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REA Annual Meeting, November, 2014

Out of the Depths Have I Cried: *Aesthetic Opposition at the Gateway to Auschwitz*

Abstract

Terezin, the gateway to Auschwitz was a town commandeered by the Nazis to serve as a “model” relocation camp to demonstrate the Third Reich’s generosity and kindness toward the Jews, was an elaborate hoax. In an environment where truth was twisted beyond recognition, artists, writers, actors and musicians used their work to revive the spirits of the condemned and to leave a legacy of truth in the face of an insidious lie. The arts became the foundation for a ‘curriculum’ that shaped the lives of the inmates surviving in hell.

What role did creativity play in the environment of repression, anxiety, and degradation that was Terezin? How did the aesthetic experience not only exist but thrive in Hell's antechamber? By listening to the voices of the survivors, exploring the artistic legacy that remains, and making a pilgrimage to the site, a complex and multi-faceted portrait of the incredible aesthetic response to the horror of Nazi Final Solution emerges.

It is a forty minute drive from Prague to the garrison town of Terezin, in the Czech Republic. My journey, taken last spring, began with a drive through a serene and lush pastoral landscape, graced by charming farmhouses with gardens filled with spring blossoms. My destination was the most unique ghetto in the lexicon of the Nazi chamber of horrors. After researching its extensive artistic legacy, produced in the midst of unspeakable horror, visiting Terezin would provide further illumination.

Terezin or Theresienstadt, was a garrison town built in the late 1700's, designed, ironically, in the shape of a six-pointed star. It initially accommodated a population of about five thousand inhabitants but the walled fortress town would eventually house over 60,000 prisoners at once, serving as a conduit to the Death Camps. The Nazis removed the original populace and used Terezin to incarcerate Jewish people whose disappearances would raise questions and cause concern. "Theresienstadt was promoted not only as a special place for old Jews who "could not stand the strain of resettlement" but also as "model ghetto," thus strengthening the myth that Jews were being transferred to places where they could survive."¹ Lured to Terezin, which was touted as a resort and spa, they were assured of safe haven during the war. The population of Hitler's so-called "gift to the Jews" included highly decorated Jewish heroes of World War I, artists, musicians, dramatists, writers and scholars. Children and the elderly also formed a significant segment of the population. The deception became immediately apparent upon arrival.

My visit to Terezin began upon by touring the "Little Fortress". Tourists walk through an archway bearing the words, *arbeit macht frei*, (work will set you free) entering into a prison complex that conveys a sense of desperation and oppressiveness that is pervasive. "Around 30,000 prisoners passed through the Little Fortress, many of them to the extermination camps of the East. Conditions in the Little Fortress were worse than in Theresienstadt itself; many prisoners were kept in solitary confinement and under the threat of execution- a threat that was carried out 2000 times."² The brutality of the conditions provided for prisoners was dreadful. Standing in these rooms with a tour group of twenty and imagining the atrocious number of those

¹ Saul S. Friedman, ed. , *The Terezin Diary of Gonda Relich* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1992), vii.

² Ruth Schwertfeger, *Women of Theresienstadt: Voices from a Concentration Camp* (London: Oxford ,1989), 11.

actually condemned to exist in these spaces was deeply disturbing. This locus of torture and death now stands quietly mute to what once took place within its walls.

A ten minute walk from the Little Fortress, culminates in the town of Terezin. It has not changed significantly since the end of the Second World War. The buildings that were once filled with the desperate, the ill and the starving, remain standing in silent testimony, once again serving as housing for the current inhabitants. A single museum, built in one of the former barracks, shelters the artifacts that bear witness to the artistic and cultural life that characterized Terezin during the Shoah.

Presently, the town's three thousand inhabitants live surrounded by Terezin's legacy of cruelty and deception. The train tracks that once took the transports that carried 140,000 of its inhabitants to "the east" remain. The crematorium that disposed of the bodies of nearly 35,000 who died of deprivation and disease, is now open for tourists. A replica of one of the bunk rooms in a typical barracks, had to be re-created, however, because little remains to bear original witness to what took place here. Terezin's post-war years, were characterized by continued anti-Semitism under an extremely repressive Communist regime. Thankfully, in the last two decades following the replacement of the former government, a renewed interest in the story of the Jews who lived and perished in this Ghetto has emerged. The site continues to be developed as a center for education and tourism. Terezin, however, is a place of sadness and its grim legacy is pervasive.

