

Avenues of Intellectual Resistance in the Ghetto Theresienstadt: Escape Through the Central Library, Books, and Reading

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The Ghetto Theresienstadt served as a façade behind which the Nazis attempted to hide the atrocities they were committing in other ghettos and concentration camps throughout Europe. As a result of Theresienstadt's unusual nature, the Nazis sanctioned certain cultural and intellectual activities in the camp. Consequently, there remains a considerable record of the interior lives and personal perspectives of Theresienstadt inmates. Through a close examination of Theresienstadt memoirs, diaries and histories, this paper explores the concept of intellectual resistance as a result of participation in some of the camp's intellectual activities – namely

the library, books and reading. These activities provided prisoners with a means of keeping their minds and imaginations active and alive, allowing them to escape temporarily from the horror surrounding them, as well as providing a means of maintaining hope and strength that increased their chances of survival. As of yet, no single work in English focuses on this topic. This paper strives to fill that void and to encourage librarians to consider the power of literacy and the significance of their responsibilities as providers of knowledge, story and information, particularly in times of terror or war.

Introduction

The enormity of the Holocaust is virtually incomprehensible to those of us who did not experience its horrors. No matter how many books we read, memorials we visit, or survivors we speak with, the experience is not one that can be understood. As a person who was born many years after the end of World War II, I feel that choosing to study and write about the Holocaust involves taking a risk that honest intentions may be misdirected, misplaced or misinterpreted. Therefore, I wish to clearly state my intentions. My aim in this research is to examine particular elements of the Holocaust, specifically from Theresienstadt, as a student of libraries, books and reading. The paper will bring together and discuss aspects of Theresienstadt in order to reinforce an already familiar concept, that of the power and influence of the written word.

Prisoners in World War II ghettos and concentration camps took advantage of various means to avert and resist Nazi attempts to humiliate and dehumanize them.

Visiting a library, reading books and sharing stories had significant and positive effects on many of the prisoners of Theresienstadt. Many scholars consider the cultural activities that took place in the ghettos and concentration camps to be manifestations of defiance and resistance, usually referred to as intellectual or spiritual resistance. While the concept of intellectual resistance through books and storytelling is not new, it has yet to be a decisive focus of Holocaust research (or has yet to be conducted in or translated into English).

Countless stories can be found from the body of Holocaust personal narratives that seriously undermine the notion that armed resistance is the only true, admirable or heroic form of resistance.

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The goal of this research is to gain a better understanding of the role that libraries, books and reading played in providing avenues of intellectual resistance in Theresienstadt. For the purposes of this paper, the selected themes will be examined through personal and historical records of the four years that Theresienstadt functioned as a Nazi concentration camp.

Terezín – Theresienstadt

In 1941, the Nazis began the transformation of Terezín, a fortress town 63 km from Prague, into the Ghetto Theresienstadt. The first group of Jews from Prague arrived in November 1941 (Berkley 1993, 23–25). Theresienstadt was more a concentration camp than a ghetto, and it served two main purposes for the Nazis. First, it was to be presented to the rest of the world as a “model ghetto,” an illusion which would demonstrate how “well” the Nazis were treating the Jews, should anyone ask. Second, it was to serve as a transfer point to death camps in the East, mainly to Auschwitz-Birkenau. In June of 1942, the Nazis forced all the Czech inhabitants of Terezín to abandon their town (Berkley 1993, 27). At this point the entire town became the concentration camp and remained so until its liberation by the Russians on May 5, 1945 (Huppert and Drori 2000, 17).

In contrast to other concentration camps, in Theresienstadt the Nazis attempted to maintain a skeletal semblance of a normal, functioning town. A Council of Elders made up of older, well-known Jews was appointed to run the camp and carry out the wishes and orders of the Nazis. There was a bank which controlled the worthless ghetto currency, a café where one could only order a coffee substitute and shops that sold nothing of any use. Theresienstadt was created in order to deceive. After a few strategic days of “embellishment” and “beautification,” the Nazis proved the success of their “model camp” with the June 23, 1944 visit of three Red Cross representatives, who left successfully deluded and relatively pleased and satisfied at the camp’s conditions.

