

This volume presents theatrical works that speak to us from the very heart of the Holocaust: they were written by Czechoslovak and Austrian Jews imprisoned during the Second World War in the Terezín/Theresienstadt ghetto. Before engaging with the plays themselves, however, let us engage with a question that has vexed scholars for decades: What to call this place where such a thriving cultural life sprung up and where so many lost their lives? The right to grant a name is a particular form of power. In this volume I use the names chosen by those who have the greatest right to that power: the prisoners themselves.

Should the Czech “Terezín” or the German “Theresienstadt” be used? When the Nazis chose this fortress town as the site of the ghetto, both names had been in use for over 150 years. It was built in the 1780s in a bilingual region about 60 km northwest of Prague, near the present-day Czech–German border. The Czech- and German-speaking authors of the plays in this volume used the name more familiar to them. Therefore, in the translations of the authors’ texts I use the name they used; in my own texts, except for proper names of organizations, etc., I use the dual form “Terezín/Theresienstadt.”

Should Terezín/Theresienstadt be called a “ghetto”?¹ A concentration camp? Or was it, as Czech historian and survivor Miroslav Kárný argued, *unikum sui generis*, a site unlike any other in the Nazi system of ghettos and camps? The prisoners themselves, as their texts reveal, called it the “ghetto;” the survivors in their testimony often alternate between “ghetto” and “camp.” I will call it, as the prisoners did, the ghetto. However, more important than the name is an understanding of the conditions the

¹ Some scholars today find the term “ghetto” too euphemistic. It was not euphemistic enough for the Nazis. As of May 1, 1943, the term was forbidden and the term *Jüdisches Siedlungsgebiet* (Jewish settlement area) was used in all official documents. See Martin Niklas, “. . . die schönste Stadt der Welt”: *Österreichische Jüdinnen und Juden in Theresienstadt* (Vienna: DÖW, 2009), p. 51.

prisoners actually faced. The historical overview later in this introduction describes daily life in Terezín/Theresienstadt and the setting in which these plays were written and performed.

Finally, what should the phenomenon of theatrical performance in the ghetto be called? The word used most often today to describe the cultural life of Terezín/Theresienstadt is “resistance.” If resistance is defined too narrowly, however, as defiance against the Nazis, it may limit our understanding of the many reasons why the prisoners performed.

THEATRICAL TEXTS FROM TEREZÍN/THERESIENSTADT AND RESISTANCE

Terezín/Theresienstadt played a prominent role in Nazi propaganda as a “model ghetto,” displayed to representatives of the Red Cross in June 1944 to deceive the world about the true nature of the Final Solution. Although it is well known that performances took place during this inspection—for example, the commission watched the children’s opera *Brundibár*—the cultural life of the ghetto did not emerge on Nazi orders. In fact, the vast majority of the cultural events in the ghetto were initiated by the prisoners, for the prisoners. The first documented event, a “variety evening” in the prisoners’ barracks, took place on December 5 or 6, 1941, just two weeks after the first transport arrived.² By the spring of 1944, performances and lectures were taking place on more than a dozen stages in the ghetto.³

Although the Nazis attempted to portray Terezín/Theresienstadt as an independent “Jewish settlement area,” the reality of the ghetto was much grimmer. It was the final stop for more than 30,000 Central and Western European Jews, most from

² See Erich Weiner, “Freizeitgestaltung in Theresienstadt,” in Rebecca Rovit and Alvin Goldfarb (eds.), *Theatrical Performance during the Holocaust: Texts, Documents, Memoirs* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 209–30, see p. 217; and the Terezín Memorial, inv. no. PT 3878.

³ For a list of the performance spaces see the Terezín Memorial, inv. no. PT 3765.

Czechoslovakia, Austria, and Germany, who perished within its walls. For thousands more, it was only a way station on the journey to the slave-labor and death camps. Yet it was also a place where many prisoners became intensely aware of the meaning and power of art.⁴ Among those who spent months, or even years, in Terezín/Theresienstadt, a vigorous cultural life emerged: adults and children drew and painted, composed, played and sang musical works, wrote poems, essays, and plays. Not all the prisoners participated in the cultural life, and only a small fraction of the works produced has survived. Nevertheless, the testimony of those who were involved, and the drawings, texts, and sheet music that have been preserved reveal a world where art, as one survivor wrote, “transcend[ed] itself and acquir[ed] a dimension of sheer survival.”⁵

During my research in Europe and Israel on theatrical performance in the ghetto, the works in this volume—cabarets, puppet plays, historical and verse dramas, short sketches, poems and songs, a radio program, and a *Purimspiel*—came to light in private collections and small archives. Although short texts from Terezín/Theresienstadt had been published in previous anthologies, these newly discovered works included complete, full-length scripts, some including original sheet music.⁶ Most of the authors were unknown; for those whose works had been published, significant new material had come to light.⁷ With the help of survivors who explained to me the meaning of many disguised jokes and veiled references, a bilingual Czech–German annotated volume of the texts was published in 2008.⁸

4 See the prologue in this volume.

5 Mirko Tůma, “Memories of Theresienstadt,” in Rovit and Goldfarb, *Theatrical Performance during the Holocaust*, pp. 265–73; see p. 271.

6 See the bibliography for a list of previously published collections of theatrical texts from the ghetto.

7 For previously published authors Leo Strauss and Hans Hofer, new songs and poems were found. For František Kowanitz’s song lyrics for the musical revue *Prince Bettliiegend*, an outline of the plot was reconstructed on the basis of several survivor testimonies. Significant new information on Hanuš Hachenburg’s puppet play *Looking for a Specter* was provided by his friend and fellow survivor Kurt Jiří Kotouč.

8 See the acknowledgements in this volume and www.akropolis.info/terezin for information in Czech, German, and English.

For this revised and expanded English-language edition, all translations were prepared with performance in mind. The brief introductions to each play are based on survivor testimony, archival materials, a wealth of published diaries and secondary sources on the ghetto, and, above all, a network of living memory. Very few of these scripts are abandoned artifacts. Surviving relatives and friends were able to provide much insight into the influences that shaped the scripts and their authors' lives. In addition, within the texts themselves, extensive footnotes explain references to life before the war and in Terezín/Theresienstadt.

Insight into these texts, however, requires more than footnotes. We must also consider the prisoners' own relationship to theatrical performance. As testimony reveals, the survivors have long been concerned about misinterpretations of the cultural life of the ghetto. In an essay written in Prague in 1961, Terezín/Theresienstadt actress Jana Šedová warned against "two dangerous and incorrect views:" underestimating the prisoners' suffering (that is, assuming that conditions must not have been so bad if cultural activities could take place), and overestimating the heroism of the performers.⁹

In the historical section of the essay that follows I attempt to address Šedová's first concern and dispel any suspicion that the cultural activities took place because life in the ghetto was easy. Instead, readers are presented with a paradox: deprivation itself spurred the prisoners to perform. As one survivor wrote, "In spite of all the harassment, dirt, ugliness, and horror, or rather, exactly because of them, we all sought stimulus through which it would be possible to live and draw hope. It was in the cabaret [. . .] that we forgot about the powerlessness of our daily lives."¹⁰

Šedová's second concern becomes clearer when we consider its context. Various groups in post-war and subsequently communist Czechoslovakia tried to use the prisoners as symbols—of suffering,

⁹ Jana Šedová, program notes to *Poslední cyklista*, Divadlo Rokoko, Prague, 1961. Šedová (née Truda Popperová) performed in one of the works in this volume, *Prince Bettliegend*.

¹⁰ Ib, "Svědectví 'posledního cyklisty,'" *Hlas revoluce*, June 22, 1961.

of resistance, of victimization—to serve ends that were sometimes in conflict with those of survivors.¹¹ Šedová’s warning is still valid. Works from Terezín/Theresienstadt are now performed and exhibited all over the world, and one rarely finds a set of program notes that does not include the phrase “spiritual resistance.” Musical works from the ghetto that have received the most recognition tend to be those that contain an element of defiance: *Brundibár*, where children defeat the black-mustached villain, and *The Emperor of Atlantis* (*Der Kaiser von Atlantis*), where the tyrannical Emperor is forced to surrender to Death. But as the works in this volume reveal, the prisoners sometimes had other goals: to indulge in nostalgia for their homes, to satirize their own behavior and that of their leaders, to enjoy a moment of aesthetic pleasure and escape. A narrow definition of resistance that includes only acts of defiance leaves no room to acknowledge how important these aspects of theater were to the prisoners themselves. If resistance is more than defiance, how can we widen our view of this concept without defining the term so broadly that it becomes meaningless?

