CHILDREN'S STORY

Children's Drawings from the Terezín ghetto 1943-1944

A CHILD'S LIFE IN THE PROTECTORATE

The Protectorate of Bohemia-Moravia was declared as soon as German troops crossed the border into what was left of Czechoslovakia on March 15, 1939.1 A great number of people now became involuntary prisoners literally overnight in the territories occupied by the Nazis. Only a paltry few of those who were designated as Jews under the discriminatory measures of the Nuremberg Laws were successful in emigrating. Of a total of 118,310 persons registered on March 15, 1939 as "Protectorate Jews" (in addition, German and Austrian Jewish refugees were now living in the territories), 80,000 remained in the Protectorate after all avenues of escape had been sealed.

From the very first day of the Protectorate, Nazi authorities enforced an extremely repressive policy against the Jews. They were fired from their jobs and their property was confiscated; the decrees were taken to such an absurd extent that even radios, bicycles, skis, and house pets had to be surrendered. Free movement was restricted, and as of 1940 all Jews were concentrated in the cramped confines of the newly created Jewish quarters. In Prague, the area of the former Jewish ghetto of Josefov and several other districts were used for such purpose. Jews were forbidden entry to cafés, cinemas, theaters, and other public places, like parks, the embankments, etc. There were specially designated hours when they could shop, and only in selected stores and among a limited assortment of goods. Curfew was set at 8:00 p.m. They were allowed to ride trams only while seated in the back and were not allowed on buses at all.

Notices appeared at park entrances and children's playgrounds that read: Juden nich zugänglich (No Jews Allowed). Jewish children, who were expelled from all the schools in the Protectorate in September 1940, could only play at the Jewish cemeteries or the stadium of the Jewish sports club Hagibor, which was located in the city's outskirts. As of September 1, 1941 all Jews were required to wear a yellow Star of David, a highly visible marker that brought with it enormous psychological pressure, especially at the beginning, as many had not been in the habit of openly declaring their ethnicity. And without such designation their "otherness" went unnoticed. The star,

1) The Czechoslovak Republic came into being as an independent state with the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the end of the First World War (October 28, 1918). Its border regions – the Sudentenland – had been granted to Nazi Germany on the basis of the Munich Agreement of September 30, 1938. On March 14, 1939, Slovakia declared itself an independent state and immediately after the regions of Bohemia and Moravia were occupied by German troops, thereby putting an end to Czechoslovakia as a sovereign entity. To replace it, the Nazis established the Protectorate of Bohemia-Moravia. The term "protectorate" comes from the Latin protectio. It was used here to give the impression that the Czech Lands had received the "protection" of the German Reich. The highest administrative authority was called a Reichsprotektor.

however, distinguished its bearer at first sight and in all circumstances. This form of segregation was particularly hard on the children, and the experience quickly made adults of them.

Since the beginning of the occupation children, just like their parents, had to face persecution daily. Therefore, it was extremely important that they were shielded from the constant stress lest it lead to permanent depression. It became necessary not only to preserve the continuity of their education, but to occupy them in their free time as well. Even though this task was to take on supreme importance in the difficult conditions of the Terezín ghetto and in the awful reality of Auschwitz's family camp B II, many saw the need to organize life for the children even before mass deportations began, and they started to plan such a program. The leadership of Prague's Jewish Community was instrumental in providing assistance. The community was headed by Dr. Jacob Edelstein, an active Zionist who later became the first chairman of the Council of Elders in Terezín.

In addition to giving children an opportunity to attend a Jewish school, whose capacity was naturally insufficient, other alternative forms of instruction were also organized. Lessons were held in the mornings in apartments improvised as classrooms, afternoons were set aside for sport and play, although space was considerably limited. Instructors were chosen by the leadership from the ranks of Zionist youth groups of the Hachshara Hechalutz.2 On account of this strong Zionist orientation, which later was instrumental in the education of children and adolescents in the Terezín ghetto, the children were given a positive meaning to their Jewishness, of which many had been unaware before the occupation. The strengthening of their Jewish identity by casting it in a positive light as something they should be proud of offered the children at least some relief from a life of constant humiliation and fear of deportation, which began in October 1941. The transports left from the assembly area at Prague's Trade Palace, Veletrzní palác. At the outset the primary destination was the Lodz ghetto, but in November 1941 the first transports also began to the newly established ghetto in Terezín.