Another motivation behind the creation of Theresienstadt was the Nazis’ concern that the disappearance of certain famous and renowned people would cause some international questioning. It was here that the Nazis “sent many of the

wealthy and prominent Jews from throughout the Reich. Many residents were famous artists, writers, musicians and scholars” (Ayer 1999, 38). For example the disappearance of Rabbi Leo Baeck was apparently a great source of concern throughout the Jewish world as he was such a well-known figure in Reform Judaism. Ironically, this concern dissipated when word got out that Rabbi Baeck was “safe” in Theresienstadt (Berkley 1993, 11). As the Nazis initially considered it prudent to keep these elite citizens alive, the model camp was the ideal place in which to imprison them. Enclosing so many outstanding people in such a small space had the unforeseen effect of greatly enhancing the cultural and educational possibilities within the camp.

Literature review

Several general histories of Theresienstadt were indispensable in the research process for this paper: *Ghetto Theresienstadt* by Zdenek Lederer, *Terezín*, edited by František Ehrmann and *Hitler’s Gift: The Story of Theresienstadt*, by George E. Berkley.

Five websites provided significant information for my research for this paper: the Terezín Memorial (URL: <http://www.pamatnik-terezin.cz> [viewed September 1, 2004]) in Terezín; the Beit Theresienstadt Institute (URL: <http://www.bterezin.org.il/indexie.html> [viewed September 1, 2004]) in Israel; the Terezín Initiative Institute (URL: <http://www.terezinstudies.cz/eng/main> [viewed September 1, 2004]) in Prague; the Holocaust Memorial Center (URL: <http://www.holocaustcenter.org> [viewed September 1, 2004]) in West Bloomfield, Michigan; and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (URL: <http://www.ushmm.org> [viewed September 1, 2004]) in Washington, D.C. In addition, I was provided with unpublished documents of and about the Theresienstadt library from the Beit Theresienstadt Institute in Israel. Their support and literary contributions were integral to my research.

Much of the published literature about Theresienstadt tends to focus on the extraordinary artistic and musical achievements of the prisoners in the camp, such as *Spiritual Resistance: Art from Concentration Camps*, edited by Miriam Novitch, and *Art, Music and Education as Strategies for Survival: 1941–1945 Theresienstadt*, from the 2000

Symposium of the same name. Several articles included in books on Theresienstadt, ghettos or the Holocaust in general, discuss the intellectual activities in Theresienstadt as well as in other camps and ghettos. The most comprehensive work on this topic is David Shavit's *Hunger for the Printed Word: Books and Libraries in the Jewish Ghettos of Nazi-Occupied Europe*. It includes a chapter on Theresienstadt and appears to be the only book in English solely devoted to this subject. In his introduction, Shavit states that "few people have researched this 'unusual aspect of Nazi Germany': the use of books and libraries in ghettos" (Shavit 1997, 1).

The literature on Jewish resistance, including discussions on intellectual and spiritual resistance, is somewhat more abundant. Discussions of resistance are present in some of the major works of Holocaust literature including, *The War Against the Jews 1933–1945* by Lucy S. Dawidowicz, and *The Destruction of the European Jews*, the three volume history by Raul Hilberg. There is no single definition delineating what actions count as resistance and which do not. This was the topic of discussion at the "Conference on Manifestations of Jewish Resistance," which took place April 7–11, 1968, in Jerusalem. Several definitions of forms of resistance were offered by conference participants and debated by others; Nachman Blumental and Sara Neshamit offered two of the most inclusive definitions, respectively:

By 'resistance' I mean not only physical acts, but also the spiritual and moral resistance which Jews displayed under Nazi occupation. (Grubsztein 1971, 47)

We make another kind of distinction: (1) All forms of civil resistance, including: economic resistance in its various forms, such as smuggling food and others; spiritual resistance, such as cultural and artistic creativity, educational activity, and so on; mutual assistance of all kinds – in short, the numerous activities in which the general population participated. (2) Armed resistance. (Grubsztein 1971, 67)

In the latter definition, I believe that armed resistance is listed second purposefully. When attempting to define resistance, weapons-gathering and physical fighting may be what first come to mind, but the reality during the Holocaust was that very few Jews actually had access to weapons. "You either have arms or you do not; for the most part, the Jews did not." (Bauer 1989, 35)