We can craft a more compelling definition by asking the question: Resistance against what? In addition to resistance against the Nazis, the prisoners had to fight a more general and insidious enemy, one mentioned by the survivor quoted above: resistance against powerlessness. This is not an abstract problem, for it is intimately tied with an issue that directly affected the prisoners’ survival: they had to find ways to manage the feelings of fear, helplessness, and loss of control that are the symptoms of psychological trauma. According to Judith Herman, Professor of Clinical Psychiatry at Harvard University Medical School, “Traumatic events are extraordinary [. . .] because they overwhelm the ordinary

11 For example, in the immediate post-war period, communists used narratives of Nazi brutality in the ghetto to support their program of expelling all “Germans” from Czechoslovakia, even though some of those labeled “Germans” were actually German-speaking Czechoslovak Jews. See Lisa Peschel, “The Prosthetic Life: Theatrical Performance, Survivor Testimony and the Terezín Ghetto, 1941–1963” (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, Minneapolis and St. Paul, 2009), pp. 97–8.

human adaptations to life.”¹² In the ghetto, quick adaptation to the new conditions was a matter of life and death. Theatrical performance could not change these conditions, but it could help the prisoners counteract the intense feelings of fear and helplessness in a way that kept them from becoming paralyzed by despair and enabled them to go on with the daily fight for life.

How might this have functioned? As Herman argues, since helplessness is the essential insult of trauma, the guiding principle of recovery is to restore a sense of power and control.¹³ In Terezín/Theresienstadt, where the prisoners’ ability to control any aspect of their environment was greatly limited, the cultural life became a sphere where they could actually exercise some agency—that is, where they could exert some degree of control over their experience. In some performances, they exercised this agency by confronting the ghetto, experiencing it in a more psychologically manageable way by bringing it onto the stage and forcing it to behave according to their rules. In others, the prisoners shut out the ghetto, escaping into a world of their own creation.

Escapism in Terezín/Theresienstadt theater often meant escape into the past, which was also an engagement with their imagined future. Few of the prisoners were able to acknowledge that, even if they survived, the post-war world would be a radically different place. Instead, most of them firmly believed they would return to a life just like the one they remembered.¹⁴ Therefore, the theater artists brought the world of their past onto the stage, not to mourn its loss, but to anticipate its return. Perhaps the most vivid example is *Laugh with Us: The Second Czech Cabaret*. Written and performed in the spring of 1944, the cabaret is set in a post-war Prague that is identical with the Prague of the authors’ past. As the main characters, Porges and Horpatzky, stroll around the city, “reminiscing” about their time in Terezín, they visit well-known

¹² Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), p. 33.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 41, 159.

¹⁴ Emil Utitz, *Psychologie života v terezínském koncentračním táboře* (Prague: Dělnické nakladatelství, 1947), p. 24.

pre-war bars and clubs, listen to music from the 1930s, and avoid one of their favorite restaurants—Horpatzky still owes the headwaiter money from the pre-war days.

Authors who confronted the ghetto in their works often created comic allegories. In one scene of *Radio Show*, co-author Kurt Egerer placed Terezín in a harmless, familiar framework by reinterpreting it as the setting for a fairy tale based on *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. In his story for children, hardships in the ghetto are transformed into advantages for the “dwarfs.” For example, the bedbugs that plagued the prisoners are described as little pets that watch over them at night as they sleep. Even the meager food supply is explained in a fairy tale-appropriate way: dwarfs have little tiny stomachs, so tiny rations are enough for them.

As the plays in this volume reveal, defiance toward their captors was just one element in a whole range of strategies the authors used to confront the unprecedented crisis they faced. If we widen our definition of resistance to encompass all the forms of opposition to powerlessness that they exercised within the symbolic space of performance, we become true witnesses to these authors and to all the Terezín/Theresienstadt prisoners who engaged so intensely with theatrical performance in the ghetto.

THE JEWS OF VIENNA, BOHEMIA, AND MORAVIA, AND THEATER BEFORE THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The scripts written in Terezín/Theresienstadt bear the marks of their authors’ experiences in the ghetto, but they reflect just as vividly the cultural influences that shaped them before the war. All the plays in the collection were written by Czech- and German-speaking Jews from Bohemia and Moravia (the western provinces of Czechoslovakia) and the Austrian city of Vienna.¹⁵ To appreciate the diversity of the prisoners’ theatrical responses to

¹⁵ Surprisingly, during my research for this collection, no new theatrical texts by German-Jewish authors came to light.

Terezín/Theresienstadt, we must first look at the diversity of the Central European Jews.

Until 1918, Jews from these regions had all been citizens of a vast empire ruled by the Habsburg dynasty. They had shared the historical process of emancipation that began in the late eighteenth century, when emperor Joseph II lifted certain legal restrictions on Jews, and were fully emancipated in 1867—the year that the Habsburg Empire became the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary—when parliaments of both Austria and Hungary granted them equality before the law. During the processes of modernization and secularization, regional differences created different forms of Jewish identity and different kinds of relationships with non-Jews.

The Jews of Austria-Hungary lived in a monarchy where people of different languages, cultures, and ethnicities considered themselves different nations. Unlike German Jews, who lived in a country where language, nation, and state were the same (German language, German *Volk*, German state), Jews under Habsburg rule had to reconcile various claims to their loyalty. Historian Marsha L. Rozenblit suggests that, as a result, Jews developed a tripartite identity. They were loyal to their Habsburg rulers, identified with the languages and cultures of their own region, and still felt they belonged to the Jewish people. Jewish identity could range from the traditional position that Jews were a nation in exile awaiting redemption, to a liberal perspective that saw Jewish identity as simply a religious one, to a Zionist or diasporic nationalist stance with its insistence that Jews should form a modern secular nation.¹⁶

The influence of Reform or Liberal Judaism was also different in Germany and Austria-Hungary. In Germany, Liberal Jews rejected the traditional notion that Jews still formed a separate nation hoping to return to Israel and professed their full loyalty to the

¹⁶ Marsha L. Rozenblit, *Reconstructing a National Identity: The Jews of Habsburg Austria during World War I* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 162.

German state and people.¹⁷ In Vienna, because of differences in the way that the Reform movement was introduced and waves of Jewish migration in the late nineteenth century, modern Jews adopted the form of Liberal Judaism but the content of worship remained traditional. On the one hand, there was pressure from more traditional Jews from other parts of Austria-Hungary to retain prayers for a return to Zion; on the other, because Austria-Hungary was composed of so many different nations, the idea of a separate Jewish nation was not such an anomaly.¹⁸ Ultra-orthodox tradition was represented in Vienna as well, due to the migration of Yiddish-speaking Jews from Galicia, the Bukovina, and the Pressburg area of Hungary (now Bratislava in Slovakia). They quickly adopted the German language; some modernized, but others retained their own traditional religious practices.

Jews in Bohemia and Moravia adopted a similar style of worship that combined Liberal form with traditional content, but ultra-orthodoxy gained little foothold in this region. Bohemian and Moravian Jews spoke the languages of their non-Jewish neighbors, German and Czech, and, especially in small towns, continued to lead a traditional Jewish lifestyle.¹⁹

In the late nineteenth century, anti-Semitism affected both groups in different ways. In Vienna, largely due to the influence of powerful mayor Karl Lueger and his Christian-Social Party (which controlled the Vienna City Council from 1895 to 1919), anti-Semitism became a political instrument, and was considered “respectable” even for the middle classes.²⁰ Austrian anti-Semitism was different from Nazi anti-Semitism in that, at least until the late 1930s, it was not based on “racial” hatred but rather on

17 Marsha L. Rozenblit, “The Jews of Germany and Austria: A Comparative Perspective,” in Robert S. Wistrich (ed.), *Austrians and Jews in the Twentieth Century: From Franz Joseph to Waldheim* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), pp. 1–18, see p. 3.

18 *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

20 Robert S. Wistrich, *The Jews of Vienna in the Age of Franz Joseph* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 236.