After exploring creativity in the midst of the repression and degradation of this unique ghetto, it is incomprehensible that art and culture flourished here at all. "Overcrowding, filthy water supplies, vermin, unhygienic bathrooms, and lack of washing facilities led to frequent outbreaks of disease, including typhoid and scarlet fever. Constant lack of food weakened people, so they fell ill easily and failed to get better. And many old people were already sick and feeble when they arrived."³ The elderly perished at alarming rates. The adult population was forced to work twelve to fourteen hour days. In spite of all this, survivor Ruth Elias recounts that, "The inmates immersed themselves in any diversion that was at hand just to keep from being constantly reminded of the horrible conditions around them. We wanted to fill each free moment with something beautiful, and therefore we plunged into these cultural activities to savor every minute of life. No one knew what awaited us or when it would all end."⁴ The arts provided a time to escape, to remember, to be restored. The unknown was the greatest challenge to survival.

The majority of the residents of Terezin, were largely unaware of the town's primary function; a conduit to the death camps, primarily Auschwitz. Survivor Vera Shiff states, "There were few among us who really knew the horrendous truth: only the members of the Council of

³ Ruth Thomson, *Terezin: Voices from the Holocaust* (Somerville: Candlewick Press, 2011), 28.

⁴ Ruth Elias, *Triumph of Hope* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 1998), 98.

the Elders and some prominent individuals (i.e., Leo Baeck, the former Chief Rabbi of Berlin). Even Dr. Tarjan, who knew full well about the extermination camps in the East, never admitted to it openly. Only to me did he hint at the truth. He repeated many times over the instructions on how to pass successfully a selection.”⁵ The Nazi plan required that secrecy about the true purpose of the ghetto be maintained. What awaited those who were selected was never fully disclosed to the general populace. Nevertheless, the mere threat of transport clouded the existence of a doomed population.

For the residents of the Terezin Ghetto, avoiding selection was intrinsic to survival. “Fear of the transports was the central anxiety around which all life in Theresienstadt revolved and was at the same time the force that engendered the most impassioned response to impermanence in works of art - literary, musical and visual - that have survived much longer than Theresienstadt’s three-and-a-half-year history.”⁶ Anxiety was a constant presence but instead of producing a malaise of indifference, it gave birth to creative expression. “Art became an essential, perhaps the only worthwhile, part of life in Theresienstadt. The artistic struggle helped the prisoners to affirm their own humanity and to keep their spirit alive.”⁷ Aesthetic experience as spiritual resistance was intrinsic to existence in Terezin.

Many of the survivors who share their stories are convinced that they are alive because of the aesthetic experiences they provided or were witness to. Concert pianist, Alice Herz-Sommer states, “Music gave heart to many of the prisoners, if only temporarily. In retrospect I am certain that it was music that strengthened my innate optimism and saved by life and that of my son. It was our food; and it protected us from hate and literally nourished our souls. There in the darkest corners of the world it removed our fears and reminded us of the beauty around us.”⁸ Artistic expression became the creative constant in an environment of false reality and chaos. “The act of making art suspended the collective nightmare, and replaced the arbitrary rules of the ghetto with individual purpose. It helped to sustain hope, a sense of the self, and the will to live.”⁹ The artistic experience provided a respite that allowed the residents to return to their former existence, if only briefly. It gave them the hope that would sustain them through the degrading circumstances confronting them on a daily basis.

An astonishing variety of artistic offerings were available for those in the ghetto. “At first secretly, and then with the consent of the Germans, a rich cultural life developed for many of

⁵ Vera Schiff, *Theresienstadt: The Town The Nazis Gave To The Jews* (Toronto: Lugas, 1996), 82.

⁶ Schwertfeger, 2.

⁷ Gerty Spies, *My Years in Theresienstadt: How One Woman Survived the Holocaust* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1997), 17.

⁸ Melissa Müller and Reinhard Piechocki, *Alice’s Piano: The Life of Alice Herz-Sommer* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2006), x.

⁹ Anne D. Dutlinger, ed., *Art, Music and Education as Strategies for Survival: Theresienstadt 1941-1945* (New York: Herodias, 2001), 7.