THE TEREZÍN GHETTO

The town of Terezín is located sixty kilometers northwest of Prague. Originally a military garrison from the time of Emperor Joseph II, the Nazis converted it at the end of 1941 into a transit concentration camp (a ghetto) where Jews, mostly from the Protectorate, were to be gathered before being transported further east. In time, Jews from Germany, Austria, Holland, Denmark, and other occupied countries were also deported here. The Nazis wanted to make Terezín a "model ghetto" by whose

2) Chalucim: Hebrew for "pioneers." Hachshara Hechalutz was a Zionist organization that prepared young people for emigration to Palestine and life in the difficult conditions found there.

example they could demonstrate their benevolence toward an "inferior race." Before the eyes of the international public they sought to conceal Terezín's true purpose as a way station to the extermination camps by presenting it as an idyllic spa resort. A propaganda film was shot to create this illusion. In the film youths are dancing and singing while children drink milk and lemonade. The reality was completely different. 140,000 prisoners passed through Terezín until the end of the war in May 1945. The majority of these spent a short time in the ghetto before being assigned to transports heading east, to the ghettos and death camps of Poland, Belarus, and the Baltics. For most of those deported and, with few exceptions, for all children up to the age of fifteen this amounted to a death sentence.

Although living conditions behind Terezín's walls appeared to be more bearable than the ghettos and extermination camps of the East, thanks in large part to its role in Nazi propaganda campaigns, the inmates of the ghetto experienced all the hardships of life in the camps: starvation, malnutrition, awful hygienic conditions, infections and a tragic lack of medicine. They lived crowded together in dormitories provisionally set up in the former barrack buildings. Living quarters were found everywhere possible, even in attics and cellars. At the height of the ghetto's overpopulation, 60,000 prisoners lived in a space that before the war had housed 3,500 soldiers and about the same number of civilians. Everyone was massed here together: the young with the old, the healthy with the ill (both mentally and physically).

To spare the children from having their physical and psychological development severely stunted by the shocking reality they found themselves in, the Jewish administration urgently sought to create a separate world for them, to whatever extent possible, where a normal, even innovative, educational system based on high moral principles could be implemented. In the summer of 1942 they managed to establish children's dormitories in several of the buildings. The dormitories were divided into individual rooms of twenty to thirty children based on age and native language (Czech- and German-speaking children were assigned to the ghetto's children's dorms). Each room (called a Heim, or home) was supervised by an instructor, who was often called by the Hebrew madrich. Considering the inadequate capacity of these rooms, it was not possible for all the children to live separately from the adults. Yet those that lived with their parents still participated in the dorms' daily programs. Despite severe limitations these programs were quite varied: there were performances, literary evenings, and lectures. Several magazines were published by the children in Terezín, among which the most renowned was Vedem put out by the boys of Heim I in L417 (coming out weekly for a whole eighteen months, it totaled 800 pages). Others included BoNaCo published by the girls of Heim XI in L410, Rim-Rim-Rim by the boys of Heim VII in L417, the magazine's title taken from their cry, and Noviny by boys' Heim X in L417.

In an effort to create bearable conditions for the children in the ghetto the Jewish administration endeavored to provide them with better food and clothing (a department for the care of children and the young, the "Jugendfürsorge," was established) and enlist a sufficient number of educated and enthusiastic teachers. Education remained the most important issue as it was vital for the continuity and further development of ethical, aesthetic, and intellectual values. Even though the organized education of Jewish children had been strictly forbidden since the time of the 1940 edict that prohibited them from attending school, permission in the ghetto was eventually granted for instruction in crafts, drawing, and singing. To this were gradually added, even if illegally, the teaching of languages, literature, history, and the basics of the natural sciences. In this respect the Terezín children received the best attention as their teachers, fellow inmates in the ghetto, were among the top scientists and artists.