Methodology

Numerous questions framed the basis for this research: Did people in Theresienstadt read? If so, what did they read? What reading materials were available to them, and, if they had a choice of materials, what did they choose to read, and why? What effects, if any, did reading have on them and their circumstances? What risks were they taking by choosing to read? There was a large and active library in Theresienstadt. How did it come to be? How was it organized? Who worked in it? Who used it? What types of books were in it? Where did they come from? What was the significance of the library in the lives of the prisoners, both those who worked in the library and those who took advantage of its presence? What risks did the librarians, library staff and library users take? What motivation did the Nazis have to allow for a ghetto library?

In order to research this topic, I carefully considered these questions as I read diaries, memoirs, and histories written in and about Theresienstadt. I combed these sources for references to the library, books and reading. Books containing reproductions of art created in Theresienstadt were also searched for images of people reading. Selected quotations taken from these accounts can be found throughout this paper. Their inclusion offers literary evidence of the historical record and serves to contextualize my text.

Discussion

Emanuel Ringelblum, archivist of the Warsaw ghetto, is perhaps the best-known example of a supporter and documenter of intellectual resistance during the Holocaust. He asked a question which librarians are always asking:

What are people reading? This is a subject of general interest; after the war, it will intrigue the world. What, the world will ask, did people think of on Musa Dagh or in the Warsaw Ghetto – people who knew for a certainty that death would no more skip them than it had over the other large Jewish settlements and the small towns. Let it be said that though we have been sentenced to death and know it, we have not lost our human features; our minds are as active as they were before the war. (Ringelblum 1958, 298-299)

I believe that what people were reading may be integral to furthering our understanding of peo-

ple's ability to keep the mind healthy and active, and the role of cultural institutions to do everything within their means to continue to serve the public in whatever capacity possible during times of terror, war or deprivation.

Books offer refuge and help us to cope, at least temporarily, with a painful, frightening, or devastating reality. They can comfort, distract and allay fears. It is no wonder that so many ghetto inhabitants were literally desperate for books and, often, for particular titles or types of books. Thoughtfully selecting reading materials by taking into consideration the specific details of your current frame of mind and circumstances is considered to be an aspect of bibliotherapy known as "directed reading" (Rubin 1978, 1). For Jews facing illness, starvation, transports and death, being able to identify with others who had undergone similar experiences allowed them to feel a certain level of comfort even when this identification seemed to presage their fate. "Reading was not only narcotic and escape," Lucy Dawidowicz (1975, 259) wrote, "but also a discipline of mind, an attempt to retain the habits of a civilized existence. Reading about past wars and catastrophes involving other peoples and nations universalized the Jewish experience and transcended the misery within the ghetto walls." Literature can be used as a catalyst to help a person continue their life story, picking up the thread from where it was broken off. This is how literature can be "useful" (Gold 2001, xviii). It was up to the Jews to discover ways, even if incompletely or haltingly, in which they could resist the Nazi plan by secretly ensuring the continuation of their individual and collective stories.

From 1941–1945, close to 140,000 people from at least eight countries passed through Theresienstadt (Lederer 1953, 248). Not all who passed through had the opportunity to benefit from the cultural and intellectual life in Theresienstadt. Some seemed to have never even known of the existence of these activities. However, it is clear that books and reading were in fact vital to many. "I was soon to realize how important it had been for me to exchange some food for the body for food for the mind, within the permitted allowance of 50 kilograms per head. Later, I was to discover that hundreds and thousands of others had reasoned likewise ..." (Friesová 2002, 86–87). Norbert Frýd, who held a PhD in the history of literature

from Charles University in Prague, believed that there was "practically no one who had not brought at least one book in the fifty kilograms allowed him." (Ehrmann 1965, 207)

The significance of the written word and its strong associations with cultural identity and history has long been realized and often exploited or used in order to harm or even destroy people. This explains the innumerable accounts of libraries and archives destroyed as acts of cultural devastation. In Theresienstadt, the Nazis walked a thin line between empowering the Jews by allowing them a privilege like the library, while depriving them of basic necessities, like food, fresh water and proper clothing, so that in the end, they would be too weak and ill to revolt, or to survive.

