic concerts directed by Karel Ančerl with soloists Egon Ledec and Paul Kling, The Tales of Hoffmann in German and Midway in Yiddish. Geron was sent to his death in Auschwitz in October 1944, before completion of the film. This was also the fate of the "actors" and the thousands of extras who were forced to participate.
- [4] The jazz ensemble of the ghetto, The Ghetto Swingers, included the German musicians Eric Vogel and Pavel Lipensky. It was managed by jazz pianist Martin Roman. They were all deported to Auschwitz in October 1944. Only Martin Roman survived.

- [5] Viktor Ullmann (1898-1944). He was a composer from Silesia and a pupil of Schoenberg and was considered a multi-talented creator and a central figure in the musical scene of Prague. In 1942 he was deported to Theresienstadt. He never managed to perform his opera Atlantis, written that in the ghetto, since all participants were deported to Auschwitz in October 1944. His last musical work, The Lay of Love and Death of the Cornet Christoph Rilke, based on the novel by Rainer Maria Rilke, was written close to the time of his deportation and only the unfinished version remained. In 2010 a composition class under the direction of the composer Michael Wolpe performed this work for the first time in Israel.
- [6] Gideon Klein (1919-1945), born in Moravia, gifted composer and pianist. Sent to the ghetto in December 1942, where he performed both solo and as an accompanying pianist. He wrote many musical pieces for choirs, music for theatre, and more. In October 1944 he was sent to Auschwitz and from there to a labor camp, where he died in January 1945.
- [7] James Simon (1880-1944) born in Berlin. Composer, pianist and musician. In April 1944 he was sent from Westerbork to the Theresienstadt Ghetto where he played recitals, composed music to Psalms, and served as a lecturer. In October 1944 he perished in Auschwitz
- [8] Egon Ledeċ (1889-1944), born in Bohemia, violinist and composer. Sent to Theresienstadt in December 1941. In the ghetto he founded a string quartet and appeared as concertmaster with the orchestra. In October 1944 he perished in Auschwitz.
- [9] Karels Ančerl (1908-1973) born in Czech, conductor. In 1942 sent to Theresienstadt, where he joined musical activities as a conductor. In October 1944 he was deported to Auschwitz, which he survived .

- [10] Hans Krasa (1899-1944), born in Prague, composer. In 1938 he wrote the children's opera Brundibár based on a text by Adolph Hoffmeister. In October 1944 Hans Krasa perished in Auschwitz.
- [11] Raphael Schächter (1905-1944). Conductor and pianist who grew up and studied in Brno and Prague. Sent to Theresienstadt in November 1941. One of the first initiators of cultural life there. He produced and conducted a variety of musical shows in the ghetto, including The Bartered Bride by Smetana, which enjoyed major success, and Verdi's Requiem. In October 1944 he was deported together with the last chorus that he had founded in Theresienstadt. He perished in Auschwitz ..,
- [12] Philipp Manes (1875-1944), a furrier from Berlin, was sent to Theresienstadt in July 1942. Perished in Auschwitz in October 1944.
- [13] Ilse Weber (1903-1944), poet, born in Moravia, was sent to the ghetto in 1942. Two of her best known works are Wiegala (lullaby) and the song I wander through Theresienstadt (Ich wandre durch Theresienstadt), about the pain and longing for freedom. She joined her little son Tommy and both were sent to their death in Auschwitz in October 1944.
- [14] Alisa Ehrmann-Shek (1927-2007), born in Prague. Was sent to Theresienstadt in 1943 and survived and was liberated in the Ghetto.
- [15] Bedrich Fritta (Fritz Taussig) (1909-1944), painter from Czech. Was among the first transport to the ghetto on November 24th, 1941. In July 1944 he was sent with his family to the "Small Fortress" near Theresienstadt, and from there to Auschwitz where he and his wife were murdered. His small son, Tommy, survived and was adopted by the painter Leo Haas.

- [16] Leo Haas (1901-1983)), painter born in Opava, Czech. In October 1939 he was sent to Nisko near Lublin where he painted scenes from the camp. Returned in 1940 and in January 1942 was deported to Theresienstadt. In July 1944 he was sent to the "Small Fortress" near the Ghetto and from there in October 1944 was sent to Auschwitz .and to other camps. He survived the war
- [17] Peter Kien (1919-1944), painter and poet from Czech. Sent to Theresienstadt in December 1941. and to Auschwitz in October 1944, where he perished one month later.
- [18] Karel Fleischmann (1897-1944), born in Klatovy Czechoslovakia, a dermatologist, painter and a writer. In April 1942 he was sent to Theresienstadt and was appointed as a senior member of the health department in the Ghetto. Daily life gave him the inspiration for many paintings, poems and articles. In October 1944 he perished in Auschwitz.
- [19] Jo (Joseph) Spier (1900-1978), Dutch artist and illustrator. Sent to Theresienstadt in April 1943. He worked in the painters' room in the technical department. In 1944, on orders from the German command, he participated in the process of "Embellishment Operation" in the Ghetto and painted a propaganda album "Pictures from Theresienstadt". He survived and was liberated in the Ghetto.
- [20] Friedl Dicker-Brandeis (1898-1944), artist born in Vienna. She moved to Berlin and Prague and left around 900 paintings. Perished in December 1942 was deported to Theresienstadt. In October 1944 she perished in Auschwitz.