DRAWING LESSONS IN THE TEREZÍN GHETTO

Drawing was taught in the ghetto by Friedl Dicker-Brandeis (July 30, 1898 Vienna – October 1944 Auschwitz), a Viennese artist and art instructor who with her husband had been deported to Terezín in December 1942. She devoted herself to organizing these lessons upon arriving in the ghetto, and they soon acquired a privileged position in the overall teaching of the children: along with the children's theater, singing, and crafts, they became one of the few officially sanctioned forms of education.

Dicker-Brandeis's method was quite progressive for its time. She mainly drew on her experience with experimental techniques that she learned in Vienna and as a student at the Bauhaus3 in Weimar, where she studied under the most renowned European avant-garde artists (her teachers included Johannes Itten, Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, and Oskar Schlemmer). Her special exercises taught the children how to work with color and light, showed them how to develop a sense of form and composition. She favored a method of rhythmic drawing exercises that was based on a transposition of auditory perception to a drawn form, a simplified graphic representation.

The children signed their drawings and on them wrote their room number, the group they belonged to, and sometimes the lesson number. Dicker-Brandeis then further worked with the drawings, analyzing and classifying them. On the basis of what the drawings revealed to her, she then tried to help the children not just overcome certain technical problems in their artistic expression but, more importantly, their anxieties that their daily trauma and continual fears of an uncertain future produced.

3) Bauhaus was an arts' school founded in 1919 in Weimar, Germany. During the interwar period Bauhaus become a center for the European avant-garde.

As she states in a lecture she wrote about her pedagogic work in the ghetto, her goal was not to train the children to be artists, but to be healthy, self-confident individuals with a high social intelligence.

For the drawing lessons in Terezín to proceed at all an adequate supply of materials had to be obtained and this was no mean feat in the ghetto. Dicker-Brandeis tirelessly hunted for paper and paint, and even with the few parcels she was allowed to receive from friends outside, she requested materials rather than food or warm clothing for herself. The children used any and every scrap to draw on; often it was old military forms that had been left in Terezín by the Czechoslovak army who had garrisoned here before the war. Scarcity forced the young artists to content themselves with the little they had. Many times an economical approach had to be adopted when composing the drawings and collages, and the results were remarkable for their force of expression and overall simplicity.

Dicker-Brandeis was selected for one of the "liquidation" transports that left Terezín for Auschwitz in October 1944. She left alone, without her husband, who had been transported east shortly before her. This journey meant death for her as it did for the majority of children that were transported during that time. From the moment her transport left the ghetto very little drawing went on in Terezín. Two suitcases crammed with more than four thousand children's drawings were all she left behind. She had hidden them in one of the children's rooms, and right after the war ended in May 1945 they were brought to the Jewish Museum in Prague.

I

MARCH 15, 1939: THE PROTECTORATE OF BOHEMIA ANS MORAVIA IS DECLARED

March 15, 1939 marked the definitive end of all illusions. Up till then most Czech Jews believed in the inviolability of the Czechoslovak Republic. Like many in the other European countries, they hoped they would be spared the aggression of Nazi Germany. Between 1933 and 1939 many Jewish refugees from neighboring countries, particularly Germany and Austria, sought sanctuary in Czechoslovakia, believing that it would remain an "island of freedom" in a Europe in the grips of racial hatred and violence. They thought Czechoslovakia would manage to defend its sovereignty and the lives of its citizens. This hope went unfulfilled. Literally overnight a large number of people were made the unwilling prisoners of Nazi occupiers who put into immediate effect the racially discriminatory measures of the Nuremberg Laws. Daily life became more and more difficult, and all the prohibitions and directives the Nazis introduced against the Jews had a profound impact on the children.