Library

A library is an institution devoted to the collection, preservation and dissemination of information. The Nazis were attempting to exterminate the Jewish people, so the Ghetto Central Library (herein referred to as GCL) was established for the benefit of the Nazis, of course, not the Jews. A library would serve as an excellent tool to illustrate that Theresienstadt was functioning as a normal town. However, the Nazis may not have foreseen or been aware of the accompanying elements of resistance and escape.

The Ghetto Central Library – Ghettozentralbücherei

Providing sustenance and support for much of the camp's cultural life was the library. It opened ... at the same time as the bank, coffeehouse, and stores. Unlike these other operations, however, it soon became a vital and popular component of camp life. (Berkley 1993, 139)

The GCL in Theresienstadt opened on November 17, 1942 (Starke-Goldschmidt n.d., 172). Dr. Emil Utitz, who had been a professor of philosophy and psychology at Charles University in Prague, was the head of the library from its opening until liberation in 1945 (Spies 1997, 17). Upon opening, the GCL held about 4,000 volumes. In November of 1942 there were 47,693 people in Theresienstadt (Lederer 1953, 247). The library staff realized immediately that 4,000 works,

housed in one room, could not effectively serve such a large and diverse population, a population which seemed to be in constant flux as transports regularly came and went, bringing new people in and taking others away. The first books in the collection came from the Rabbinical Seminary of Berlin and the Warburg Library in Hamburg. Consequently, most of the works were theological, philosophical, and otherwise scholarly, and, most were in German and Hebrew (Starke-Goldschmidt n.d., 172). One survivor recalls having to learn to read German in order to borrow books from the library.

If I wanted to read, I had to read in German ... But I had never learned to read or write in German. Since I had learned to read in Dutch, I had learned only the Roman alphabet; the German books in the Theresienstadt library, however, were printed in gothic characters (Fraktur). Like it or not, I had to learn to decipher these if I wanted to read. (Silten 1995, 151)

Another survivor wrote, "We had nothing to read in the camp other than some old, mainly theological, works written in Czech." (Oppenheim 2001, 61) Most likely, both are referring to books from that original scholarly collection and to the fact that the worst deficiency was in fiction, which was in highest demand. The collection grew quickly as a result of the harvesting of books from incoming and outgoing transports, which allowed the library eventually to grow to contain well over 60,000 volumes which the staff worked hard to circulate as widely as possible throughout the camp.

A version of a bookmobile was adopted as a solution for the space problem. Boxes containing thirty books each of "a cross section of the works of which most copies were available" (Starke-Goldschmidt n.d., 172) traveled throughout Theresienstadt according to a specific plan in order to reach the highest number of people possible. As a result of this practice, many more people had access to books than would have been otherwise possible, but many books were also lost. Some were damaged or kept; others were taken east in transports. Head librarian Emil Utitz was accepting of this less than ideal reality. He maintained that "a book was serving its purpose as long as it was read, whatever the circumstances." Also due to the high demand for books, the library loan period was short. "I had gotten hold of Keller's

Romeo and Julia, and not being able to finish it due to the shortness of the loan period, enjoyed at least a few pages." (Spies 1997, 138)

GCL branches

The GCL had various subdivisions or branches dispersed throughout the camp. The two largest were the Medicine Central Library and the Hebrew Library. There were smaller collections in some of the children's homes. Books in poor condition were generally brought to hospitals and sick rooms and were not circulated outside of those areas due to the risk of spreading disease.

The Hebrew Library was created as a part of the Nazi plan to open "The Central Museum of the Extinguished Jewish Race" (Spector 2001, 1023) in Prague after the war and after the expected successful extermination of the Jews. The Nazis put Jews to work in Prague organizing, preserving and cataloging the materials that were to become a part of the future museum's collection. The Hebrew works being cataloged in Theresienstadt were to be a part of this museum collection; some of these items now make up the collection of the Jewish Museum of Prague and its library. On June 26, 1943 Gonda Redlich, a young Czech Zionist who headed the Youth Welfare Department (*Jugendfürsorge*) in Theresienstadt, learned that "people who know Hebrew were ordered to translate and catalog books. It seems they want to send Hebrew books here for cataloging." (Friedman 1992, 123) In late 1944 "the Hebrew library ... was completely shut down and all of its staff deported," (Berkley 1993, 201-202), although the GCL remained open until liberation.