Catholic teachings and economic resentment, especially by the lower middle classes who blamed Jews for their economic problems. However, Lueger's own recognition that Vienna needed its Jewish economic elites led to an uneasy but functioning coexistence. As historian Robert S. Wistrich succinctly puts it, "In spite of its vulgarity, Christian-Social anti-Semitism did not generate any pogroms in Vienna."²¹ In fact, during this period, Jews made tremendous contributions to what we know as Viennese culture: Sigmund Freud, Arthur Schnitzler, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Arnold Schoenberg, and Gustav Mahler were all Jewish or of Jewish descent.²²

In response to increasing anti-Semitism, Liberal Jews founded the Austria-Israelite Union. Its members emphasized their dedication to German-language Austrian culture, but they also helped to define a positive Jewish group identity that exceeded the bounds of religion to include a sense of ethnic consciousness.²³ The rise of the Zionist movement, whether focused on actual emigration to a Jewish homeland or on a sense of Jewish nationhood in the diaspora, also offered new positive models of Jewish identity.

In Bohemia and Moravia, a different factor emerged as a central element in anti-Semitism: Jews were caught in the middle of the nationality conflict. During the nineteenth century, Czech and German speakers in the region began increasingly to consider themselves not just separate language communities but separate nations. During the process of emancipation, many Jews had assimilated to the elite language and culture of the empire, that is, German. Now they found themselves alternately pressured to join the Czech national movement, rejected by both sides as a group that could never belong to either nation, and criticized for taking sides out of opportunism. Nevertheless, even though the dominant

²¹ Ibid., p. 237.

²² For a more detailed description of Jewish contributions to Viennese *fin de siècle* culture see Steven Beller, *Vienna and the Jews, 1867–1938* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

²³ Rozenblit, "The Jews of Germany and Austria," p. 7.

political party, the Young Czechs, began to use anti-Semitism as a political weapon in the late eighteenth century, the influence of the Czech national movement increased among Jews.²⁴ Many Czech-assimilated Jews shifted their support to the Realist party, led by the future president of Czechoslovakia, Thomas Garrigue Masaryk.²⁵ The Zionist movement also gained ground, especially because the idea of a separate Jewish nationality offered a way out of the increasingly tense Czech–German nationality conflict.

By the early twentieth century, the patterns of Jewish identification that would persist in Bohemia and Moravia until the Second World War had been established. As Hillel Kieval writes,

[Modern Czech Jewry] grew out of the transformation of “Bohemian” Jewry: the Czech national Jew, the discoverers of Jewish nationality, the bilingual, but nationally indifferent, mass of rural and small-town Jews, the bridge-builders between German and Czech culture, and the ever-dwindling number of defenders of the German cultural ideal. All of these tendencies are present in the modern Czech-Jewish community.²⁶

After the First World War, when Austria-Hungary was divided into several successor states, the Jews of Vienna, Bohemia, and Moravia found themselves in different countries, under different governments, and in fundamentally different situations.

After 1918, all that remained of once-great “Austria” was a small republic, initially named “German Austria” (Deutschösterreich),

24 In the census of 1890, 66 percent of Bohemian Jews indicated German as their language; by 1900, 54 percent declared it to be Czech. See Hillel J. Kieval, “Jews, Czechs and Germans in Bohemia before 1914,” in Robert S. Wistrich (ed.), *Austrians and Jews in the Twentieth Century: From Franz Joseph to Waldheim* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), pp. 19–37, see p. 26. However, many of those who assimilated to Czech-language culture continued to value a German cultural affiliation. Even in 1910, almost 90 percent of Jewish children in Prague were enrolled in German-language schools. See Gary B. Cohen, *The Politics of Ethnic Survival: Germans in Prague, 1861–1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 224.

25 *Ibid.*, pp. 21, 28.

26 Hillel J. Kieval, *The Making of Czech Jewry: National Conflict and Jewish Society in Bohemia, 1870–1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 4.

plagued by post-war shortages, economic crises, and political instability.²⁷ The Christian-Social Party continued to play a dominant role in Austrian politics, and the peculiarly Austrian form of religious and economic anti-Semitism remained firmly woven into the social fabric of the Republic. Although the government refused the Zionists' repeated attempts to gain formal recognition for Jews as a separate nationality, Austrian anti-Semitism did not translate into official discrimination and anti-Jewish laws. In the Social Democratic Party, the only party that accepted Jewish members, many held positions of leadership. However, their role in public life ended in 1934, when the Austrian Civil War led to a form of authoritarian rule called "Austrofascism." The new regime identified itself as pro-Austria and anti-National Socialism; unlike Hitler's rise to power in Germany, Austrofascism did not translate into state persecution of Austrian Jews. Many Jewish leaders in the Social Democratic Party were arrested after the social democratic movement was outlawed, but conditions did not substantially worsen for the Jewish population in general.

Many Jews in Austria continued to try to balance political loyalty to the Austrian state with dedication to German-language culture and their own sense of Jewish identity, whether that identity was Zionist/nationalist or religious with a sense of ethnic belonging. However, as the influence of Nazi Germany increased, more and more non-Jewish Austrians began to adopt a sense of belonging to a German *Volk* or nation rather than simply to German-language culture—a *Volk* to which Jews could not hope to belong. In response, Jewish communities became more insular and they asserted their Jewish identity more forcefully.²⁸

27 On September 10, 1919, the name of the republic was changed from "German Austria" to "Austria."

28 Marsha L. Rozenblit, "Jewish Ethnicity in a New Nation-State: The Crisis of Identity in the Austrian Republic," in Michael Brenner and Derek Jonathan Penslar (eds.), *In Search of Jewish Community: Jewish Identities in Germany and Austria, 1918–1933* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), pp. 134–53, see p. 145.

The situation in the new state of Czechoslovakia was more hospitable for many reasons.²⁹ Newly won independence created a mood of optimism rather than defeat.³⁰ The territories within its borders included much of the former empire's industrial base, placing the new state on a firm economic footing. Perhaps most importantly, the new government refused to condone anti-Semitism. Although incidents of anti-Jewish violence erupted after the war, the Jews had faith that President Thomas Masaryk would bring the situation under control and create a tolerant and just society.³¹

Jewish attitudes toward the new state were mostly positive. Those who identified with the Czech national struggle supported the new order enthusiastically.³² Others were encouraged when Czechoslovakia granted wide-ranging rights to the "national minorities" within its borders, which included Germans, Hungarians, Ruthenes, Poles, and Jews, recognized as a nationality in the country's first constitution of February 29, 1920.³³ Thus, in Bohemia and Moravia, Jews were able to maintain a tripartite identity if they so desired: politically Czechoslovak, culturally Czech or German, and religiously, ethnically, or nationally Jewish.³⁴

29 Czechoslovakia was formed from the provinces of Bohemia and Moravia, the Hungarian territory of Slovakia, and parts of Silesia and Subcarpathian Ruthenia.

30 Not all groups wanted to be citizens of the new state: German-speaking regions unsuccessfully sought independence or union with Austria. See Derek Sayer, *The Coasts of Bohemia: A Czech History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 168–69.

31 Marsha L. Rozenblit, "Sustaining Austrian 'National' Identity in Crisis: The Dilemma of the Jews in Habsburg Austria, 1914–1919," in Pieter M. Judson and Marsha L. Rozenblit (eds.), *Constructing Nationalities in East Central Europe* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005), pp. 178–91, see p. 186.

32 Kieval, *The Making of Czech Jewry*, pp. 183–86, 192.

33 Tatjana Lichtenstein, "Making Jews at Home: Jewish Nationalism in the Bohemian Lands, 1918–1938" (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 2009), p. 68. Debates raged as to whether "nationality" on the Czechoslovak census should mean the individual's subjective choice of nationality or whether it should be based on more objective criteria. The Statistical Bureau ultimately decided that nationality was to be understood as ethnic belonging, with mother tongue as the main criterion; however, Jews were allowed to choose Jewish nationality regardless of language spoken. See *ibid.*, pp. 80–1.

34 Rozenblit, "Sustaining Austrian 'National' Identity," p. 186.

However, because the government rejected anti-Semitism, and because Czech anti-Semitism was often associated with resentment of Jews' perceived preference for German-language culture, other options were open to them. Some Jews who embraced Czech language and culture encountered little anti-Semitism and assimilated thoroughly into the Czech cultural sphere—their Jewishness became simply a religion or, for those who were completely secular, only a vague sense of family origin.