II

WHAT CAME NEXT

As a result of the new prohibitions, a sign stating "Juden nicht zugänglich" [No Jews Allowed] began to appear on playgrounds. In September 1940 Jewish children were forbidden to attend all the schools in the Protectorate. As of September 1, 1941 all Jews in the Protectorate, including children, were required to wear a yellow Star of David where it would be clearly visible on their clothing. The star was similar to those worn by Jews in other European countries, only "Jew" differed according to the respective language. Through this measure the Nazis wanted to make clear who was Jewish and distinguish them from the rest of the populace. Not to wear the star in public was considered a serious offense, and one ran the risk of being turned in and severely punished.

III

TRANSPORTS

Worst of all was the constant fear of transport, which began leaving the Protectorate on October 13, 1941 when 1,000 men, women, and children were deported from Prague to the Lodz ghetto. This launched the mass deportation of Jews from the Protectorate, which was to become Judnrein (ethnically

cleansed of all Jewish inhabitants in Nazi terminology) in the shortest time possible. Six large transports, each with 1,000 people, left the Protectorate for the East. At the end of 1941, the Terezín ghetto was established. Further transports were directed there.

IV

THE TEREZÍN GHETTO

The town of Terezín, located sixty kilometers northwest of Prague, was originally a military garrison built during the reign of Josef II. The Nazis converted it into a transit concentration camp at the end of 1941. It was set up to serve as an assembly area for Jews, particularly those from the Protectorate, before their transport to the extermination camps. Transported here were also Jews from Germany, Austria, Holland, and Denmark. Terezín was a stopover for thousands of people on their way to a certain death.

V

LIFE IN THE GHETTO: PROPAGANDA AND REALITY

The Nazis wanted Terezín to be a "model ghetto" that would serve as an example of Hitler's benevolence to the Jews, whom the Germans considered an inferior race. A propaganda campaign presented Terezín as a spa resort where Jews from outside the Protectorate were accepted on their exceptional merit. With this campaign the Nazis hoped to gain the approval of public opinion. Though its use for propaganda purposes might seem to suggest that conditions in the ghetto were not as harsh as in other ghettos and concentration camps, those interned here faced all the hardships common to camp life: starvation, malnutrition, sickness, and a high mortality rate. People were crammed into tight living quarters set up in the former barracks. With a prewar population of 3,500 soldiers and roughly the same number of civilians, at the height of its population the ghetto housed 60,000 inmates.

VI

LIFE IN THE CHILDREN'S DORMITORIES

To save the children as much as possible from their depressing surroundings, the Jewish administration tried to create better and separate living conditions for them. In the summer of 1942 they succeeded in

setting up “children’s dormitories” in several of the barracks. The children were delegated to rooms, called “Heims,” according to age. In addition to better living quarters and food, daily programs for the children were organized in the Heims, as well as secretly organized lessons about the Jewish holidays and their observance.

VII

ART AS A STRATEGY OF SURVIVAL

Even though the Terezín ghetto was full of hardship and human misery a rich cultural life developed behind its walls. It is difficult for us to imagine today how the inmates managed to find the strength to create it amidst the exhaustion they experienced from the daily hard labor and anxiety over their own fates. Those who survived all agree: “Art helped us survive.”

Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, who taught the drawing lessons at Terezín, was well aware of the therapeutic effects of art. During her lessons the children were occupied with exercises for working with color, the intensity of light and shadow, and rhythm and were thus able to forget all their anguish. Sometimes she only had to open the window and say: “Paint what you see.” The wide-open window was a promise of a world without walls, where all dreams came true.

VII

TRANSPORT INTO DARKNESS

Unfortunately, not all the children who passed through Terezín had their dreams come true. By summer 1944 many hoped that the war would soon end. But instead of their longing for home answered there came a cruel autumn. Between September 28 and October 28, 1944 a large number of transports left Terezín for the death camp at Auschwitz II-Birkenau, and on these transports were an unprecedented number of children. For the vast majority it was their last journey, at whose end waited the gas chambers and crematoria.