Terezin's inhabitants, including dramatic and musical performances (sometimes of pieces composed in the ghetto), lectures and readings, and even a cabaret."¹⁰ The Nazis would sanction the artistic life of Terezin because they knew it would never be permanent. "The attitude taken by the SS Command was both pragmatic and cynical: "Let them play!"¹¹ It would serve their propaganda agenda as they would promote the Terezin Ghetto as an ideal residence for Jews during the war. "Living amid a German enemy whose purpose in Terezin was to delude the world, their prisoners, and perhaps even some of their own members into believing that the place was not really what it was - a transit camp to the gas chambers of Auschwitz-it is no wonder that the painters of Terezin returned again and again to the contrast between truth and delusion."¹² Artists would be forced to use their talents in the service of the Nazi regime on their work details but their precious free time would provide them with the opportunity to tell the truth through their art.

The risk that the artists took in the service of truth, cannot be over-emphasized. Being caught meant torture and almost certain death. "In their time off, evenings, nights, they sketched and painted their impressions, their criticism, their hopelessness, their despair. Of course not officially: if they would have been caught it would have meant immediate assignment into the next transport. That part of their work was hidden in safe places."¹³ But not all art remained concealed. Some of it was smuggled out of Terezin in the hope that the world would know the truth. Upon discovering that art illustrating the actual conditions of Terezin had made its way to Switzerland, Nazi retaliation was brutal in what became known as "The Painters' Affair".

Leo Haas, was one of four artists accused of producing "horror propaganda" and sent with their families to the horror of the "Little Fortress." He recalled his interrogation, stating, "Günther [an SS captain] questioned me, showing me a study of Jews searching for potato peels and saying, 'How could you think up such a mockery of reality and draw it?'"¹⁴ The Nazi Regime thrived on false reality and when confronted with a challenge to their charade, they attempted to root out any possibility of the truth being exposed. Truth in art was anathema. "The Germans labeled this art "horror propaganda," but it deserved to be called the "horror truth" of Terezin. The artists foresaw that the challenge to the postwar world would be how to imagine the reality of the camp. The real tribute to them is not to their moral courage or spiritual defiance, but their will to pit their vision of how the Holocaust should be seen against the aim of

¹⁰ Lawrence Langer, ed., *Art from the Ashes* (New York: Oxford, 1995), 663-664.

¹¹ Vojtech, Blodig, Kurt Kotouč, et.al., *Art Against Death: Permanent Exhibitions of the Terezin Memorial in the Former Magdeberg Barracks* (Pamatnik Terezin Blodig, 2002), 13.

¹² Langer, 666.

¹³ Norbert Troller, *Theresienstadt: Hitler's Gift to the Jews* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 133.

¹⁴ Thomson, 52.

their oppressor to shape another view.”¹⁵ Haas, alone, would survive the interrogation and its aftermath. In almost miraculous fashion, much of the artwork that was concealed within Terezin’s framework has been recovered.

In 1944, three years after the establishment of the Terezin Ghetto, the Nazis once again devised a treacherous hoax. They were determined to complete the Final Solution and were succeeding. The outside world, however, was beginning to respond to atrocity reports about the concentration camps. An elaborate facade was created to deceive a delegation from the Red Cross coming to inspect conditions at Terezin. The entire town was transformed but only on the surface. What was concealed would tell the truth about conditions in the ghetto but it was never revealed to the Red Cross team. “They had been given a carefully rehearsed inspection tour, which avoided all buildings that might arouse suspicion. Transport records show that just before the delegates arrived 5000 people were transported, including a group of the mentally ill. In this way the streets looked less crowded.”¹⁶ Residents were forbidden to provide any information that could have given the Red Cross Team reason to assume they were being lied to. During the Red Cross visit a performance of Verdi’s Requiem took place.

Rafael Schächter had the incredible vision and tenacity to facilitate the performance of this masterwork. He worked with a broken piano in the basement of one of the barracks and rehearsed a select choir in the evenings after the work day ended. Using a single score, the choir of 120 memorized the incredibly complex music and its Latin text of a Catholic Mass for the dead. “The importance of its staging when far beyond the walls of the Terezin fortress. Only thanks to Rafael Schächter’s enormous - almost fanatical - dedication to the beauty of that work, this composition by the Italian master appeared on the repertoire of a Czech singing choir.”¹⁷ The ruling Council of Elders, the Jewish officials charged with the supervision of life in Terezin, were vehemently against the performance. They had hoped that he would select an oratorio with a Jewish theme since Terezin was the only place in the Third Reich that allowed Jews to perform music. Schächter, however, would ultimately convince them and the performance took place. He was committed to the work because of its thematic content. Performing it in the presence of the Nazi oppressors was an act of spiritual defiance. In the words of one of the survivors in attendance, “It was as if angels were singing in hell.”¹⁸

The Requiem would be performed three times. After the first performance, the choir members were placed on transports. “Only the conductor himself and solo singers remained. With a good deal of passion and will power Schächter rehearsed the requiem mass anew with another 120 singers. But after several weeks of the performances the entire choir was again

¹⁵ Langer,,663-664.