The situation was more complex for those who were assimilated to German-language culture. In Prague, as the proportion of Czech speakers increased, the German-speaking Jews—a group that included noted authors Franz Kafka and Max Brod—saw their world as “a game preserve whose ground was always shrinking . . . an iceberg that the surrounding waters slowly eroded.”³⁵ As Hitler's power grew, those who lived in the largely German-speaking border regions (called the Sudetenland) saw their non-Jewish neighbors' sense of belonging to a racially defined German nation increase. The Zionists of Czechoslovakia, encouraged by the government's recognition of Jewish nationality, continued to try and persuade their fellow Jews to consider themselves a separate Jewish nation, removed from the Czech–German nationality conflict.³⁶ Others saw no conflict in belonging simultaneously to both Zionist and Czech or German organizations.³⁷ In the 1930 census in Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia, of those who indicated Judaism as their religion, 36 percent chose Czechoslovak nationality, 31 percent chose Jewish, and 30 percent chose German,³⁸ with Jews in

³⁵ Emil Utitz, quoted in Scott Spector, *Prague Territories: National Conflict and Cultural Innovation in Franz Kafka's Fin De Siècle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 3.

³⁶ Lichtenstein, “Making Jews at Home,” p. 7.

³⁷ See the example of Karel Fleischmann in Kateřina Čapková, “Tschechisch, Deutsch, Jüdisch—wo ist der Unterschied? Zur Komplexität von nationalen Identitäten der böhmischen Juden 1918–1938,” in Marek Nekula and Walter Koschmal (eds.), *Juden zwischen Deutschen und Tschechen: sprachliche und kulturelle Identitäten in Böhmen 1800–1945* (Munich: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2006), pp. 73–84, see p. 73.

³⁸ Livia Rothkirchen, “The Jews of Bohemia and Moravia: 1938–1945,” in Avigdor Dagan, Gertrude Hirschler, and Lewis Weiner (eds.), *The Jews of*

Moravia much more likely to claim Jewish nationality than those in Bohemia.³⁹

Religious practice among the Bohemian and Moravian Jews varied widely. Although some continued in orthodox observance of Jewish law, many observed only selected holidays, while thousands left Judaism completely, or converted to other faiths.⁴⁰ Instances of intermarriage also increased; of Jews who married between 1928 and 1933, 43 percent in Bohemia and 30 percent in Moravia married non-Jews.⁴¹ Geographically, they were also much more integrated with their non-Jewish neighbors than their Austrian counterparts. In 1934, the vast majority (92 percent) of Austria's 191,000 Jews lived in Vienna.⁴² In Bohemia, according to the 1930 census, approximately 50 percent of the province's 76,000 Jews lived in Prague; in Moravia, less than 30 percent of the province's 41,000 Jews lived in the capital city of Brno/Brünn.

Furthermore, most political organizations had Jewish members.⁴³ They participated actively in the public life of the state, where a democratic government remained in power right until the eve of the Second World War.

Czechoslovakia: Historical Studies and Surveys, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1984), pp. 3–74, see p. 12.

39 In Bohemia, 46 percent chose Czechoslovak, 31 percent German, and 20 percent Jewish nationality. In Moravia-Silesia, 52 percent chose Jewish, 29 percent German, and 18 percent Czechoslovak nationality. See Ezra Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), p. 159.

40 In March 1941, of the 74,417 Jews “by race” still in Bohemia and Moravia, 12,168 were not of Jewish faith. Of those, 46 percent were unaffiliated with any church. The next largest group, comprising 40 percent, were baptized Catholics. See Livia Rothkirchen, *The Jews of Bohemia and Moravia: Facing the Holocaust* (Lincoln and Jerusalem: University of Nebraska Press; Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2005), pp. 341, 92ff.

41 Kateřina Čapková, *Češi, Němci, Židé? Národní identita Židů v Čechách, 1918–1938* (Prague: Paseka, 2005), p. 21.

42 Gerhard Botz, “The Dynamics of Persecution in Austria, 1938–45,” in Wistrich, *Austrians and Jews in the Twentieth Century*, pp. 199–219, see p. 201.

43 Exceptions included specifically Christian parties such as the Catholic People's Party and pro-Hitler parties, including the Sudeten German Party and Czech fascist parties, such as the Flag (Vlajka).

In both Austria and Czechoslovakia, Jews took part in the vibrant cultural life of the inter-war years that generated the theatrical influences we see in the Terezín/Theresienstadt scripts. In Bohemia and Moravia, they had every opportunity to participate in the cultural boom that followed the establishment of the new state. Austrian Jews' investment in cultural pursuits may have increased, as Michael Pollak suggests, during this period "when all political pursuits appeared to be in vain."⁴⁴

In Austrian theater of the period immediately following the First World War, social and political critique did not play a prominent role.⁴⁵ Unlike the Berlin cabarets, which were marked by biting satire, Viennese cabarets indulged primarily in harmless humor and *Austattungsrevues*—comic and musical acts linked by a common theme with extravagant sets and costumes. Comic duo Karl Farkas and Fritz Grünbaum created a tremendously popular new form of musical revue that combined the visual spectacle of the *Austattungsrevue* with the verbal humor of the literary cabaret.

With the rise of Nazi Germany and Austrofascism, cabarets and revues became more pointed. Stella Kadmon's literary cabaret Dear Augustin (*Der liebe Augustin*) began to address the political situation with texts by anti-fascist writers, including Kurt Tucholsky and Erich Kästner. Rudolf Spitz's *The Gooseberry* (*Die Stachelbeere*) presented politically aggressive one-act plays and playlets. ABC, politically the sharpest among the cabarets, featured the works of authors like Jura Soyfer, who satirized the National Socialists and the Austrofascists. Unlike in Nazi Germany, where all criticism was repressed, censorship in Austria was neither as extreme nor as effective.⁴⁶ Theater artists developed great skill in

⁴⁴ Michael Pollak, "Cultural Innovation and Social Identity in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna," in Ivar Oxaal, Michael Pollak, and Gerhard Botz (eds.), *Jews, Anti-Semitism, and Culture in Vienna* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987), pp. 59–74, see p. 71.

⁴⁵ Jürgen Doll, *Theater im roten Wien. Vom sozialdemokratischen Agitprop zum dialektischen Theater Jura Soyfers* (Vienna, Cologne and Weimar: Böhlau, 1997).

⁴⁶ Horst Jarka, "Einleitung," in Horst Jarka (ed.), *Jura Soyfer. Das Gesamtwerk* (Vienna, Munich and Zurich: Europaverlag, 1980), pp. 13–27, see p. 18.

hiding their critical views between the lines to avoid drawing the attention of the censor while still reaching their intended audience.

Specifically Jewish theater and cabaret thrived in Vienna and several theaters offered programs of melodrama, operettas, comedies, and revues. Yiddish-language theaters performed Zionist revues, and Oscar Teller and Victor Schlesinger founded a specifically Zionist cabaret. The Jewish Culture Theater (Jüdisches Kulturtheater) offered a contemporary and artistically ambitious program that included Yiddish classics.⁴⁷

In Czechoslovakia, Czech-language theater embraced the influences of international artistic movements. For example, the directorial style of Karel Hugo Hilar, head of drama at the Czech National Theater, combined elements of expressionism and realism, and his productions, including stagings of works by Karel Čapek, won accolades across Europe.⁴⁸ In 1927, artists who were to have tremendous influence on Czech-language theatrical performance in Terezín/Theresienstadt burst onto the scene. Law students Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich became overnight sensations with their *Věst Pocket Revue*, a series of short, satiric scenes with music, which opened in April 1927, and ran for over 200 performances.⁴⁹ As their style developed during the 1930s, the plots of their performances became more unified, but they maintained the original combination of literate good humor, commentary on local and international events, and jazz music by their legendary pianist and composer, Jaroslav Ježek. Especially popular were their improvised sequences delivered directly to the audience, the *forbiny* (from German *Vorbühne*, forestage), where they satirized, among other things, Czech nationalist chauvinism. Also in April 1927, young director E. F. Burian presented his first “voiceband” performance,

⁴⁷ For an excellent description of Jewish theater in Vienna, see Brigitte Dalinger, “Verloschene Sterne”: *Geschichte des jüdischen Theaters in Wien* (Vienna: Picus Verlag, 1998).

