

"I still remember very clearly the moment of selection for this transport. We couldn't be sure if belonging to this select group would be to our advantage, but my father decided to take the chance." This is how then ten-year-old Aaron Tromp described in his memoirs what turned out to be a 'Train to Freedom' that left Ghetto Theresienstadt in early February 1945. He recalled how he and his family were "standing before a table with a number of German officers sitting behind it", adding that despite having lost "quite a lot of weight" his family "looked comparatively well" and were thus included in the transport with "the shortest possible glance of the presiding officer".

The interwoven paths of 1200 Jews from Theresienstadt

Aaron Tromp and his family were among the 1200 Jews of Ghetto Theresienstadt who departed the camp by train on February 5, 1945. Most of the passengers were elderly people, but there were also children and teenagers such as Aaron Tromp and his sisters. The prisoners originally came from Germany, Austria, the Netherlands and Czechoslovakia and had been informed a few days earlier that they could volunteer for a transport which the Nazi's said was going to Switzerland!

Having witnessed the many transports that lead to the extermination camps in Eastern Europe, most prisoners expected this transport simply to be yet another cruel hoax by the Nazis. However, those who volunteered for a place on the transport and passed the selection of the infamous camp commander Karl Rahm did indeed reach Switzerland via Kreuzlingen early in the morning of February 7, 1945. They travelled on to St. Gallen where they were quartered for several days in the school building Hadwig which then served as a first reception center and "disinfection camp" and today is part of the campus of the St. Gallen University of Teacher Education. After being transferred to different quarantine and later refugee camps, the 1200 liberated survivors of Ghetto Theresienstadt were urged to leave Switzerland and travel on or return to their home countries.

A rescue operation based on a private initiative

The rescue of these 1200 Jews who had been imprisoned in Ghetto Theresienstadt began as a private initiative of the Swiss couple Recha and Isaac Sternbuch. From their home in Switzerland, they represented the *North American Union of Orthodox Rabbis of the United States of America and Canada* (UOR) and its relief committee the *Vaad Ha-Hatzalah*. In the fall of 1944 Recha Sternbuch approached the former member of the Swiss Federal Council Jean-Marie Musy in a desperate effort to try to rescue Jews from certain death. Musy was known to have had personal contacts among Nazi circles due to his prior sympathies for fascism and its anti-communist networks, in particular with Reichsführer SS Heinrich Himmler. However, by 1944 Musy agreed to support Recha and Isaac Steinbach's endeavor. As such, Jean-Marie Musy together with his son Benoit travelled to Germany and presented the plan to Himmler. The discussions included the idea of rescuing 1200 Jews from concentration camps each week. However, this extension of the rescue operation failed.

An international Research and Public History Project

In 2010 Beit Theresienstadt sponsored a commemoration concert in honor of the "65th anniversary" of the 'Train to Freedom'. To preserve the stories of those who survived Theresienstadt due to this remarkable rescue mission, Beit Theresienstadt has now joined an International Research and Public History project initiated by St. Gallen University of Teacher Education and second generation survivors and in cooperation with the Freie Universität Berlin, Charles University Prague and the Austria Center Leiden in the Netherlands. The project partners are investigating extensive files of source material pertaining to the rescue mission found in their respective countries and creating a digitalized index of those who were rescued. Focusing on personal sources such as letters, diaries, memoirs, and interviews, the researchers follow a biographical approach that gives the liberated prisoners names, faces, and voices. In a period of rising antisemitism, this project represents an exemplary initiative for fostering both Holocaust education and humanitarian tolerance. The findings of the research will be perpetuated via a multilingual website, special exhibitions, memorial sites and teaching materials adapted to the respective curricula of the participating countries.

Call for sharing memories and personal sources

As the central goal of the project is to preserve the individual biographies of the 1,200 rescued Jews, project researchers from St. Gallen University of Teacher Education - Professor Thomas Metzger, Professor Johannes Gunzenreiner and Helen Kaufmann (M.A.) - will be carrying out Oral History private zoom interviews with survivors and families of survivors. In addition, second and third generation family members who have access to sources such as photos, diaries, letters, and memoirs of passengers of "The Train to Freedom" are requested to contact either Thomas Metzger (St. Gallen University) or Yaakov Ben-Ze'ev (Beit Theresienstadt).

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