¹⁶ Schwertfeger, 18.

¹⁷ Vojtech, Blodig, Kurt Kotouč, et.al., 21.

¹⁸ Hannelore Brenner, *The Girls of Room 28: Friendship, Hope and Survival in Theresienstadt* (Schocken Books: New York, 2009), 63.

deported to an extermination camp.”¹⁹ The third choir recruited had only 60 members and after performing for the Red Cross, the conductor and his singers were ordered to the transports on the next day. “Verdi’s *Requiem* - a funeral mass about dying, redemption, consolation, and resurrection-performed in Theresienstadt by Jewish prisoners in death’s waiting room! It was one of the ghetto’s most stirring and unforgettable concerts.”²⁰ The courage and tenacity that this performance embodied is beyond description.

Equally notable was *Brundibar*, a children’s opera, that was also performed for the Red Cross visit. It was presented 55 times for the audiences in Terezin and was intrinsic to their life experience “The opera was chosen for its content, one which boosted the morale and courage of the youngsters. The heroes of the opera were two children, who had to fight a wicked monster, *Brundibar*, and his attempts to thwart their efforts to provide for their ailing mother. The end of the tale brought about *Brundibar*’s defeat-the triumph of Good over Evil, reinforcing the daily repeated hope for a better time to come.”²¹ This opera was immensely popular not only with the children but with the adults as well. They were attempting to live the story being presented. The significance of the piece is all the more poignant when the fate of the performers is considered. “A total of around 15,000 children under the age of 15 passed through Terezin. Of these, around 100 came back.”²² The opera was symbolic of the valiant attempts made to enrich the lives of the children living in Terezin.

Children were cherished and represented hope for the future beyond the time of war. “The best buildings in Theresienstadt were allotted to the children. Youth qualified as children under the age of 16 and were ordered upon their arrival to be separated from their parents. The homes which sheltered them were equipped with the best the camp could muster.”²³ The incorporation of hope for the future into the lives of these incarcerated children was an acknowledgement of the possibility of life. Vera Schiff reflects, “ In retrospect, it seems absurd that curricula were prepared with much care to include disciplines taught at various levels of the interned children. At the time, it did not appear pathetic or ridiculous, and perhaps it was proof of the strength of the spirit to sustain the hope for a better tomorrow.”²⁴ The curricula provided an example of how to live life to the fullest. The short time these children had on earth ceased to be empty and meaningless. Instead painting, singing, drama and poetry all gave the children a creative way to bring order out of chaos. The opportunity to create was a gift to the doomed

¹⁹ Vojtech, Blodig, Kurt Kotouč, et.al., 21.

²⁰ Brenner, 62.

²¹ Schiff, 71.

²² Volavkova, Hana ed., *I never saw another butterfly...Children’s Drawings and poems from Terezin Concentration Camp 1942-1944* (New York: Schocken Books, 1993), 81.

²³ Schiff, 71.

²⁴ Schiff, 71.

children of Terezin. For a time, the children were given a pathway to self-expression and meaning making through art.

The creative process offered the possibility for making meaning out of the senseless existence that was Terezin. It engendered purpose in the midst of desolation, not only for the self, but for the surrounding community as well. The aesthetic experiences that nourished a starving, desolate people were essential to their existence. Artistic expression in this context could never be viewed as mere escapism.

Noted psychiatrist, Viktor Frankl, an Auschwitz survivor stated, “As the inner life of the prisoner tended to become more intense, he also experienced the beauty of art and nature as never before. Under their influence he sometimes even forgot his own frightful circumstances.”²⁵ Creative transformation is the result of embracing the opportunity for artistic expression and opening the self to the ineffable. Pianist Alice Herz-Sommer commenting on music, stated “It is the revelation of the divine. It takes us to paradise.”²⁶ The aesthetic experience provided a pathway to something beyond present reality. Whether it was a quest for truth, defiance in the face of oppression, a glimpse of beauty that connected one to the divine, or a moment when the community could express joy or hope and be encouraged, the artistic legacy of Terezin stands as a testament to the power of artistic expression, a lesson for our time.

²⁵ Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 50.

²⁶ Melissa Müller and Reinhard Piechocki, ix.

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