⁴⁸ Jarka Burian, *Modern Czech Theatre: Reflector and Conscience of a Nation* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), pp. 24–8, 38.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

a striking choral form which blended complex recitation and non-verbal sounds with rhythmic, syncopated music.⁵⁰

Czech theaters became increasingly politicized as Nazi Germany grew more powerful. Karel Čapek, who had concentrated on fiction rather than playwriting for 10 years, returned to the national stage in the late 1930s with two devastating plays foreshadowing the horrors of war: *The White Plague* (*Bílá nemoc*) and *The Mother* (*Matka*).⁵¹ Voskovec and Werich, now running their own venue, the Liberated Theater (*Osvobozené divadlo*), performed a series of increasingly pointed yet optimistic satirical reviews. Their two final productions in 1937–38, *Heavy Barbara* (*Těžká Barbora*) and *The Eyesore* (*Pěst na oko*), played to packed houses, and reinforced audience morale with their faith in the strength of ordinary but united people.⁵² Burian founded his own theater, D34, in the fall of 1933.⁵³ One of his most remarkable performances was *Military Service* (*Vojna*), an anti-war piece created from a montage of Czech folk texts, performed with songs and dances. In the spring of 1938, he started developing a new performance titled *Esther*. This work, based on the sympathetic portrayal of Jewish characters in a Czech-language folk play dating back to the eighteenth century, soon became politically dangerous.

German-language theater continued to thrive in Bohemia and Moravia after the First World War, especially in Prague, Brno/Brünn and in the Sudetenland. In the 1920s, there was little artistic cooperation between Czech-language and German-language theaters. Most exchanges took place internationally with other German-speaking countries and guest artists and troupes visited from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. Since most provincial German-language theaters saw themselves as bastions of high culture, avant-garde performances were rarely imported. For

⁵⁰ Burian, *Modern Czech Theatre*, p. 43.

⁵¹ *The White Plague* was staged in 1937 and *The Mother* in 1938, both at the National Theater in Prague.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁵³ D34 stands for *divadlo* (theater) and the season in which the troupe was founded. The number was updated every year.

example, although troupes from Vienna performed contemporary scripts, they rarely used the latest methods of staging. Viennese cabaret artists like Farkas and Grünbaum, however, played in Czech cities, and brought the latest German-language comic styles with them. The New German Theater in Prague, founded in 1888, offered a rich program, their specialty being operas and operettas.

Specifically Jewish theater did not play as significant a cultural role in Bohemia and Moravia as it did in Vienna. Yiddish troupes from Vienna, Berlin, and Bucharest toured the larger cities, but a single traveling troupe based in Slovakia was the first and only Czechoslovak troupe playing in Yiddish during the interwar period.⁵⁴ A few German-language Jewish troupes were established, but they failed to gain a permanent foothold.⁵⁵

After Hitler's rise to power in 1933, many German-Jewish artists and political dissidents sought refuge in Austria and Czechoslovakia. In Austria, these artists created a boom in the number of small cabarets in Vienna.⁵⁶ In Prague, the New German Theater was especially enriched by this influx of talent and became a center of democratic German-language culture. A few of the newly arrived artists formed their own anti-fascist troupes in Czechoslovakia; for example, Hedda Zinner's Studio 34 was heavily influenced by Burian's D34 and his voiceband recitation style. Politically oriented artists and their troupes from other countries also visited Czechoslovakia. Perhaps the best-known was Erika Mann's Swiss exile cabaret, The Peppermill (*Die Pfeffermühle*), which performed its antifascist programs in Czechoslovakia in 1935

⁵⁴ Brigitte Dalinger, "Jiddisches Theater—Ein Grenzgänger zwischen den Sprachen und Kulturen," *Maske und Kothurn* 47(3–4) (2002): 89–100, see 92, 96.

⁵⁵ The Young Jewish Stage of Brno (*Jungjüdische Bühne Brünn*), which identified itself as a "German-language literary theater with Zionism as a doctrine," remained open from 1929 to 1935. The Jewish Chamber Theater (*Jüdischen Kammerspiele*), established in Prague in 1935 and performing in German, lasted only a few months. See Ursula Stamberg, "Das Theaterleben der Jüdischen Bevölkerung Brünns," *Maske und Kothurn* 47(3–4) (2002): 67–81, see 78; and Dalinger, "Jiddisches Theater": 98.

⁵⁶ According to laws of the time, theaters with fewer than 50 seats did not need a license.

and 1936.⁵⁷ The threat of National Socialism eventually led democratically minded Czech- and German-speaking artists to collaborate. The Club of Czech and German Stage Artists (Klub der tschechischen und deutschen Bühnenkünstler) was founded in Prague in 1936 and branches were established in Ostrava/Ostrau and Brno/Brünn. However, rising tensions between Czech and German speakers in Czechoslovakia became increasingly difficult to resolve as Hitler's power grew and as more and more German speakers in the border regions began to demand that the Sudetenland be annexed to Nazi Germany.

Austria and Czechoslovakia soon ceased to be a safe havens for Jewish artists. Austria was absorbed into the German Reich in the so-called *Anschluss* (annexation) on March 12, 1938. On September 30, 1938, representatives of England, France, and Italy signed the Munich Pact, yielding to Hitler's demand to link the Sudetenland to the Reich. On March 15, 1939, the German army invaded the remainder of Czech territory, and Bohemia and Moravia became a German-administered "Protectorate."⁵⁸ The occupation had begun.

Emigration was still possible after the *Anschluss* and from the Protectorate. There were approximately 206,000 Jews "by race" living in Austria in March 1938. By the end of November 1939, over 126,000 had emigrated, but the outbreak of war severely curtailed further opportunities to leave.⁵⁹ By June 1941, due to emigration and deportations, there were only 44,000 Jews left in Vienna. Almost half were over 60 years of age, and two-thirds were

⁵⁷ Romana Bečvová, "Beteiligt euch—es geht um eure Erde'. Erika Manns politisch-satirisches Kabarett 'Die Pfeffermühle' in der Tschechoslowakei," *Brücken: Germanistisches Jahrbuch Tschechien–Slowakei* 16 (2008): 229–50.

⁵⁸ Czechoslovakia lost most of its Silesian territory when the Sudetenland was ceded to Nazi Germany. In March 1939, Slovakia became a nominally independent state and Subcarpathian Ruthenia became a Hungarian territory.

⁵⁹ Nevertheless, another 24,500 managed to emigrate even during the war. See Botz, "The Dynamics of Persecution in Austria," p. 206.

women.⁶⁰ In March 1939, there were approximately 118,000 people in the Protectorate classified as Jews according to the Nazi racial laws; only 26,000 of them managed to emigrate before mass deportations began in the fall of 1941.⁶¹ Those who remained represented a fairly normal distribution of age and gender.

THE TEREZÍN/THERESIENSTADT GHETTO, 1941–45

The Terezín/Theresienstadt ghetto served several functions in the Nazis' plans to exterminate the European Jews: as a transit camp, where Jews from several countries were gathered before being sent on to slave-labor and death camps; as a destination to which elderly and privileged Jews were deported; as a decimation camp, where thousands of prisoners died of "natural causes;" and as a "model ghetto" that the Nazis displayed to visitors from organizations such as the International Red Cross. The relative importance of these functions evolved over the course of the war, and changes in priorities affected all aspects of life in the ghetto, from the mortality rate to the cultural life.

The first prisoners in the Terezín/Theresienstadt ghetto were Jews from Bohemia and Moravia. In October 1941, representatives of the Prague Jewish Community, forced into negotiations with the Nazis, were made to suggest a location for a Jewish ghetto. Jewish leaders did not favor Terezín/Theresienstadt because it was far too small to hold the almost 80,000 Jews who remained in the Protectorate. However, when the Nazis selected Terezín/Theresienstadt from among various possibilities, the leaders hoped it would be a site where Jews could wait out the war, and believed Nazi assurances that they would be allowed to run it as a relatively independent Jewish town.⁶²

⁶⁰ Niklas, ". . . die schönste Stadt der Welt," p. 32.

⁶¹ Rothkirchen, "The Jews of Bohemia and Moravia," p. 59.

⁶² Ruth Bondy, "*Elder of the Jews*": *Jakob Edelstein of Theresienstadt* (New York: Grove Press, 1989), p. 241.

The precise factors that led the Nazis to select Terezín/Theresienstadt are not known, but the site offered one obvious advantage: it was easy to guard. Terezín/Theresienstadt was established as a fortress complex in the late eighteenth century to defend what were then the northern borders of Austria against the Prussians. From the air, the complex looks like two towns, separated by the river Ohře/Eger, and each surrounded by massive, star-shaped fortress walls. The smaller of the two, called the Small Fortress, was already in use by the summer of 1940 as a Gestapo prison, mainly for political dissidents.⁶³ The Large Fortress, selected as the location for the ghetto, held a peacetime population of 7,000 to 8,000 soldiers and civilians. In the fall of 1941, thousands of Czech civilians were still living there.

PHASE I: IMPRISONMENT IN THE BARRACKS

The Prague Jewish Community, ordered to prepare Terezín/Theresienstadt to house thousands of prisoners, sent transports of young men there on November 24 and December 4, 1941. The Nazis promised that those who had “volunteered” for these so-called AK I and AK II transports (from German *Aufbaukommando*, literally “building commando”) would receive certain benefits (weekends at home, the transfer of their salaries to their families, etc.) which, however, never materialized. The core of the Jewish leadership of the ghetto, the so-called *Ältestenrat*, arrived with the transport of December 4. The *Ältestenrat* was headed by the *Judenältester*, Jakob Edelstein, the former deputy head of the Jewish community. As the members of AK I had already realized, the reality the leaders faced was markedly different from that the Nazis had promised. Rather than running an independent city, they would report to a Nazi commandant while taking on the

⁶³ Jews who were sent to the Small Fortress as political dissidents or for violating rules in the ghetto were treated much more harshly than the other prisoners. See, for example, the narrative of the Catholic priest Josef Miklík, *Vzpomínky z Terezína* (Prague: C.A.T., 1945).

overwhelming responsibility of day-to-day operations of the ghetto. This responsibility, however, gave Jewish leaders some room to maneuver in terms of trying to create a livable situation for the prisoners during what they all expected to be a very short war.

In the first period of the ghetto's history, which lasted from its founding till June 1942, only Jews from Bohemia and Moravia were deported to Terezín/Theresienstadt. During this period, the non-Jewish civilian population still lived in their homes but contact with them was strictly forbidden. The Jewish inmates were imprisoned in several large barracks. They left only for work, guarded by Czech gendarmes, former members of the Czechoslovak army whom the SS hired for most duties that involved direct contact with the prisoners. According to survivor testimony, most, but not all, gendarmes behaved decently towards them, treating them as fellow Czechs.

Shortly after the first transports arrived, a separate women's barracks was established and visits between men and women were forbidden. Families were divided; younger children and girls lived with their mothers, and boys aged 12 and older lived in the men's barracks. Separate children's rooms were soon established in the barracks and instructors from the Zionist youth movements were placed in charge of them.

The most shocking events to take place during this period were the executions carried out in January and February, 1942. Sixteen men who had violated prohibitions by trying to send letters to their families and buy food in the Terezín/Theresienstadt shops were sentenced to death by hanging. These were the only executions carried out in the ghetto itself. Later offenders were punished by being transferred to the Small Fortress, where most of them perished.

Jews of the Protectorate had hoped that they would at least stay in their own country, but in vain. Already in January 1942, transports began to leave Terezín/Theresienstadt. Their destination was not revealed. The prisoners only knew that the trains headed east. They lived in fear of these deportations to the unknown, even

though, until the very end of the war, very few knew the full truth about extermination camps and gas chambers.⁶⁴

The first cultural activities of the ghetto—simple and improvised programs of songs, poems, and sketches—began to take place in the barracks immediately after the first transports of prisoners arrived. Jewish leaders, apparently in an attempt to legalize these performances and ensure that prisoners would not be punished for them, requested and received permission from the Nazi commandant. They announced in the Daily Orders of December 28, 1941, that *Kamaradschaftsabende* (friendship evenings) could be held on the condition that the program be submitted in advance for approval.⁶⁵ As the cultural activities continued to expand, the Jewish leadership decided, in February 1942, to establish an administrative body to oversee them. They appointed as director of the new *Freizeitgestaltung* (Office for the Administration of Leisure Time) a young rabbi named Erich Weiner.⁶⁶

PHASE II: CREATING THE “MODEL GHETTO”

After the last members of the civilian population left Terezín/Theresienstadt, the second phase of the ghetto’s history began. On July 6, 1942, the barracks were opened, and the prisoners occupied the entire area inside the Large Fortress, except the buildings and spaces occupied by the SS.⁶⁷ The ghetto was guarded from the outside by the Czech gendarmes. Inside Terezín/Theresienstadt, the *Ghettowache*, a police force manned by the prisoners themselves, enforced rules and maintained order.

⁶⁴ See, for example, the testimony of Rabbi Dr. Richard Feder, *Židovská tragédie: Dějství poslední* (Kolín: Lusk, 1947), pp. 103–4.

⁶⁵ This order is quoted in Eva Šormová, *Divadlo v Terezíně 1941/1945* (Ustí nad Labem: Severočeské nakladatelství, 1973), p. 22.

⁶⁶ Bondy, “Elder of the Jews,” p. 291. For an account written by Weiner himself, see “*Freizeitgestaltung* in Theresienstadt,” pp. 209–17.

⁶⁷ Fewer than 30 members of the SS were assigned to Terezín/Theresienstadt during the whole time of the ghetto’s existence. See Tomáš Fedorovič, “Neue Erkenntnisse über die SS-Angehörigen im Ghetto Theresienstadt,” in Jaroslava Milotová, Michael Wögerbauer, and Anna Hájková (eds.), *Theresienstädter Studien und Dokumente 2006* (Prague: Sefer, 2007), pp. 234–50, see p. 236.

During the day, the prisoners were allowed to move about the town, but an evening curfew was strictly enforced. Men and women still lived separately, but visits were now allowed. Most children now lived in specially established children's homes in separate barracks. The education of Jewish children was formally banned, but their caretakers were supposed to keep them occupied with singing, games, crafts, and cultural activities. In practice, the cultural activities often constituted a curriculum that varied widely, based on the values of each instructor. As Ruth Bondy describes, "Every instructor educated his class (about forty children) in his image, and according to his world view: graduates of the Zionist youth movement did it in the spirit of Zionism; Communists looked toward a socialist revolution; Czech nationalists, toward love of the homeland."⁶⁸

In the summer of 1942, the character of Terezín/Theresienstadt changed again as Jews from other countries were deported to the ghetto. The first transport from Berlin arrived on June 2, 1942. Transports from German cities continued to arrive for months.⁶⁹ The basic composition of the population changed, in terms not only of nationality but also of age: the German-Jewish prisoners were substantially older than Czech-Jewish prisoners. Many of them had been told that Terezín/Theresienstadt was a spa town where they could live out their days in comfort if they agreed to sign a housing contract that ceded all their property to the Reich. Almost all the Austrian Jews were deported from Vienna during a four-month period. From June 21 to October 10, 1942, 13 transports brought almost 14,000 prisoners; their average age was 69.⁷⁰

Completely unprepared for the conditions in which they found themselves, the elderly German and Austrian Jews quickly

⁶⁸ Bondy, "Elder of the Jews," p. 310.

⁶⁹ Karel Lagus and Josef Polák, *Město za mřížemi* (Prague: Naše vojsko, 1964), pp. 337–41.

⁷⁰ After January 1943, a further 1,340 Austrian Jews were deported. See Niklas, ". . . die schönste Stadt der Welt," p. 90.

succumbed to exhaustion, hunger, illness, and despair. The mortality rate, which until that point had seldom exceeded 10 per day, increased drastically. Almost 4,000 prisoners died in the month of September 1942 alone, when the ghetto temporarily reached an unsustainable maximum population of almost 60,000 prisoners.⁷¹ By the end of 1942, the rising mortality rate and further outgoing transports had reduced the population to an extremely overcrowded but sustainable level of between 40,000 and 50,000 prisoners. In January 1943, Dr. Paul Epstein from Berlin was appointed the new *Judenältester*. Edelstein and later Otto Zucker continued to represent Czech-Jewish interests as members of the *Ältestenrat*.

Although circumstances in the ghetto had stabilized somewhat by the end of 1942 and prisoners were allowed to move about freely in the town—which represented a vast improvement over confinement in the barracks—living conditions remained harsh. People were cramped into barracks and civilian homes, sleeping on roughly hewn wooden bunks, with only a small shelf for personal items. There was no privacy. Food, prepared by the “royalty” of the ghetto—the cooks—in several large kitchens, was distributed according to the prisoner’s age and type of work (young people and those assigned to manual labor received increased rations). Lack of water was a grave problem. The capacity of the local waterworks, built to sustain a city of less than 10,000, could not meet the needs of a population four to five times that number. Showering was rationed by a ticket system; maintaining a basic level of hygiene was difficult; fleas, lice, and bedbugs plagued the prisoners and increased the danger of epidemics.

Tensions among the prisoners made the situation worse. For example, some of the Protectorate Jews resented the German and Austrian prisoners for overpopulating “their” ghetto; the newcomers resented Czech control of some of the more advantageous

71 Ludmila Chládková, *The Terezín Ghetto* (Prague: Naše vojsko, 1991), p. 48.

Freizeitgestaltung:

K/10	Leitung	Moritz Henschel
K/10	Administrative Leitung	Rab. Dr. Weiner
K/11	Sekretariat	Dr. Hans Mautner
K/12	Programmbearbeitung	Anna Zelenka
K/13	Finanzgeb. u. Eintrittskart.	Dr. Georg Kohn
K/14	Bezirksarbeit	
K/15	Probenplan	Anna Zelenka
K/10	Technische Abteilung	Otto Inebtor
K/21	Materialbeschaffung	Dr. Ed. Winter
K/22	Entwurf u. Dekoration	Architekt Franz Zelenka
K/23	Säleverwaltung	Dr. Friedner Hans
K/30	Theater	Kamill Hoffmann
K/31	Deutsches Theater	Curt Weiss
K/32	Tschechisches Theater	Gustav Schorsch
K/34	Kabarett	Kurt Geron
K/35	Blockveranstaltungen	Myra Strauss
K/40	Musiksektion	Hans Krasa
K/41	Opern- u. Vokalmusik	Rafaal Schächter
K/42	Instrumentalmusik	Gideon Klein
K/43	Kaffeehausmusik	Paul Libensky
K/44	Instrumentenverwaltg.	Paul Libensky
K/50	Vortragswesen	Dr. Franz Kahn
K/51	Allgemeine Vorträge	Prof. Dr. Emil Witz
K/52	Jüdische Vorträge	Dr. Franz Kahn
K/53	Fremdsprachige Vorträge	Prof. Dr. Max Adler
K/54	Hebraika	Prof. Keetenbaum
K/55	Jochah	Isidor Jochah
K/56	Frauenvorträge	Hana Steiner
K/60	Zentralbücherei	Prof. Dr. Emil Witz
K/61	Allgemeine Abteilung	
K/62	Jüdische Abteilung	
K/63	Hebräische Abteilung	
K/64	Fachliteratur	
K/65	Bibliophile Abteilung	
K/70	Sportveranstaltungen	Dr. Edenek Winter
K/71	Fussball	Ota Hermann
K/72	Valleyball	Gustav Straschitz
K/73	Handball	Franz Kohn
K/74	Basketball	Rudolf Klein
K/75	Tischtennis	Kurt Löbl

IMAGE 1.1 An organizational chart of the *Freizeitgestaltung* after June 1943. Divisions K/31–5 are German theater, Czech theater, cabaret, and the *Blockveranstaltungen*.

Courtesy of the Terezín Memorial.

jobs, especially those associated with the food supply. The diversity of the ghetto increased further in 1943 when transports from Holland and Denmark began to arrive as well. Pre-war class tensions also carried over into the ghetto and were exacerbated by structures of privilege. Certain prisoners, for instance, were designated by the SS or by Jewish leaders as “prominent,” and given preferential treatment, including better housing and increased rations.⁷² Although many prisoners realized that both the national and class tensions were deliberately encouraged by the Nazis to keep them divided against each other, this realization was not enough to keep the tensions at bay.

Perhaps the most traumatic event during this phase of the ghetto’s existence was the census. In November 1943, when irregularities were discovered in the population records, Edelstein was accused of hiding evidence of escapes. He was arrested and, on November 11, 1943, almost 40,000 people were made to march out of the ghetto onto a nearby field. They were forced to stand outside through the entire cold and damp day, not sure if they were to be counted or killed. Many prisoners died of exposure and of resulting illnesses in the weeks that followed.⁷³

In spite of these hardships, Terezín/Theresienstadt cannot be classified among the most terrible extermination and slave-labor camps that the Nazis built. Although all adult prisoners were obligated to work and a small number of them were assigned to workshops manufacturing goods for the German war effort, most were occupied in jobs that supported the daily operations of the ghetto.

72 The “prominent” prisoners in the ghetto were divided into two groups. Group A was named by the SS; these were usually internationally known individuals or former German military officers and their families. Group B was named by the *Ältestenrat* and approved by the SS; most were professors and representatives of Jewish organizations. See Daniela Řepová, “Emil Utitz a Terezín,” in Jaroslava Milotová and Anna Lorencová (eds.), *Terezínské studie a dokumenty 2003* (Prague: Sefer, 2003), pp. 169–212, see p. 184.

73 For details, see Bondy, “Elder of the Jews,” pp. 398–9, and H. G. Adler, *Theresienstadt: das Antlitz einer Zwangsgemeinschaft* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2005), pp. 158–61.

Although over 33,000 prisoners died in the ghetto, there were no gas chambers. In the small crematorium outside the fortress walls their bodies were burned and their ashes placed in individual cardboard urns, which their loved ones hoped to take home after the war. The prisoners were not confronted in Terezín/Theresienstadt with the horror of mechanized mass murder—a horror that many of them faced after their deportation to other camps.

A slow improvement in living conditions was due in part to a new role assigned to the ghetto by the Nazi propaganda machine. In November 1942, the International Committee of the Red Cross, prompted by the World Jewish Congress, began requesting permission to inspect the concentration camps. After 466 Danish Jews were deported to Terezín/Theresienstadt in October 1943, Danish officials also asked to see the ghetto.⁷⁴ The Nazis realized that a carefully orchestrated visit could help them refute reports on the true situation in the camps. Berlin officials agreed to an inspection, but Terezín/Theresienstadt was first thoroughly prepared for its role as a “Jewish settlement area.”⁷⁵

The most fruitful months of the cultural life occurred during a period of relative stability in the ghetto, between November 1942 and September 1944.⁷⁶ Several “stores” had been opened in September 1942 that offered an extremely limited selection of goods and services. Nevertheless they made the ghetto seem slightly less prison-like.⁷⁷ In December 1942, a “coffeehouse” was established where prisoners, according to a ticket system, could sit for a few hours with a cup of chicory coffee and listen to music played by

74 Bondy, “Elder of the Jews,” pp. 340, 391.

75 The Nazis began to use this term in March 1944. See Anna Hyndráková, Raisa Machatková, and Jaroslava Milotová (eds.), *Acta Theresiana*, sv. 1: *Denní rozkazy Rady starších a Sdělení židovské samosprávy Terezín 1941–1945* (Prague: Sefer, 2003), pp. 448, 226ff.

76 Outgoing transports did not cease during this period. In May 1944, for instance, transports sent more than 7,500 prisoners to Auschwitz to ensure that Terezín did not look overpopulated.

77 See *Verschleißstellen* (glossary); Bondy, “Elder of the Jews,” pp. 324, 333; and Hyndráková et al., *Acta Theresiana*, p. 226.



IMAGE 1.2 The census on November 11, 1943. By F. Bloch.
Courtesy of Yad Vashem.

their fellow prisoners.⁷⁸ Now that public spaces had been established and the prisoners were no longer confined to their barracks, cultural undertakings took on a more public character as well.⁷⁹ They were allowed to function and, later in this period, even actively supported by the Nazis in accordance with their propaganda plans. However, they sprang, above all, from the needs of

⁷⁸ Chládková, *Terezín Ghetto*, p. 48.

⁷⁹ Bořivoj Srba, "Divadlo za mřížemi: Projevy české divadelní tvořivosti v pracovních, internačních a koncentračních táborech a věznicích nacistické Třetí říše," *Divadelní revue* 6(1) (1995): 9–27, see 11.

the prisoners themselves. A sample of the offerings for February 1943 provides an idea of the diversity of identities, loyalties, and affinities served by the *Freizeitgestaltung's* programming:

- **Concerts:** Jewish liturgical music, opera arias, *Journey though the Land of Music* (premiere), Raphael Schächter's Hebrew Choir (premiere)—20 performances altogether.
- **Operas:** *The Bartered Bride*, *Rigoletto* (premiere, the cultural department's anniversary performance), *The Marriage of Figaro* (premiere)—10 performances altogether.
- **Theater:** Wolker's *The Tomb* (premiere); a revue, *Youngsters not Admitted* (premiere); a cabaret within the framework of *Stolen Theater*; Cocteau's *The Human Voice*; opera evening; Thoren's *Cabaret with Skits*; evening of songs from Erben's *Flower Bouquet*; puppet theater; *Women's Dictatorship*—50 performances altogether.⁸⁰

The theater offerings on this list, performed on various small stages around the ghetto, reveal the wide variety of the prisoner's national, linguistic, cultural, and even political affiliations. For example, the author of *The Tomb* (*Hrob*), Jiří Wolker (1900–24), was a Czech avant-garde writer who had been adopted by the communists as one of their own. *Youngsters not Admitted* (*Für Jugendliche Verboten*) was an evening of slightly racy comic songs and sketches in German; and the *Stolen Theater* (*Vyšlojzované divadlo*) was apparently named after the Liberated Theater of Voskovec and Werich.⁸¹ *Flower Bouquet* (*Kytice*) by Karel Jaromír Erben (1811–70) was a Czech classic from the National Revival period, and *Women's Dictatorship* (*Diktatur der Frauen*) was a German-language three-act comedy from the early 1930s.⁸²

⁸⁰ Bondy, "Elder of the Jews," p. 365.

⁸¹ Souvenir posters for *The Tomb* and for *Youngsters not Admitted* have been preserved. The *Stolen Theater* appears in a list of Czech-language works performed in the ghetto. See the Terezín Memorial, inv. nos. PT 4306, PT 3847, and PT 3862.

⁸² See the Terezín Memorial, inv. nos. PT 4304 and PT 3845.

The *Freizeitgestaltung* continued to expand; an undated organizational chart preserved in the Terezín Memorial lists more than 30 divisions, including German theater, Czech theater, cabaret, opera and vocal music, instrumental music, lectures in different languages, and chess and several sports, including soccer and table tennis.⁸³ In this period, the *Freizeitgestaltung* could officially employ artists and thus spare them from other forms of labor. In rare cases it even requested specific performers to be exempted from outgoing transports.⁸⁴ Its administrators scheduled the limited number of available performance and rehearsal spaces, distributed tickets, and submitted lists of works to the Nazis for censorship before performance. Performances also continued to take place in the barracks, outside of official channels.

A *Stadtverschönerung* (city beautification) in preparation for the Red Cross inspection was ordered to begin in December 1943. Throughout the spring of 1944 the renovation of the ghetto was carried out, mostly through the labor of the prisoners themselves.⁸⁵ The long-awaited visit of the commission, which included three international representatives—two Danish and one Swiss—took place on June 23, 1944. The visitors were accompanied by several SS officers, representatives from the Reich Ministry of International Affairs and from the German Red Cross. The only prisoner included in the contingent was *Judenältester* Epstein, who had received the title of “mayor” for the day and was only allowed to speak with the members of the commission in the presence of the SS. They followed a prepared path through Terezín/Theresienstadt with stops at the bakery, the bank, a performance of the children’s opera *Brundibár*, and a few more sites of interest.⁸⁶ The members of the commission, in spite of certain doubts,

83 See the Terezín Memorial, inv. no. PT 3768.

84 See, for example, the “protection lists” and requests to remove individual artists and their families from scheduled transports in the Theresienstadt Collection, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, file O.64/23.

85 Chládková, *Terezín Ghetto*, p. 50.

86 Adler, *Theresienstadt*, pp. 172–8.

expressed their general approval of the standard of living in the ghetto. Dr. M. Rossel, the Swiss representative, expressed surprise in his official report over the long delay in granting the Red Cross request to visit Terezín/Theresienstadt, since there was clearly nothing to hide.⁸⁷

Apparently inspired by the success of the visit, the Nazis created a “documentary” film about the ghetto. Prisoner Kurt Geron, a well-known German-Jewish actor and director of the inter-war period, was ordered to direct it.⁸⁸ A partially edited version of the film, created from the footage shot in August and September 1944, has been preserved, and offers a last glimpse of hundreds of prisoners.

At the end of September 1944, the period of relative stability came abruptly to an end. A wave of transports from September 28 to October 28 carried away 18,000 people, including the majority of prisoners of productive working age and almost all the active participants in the cultural life of the ghetto. Epstein was arrested and executed, most members of the *Ältestenrat* were deported, and Rabbi Dr. Benjamin Murmelstein, a leader of the Viennese Jewish community, became the new *Judenältester*.

PHASE III: AFTER THE MASS TRANSPORTS

After these transports, the ghetto entered its last phase of existence. Only 11,000 prisoners remained, many of them elderly and ill. Those who were healthy and capable of work—mostly women—struggled to manage the most essential operations of the ghetto. The situation began to stabilize at the end of 1944. Incoming transports continued. Jews from Hungary and Slovakia arrived in

⁸⁷ Bondy, “Elder of the Jews,” p. 439.

⁸⁸ Karel Margry, “Das Konzentrationslager als Idylle: Theresienstadt: Ein Dokumentar-Film aus dem Jüdischen Siedlungsgebiet,” in Fritz Bauer Institut (ed.), *Auschwitz. Geschichte, Rezeption und Wirkung: Jahrbuch 1996 zur Geschichte und Wirkung des Holocaust* (Frankfurt and New York: Campus, 1996), pp. 319–52.

the ghetto along with the last Czech, German, and Austrian Jews who had been protected until then for being married to “Aryans.” Slowly, even the cultural life began to revive. It was clear that the war would end soon and all thoughts and hopes were pinned on that moment.

Nazi leaders, also aware of the impending defeat, negotiated the release of some of the prisoners to neutral countries. One thousand, two hundred were sent by train to Switzerland in February 1945, and the Danish Jews were released on April 15 to the Swedish Red Cross.⁸⁹ The ghetto, however, faced a last, terrible trial: on April 20, 1945, death marchers began to arrive in Terezín/Theresienstadt—starved and ill, narrating horrific accounts of their experiences. Some of the Terezín/Theresienstadt prisoners died just days before, or shortly after, the liberation, from illnesses they contracted while nursing these prisoners.

The last days of the ghetto were marked by chaotic events as the SS lost their power over the prisoners’ lives and the Red Cross took over administration of Terezín/Theresienstadt. On May 3, 1945, the SS stopped trying to prevent escapes, and on May 4, a group of Czech doctors and nurses arrived to help battle the typhus epidemic that had broken out after the arrival of the death marchers. The next day the last of the SS officers left. On May 8, Soviet tanks, on their way to Prague, went through Terezín/Theresienstadt. The ghetto was liberated.⁹⁰ Two days later the Soviets took control and began repatriating the prisoners, but when the typhus epidemic could not be brought under control, they imposed a two-week quarantine. Repatriation resumed at the end of May. The last of the former prisoners left Terezín/Theresienstadt in August 1945.⁹¹

89 For an account of the Swiss transport see Vojtěch Blodig, “Poslední fáze ve vývoji terezínského ghetta,” in Vojtěch Blodig and Miroslav Karný (eds.), *Terezín v konečném řešení židovské otázky* (Prague: Logos, 1992), pp. 182–90, see pp. 185–6.

90 *Ibid.*, p. 190.

91 Chládková, *Terezín Ghetto*, p. 53.

Of the approximately 15,000 Austrian Jews deported to Terezín/Theresienstadt, only about 1,700 survived in the ghetto or in other camps.⁹² Of the approximately 74,000 Jews deported from Bohemia and Moravia, about 7,000 were liberated in the ghetto; of those who were deported “to the east,” that is, to various concentration and slave-labor camps, only about 3,000 returned.⁹³

⁹² Niklas, “. . . *die schönste Stadt der Welt*,” p. 150.

⁹³ Of the 7,000 Czech Jews liberated in the ghetto, just over half had been deported in the last months of the war. See Rothkirchen, “The Jews of Bohemia and Moravia,” pp. 59–60.