Reading

Books and reading

Readers and librarians, in spite of a hopeless fate, clung to books as a respite from the harsh realities and the horrors of everyday life. Books were a source of relief and a means whereby readers could escape to a different realm – at least for a little while. (Shavit 1997, 2)

In Theresienstadt as long as the prisoners had books to read, share and discuss, at least their minds and imaginations were alive and free.

Five

Hanuš Hachenburg

*This morning at seven, so bright and so early
Five novels lay there, sewn up in a sack
Sewn up in a sack, like all of our lives,
They lay there, so silent, so silent all five.*

*Five books that flung back the curtain of silence,
Calling for freedom, and not for the world,
They're somebody's novels, someone who loves them...*

*They called out, they cried, they shed tears, and they pleaded
That they hadn't been finished, the pitiful five.*

*They declared to the world that the state trades in bodies
Then slowly they vanished and went out of sight.*

*They kept their eyes open, they looked for the world
But nothing they found. They were silent all five.
(Křížková 1995, 31)*

Hanuš Hachenburg was a boy of thirteen or fourteen when he wrote this poignant poem, one of many, while in Theresienstadt, before being killed in Auschwitz at fourteen.

In May of 1944, the GCL was moved to larger rooms as part of the “beautification” in preparation for the Red Cross visit. It took three days to move the 65,000 volumes about one kilometer, from one end of Theresienstadt to the other. Käthe Starke wrote of the excitement that accompanied the library’s relocation. “During the removal the weather was fine, the young men’s enthusiasm over being so near the books, even though only to help moving them, was gratifying.” (Starke-Goldschmidt n.d., 175) For these prisoners, not even reading the books but merely being in their presence, was enough to stimulate, motivate and hearten.

Fifty kilograms was the maximum weight of personal belongings allotted to each person coming into Theresienstadt. While still at home, they were given at most a few days notice to pack and make preparations. They had to pack for an unknown destination, leaving the greater part of their belongings behind, and turn the keys to their homes and a complete and detailed inventory of all items left behind over to the Nazis. In addition, they had no idea when or if they would return, and even if they did, what would be left of their previous lives. It is therefore significant that there were people who included books, paper or writing supplies in place of a little more

food, another item of clothing, pair of shoes, or extra blanket in those meager fifty kilograms.

Some people had also brought sheet music, opera scores and books. These people chose kilograms of cultural, rather than practical items ... it was possible to find Goethe’s *Faust* or the poetry of Rimbaud. With the instruments, paints, brushes, and books, inmates carried an awareness of their own capacity, an awareness of their past and their responsibility to it. It became evident that intrinsic human creativity can endure under any circumstances. (Friesová 2002, 141)

The difficult decision would still remain, what books to bring? Eva Friesová believed that “Everyone chose what, at that moment, was closest to his or her heart, and the cases under the bunks in the concentration camp were real treasure chests. These treasures were passed on by those who were deported further east ...” (Friesová 2002, 86–87)

The following vignette tells of one man, Karel Švenk, a Czech artist who was deeply involved with the theaters and cabarets in Theresienstadt, who brought only one book with him when he was assigned to a transport East.

Under his arm he carried a large book. From time to time, when the SS guard was out of sight, he took the book in both hands and as if performing a sacrament he raised it before the eyes of those already in the wagons. The book was Dumas’ *Three Musketeers*. It was an old edition and on the cover was a lithograph of ‘three men without fear or blemish.’ Three invincible men who triumphed on every occasion. What was Švenk trying to say? (Friesová 2002, 152)

Perhaps Švenk was attempting to instill a glimmer of hope and strength in people who knew they were in a hopeless situation, crammed and locked into a cattle car pointed East. Or perhaps it was simply one last, courageous theatrical act, conducted in the hopes of lifting the ominous cloud hanging over the transport.

Reading as solitary pursuit

When we were alone, we could read (Roubíčková 1998, 74).

Many readers in Theresienstadt read for a means of temporary escape, for another world to disappear into. One memoirist noted, “When I am not too ill to do anything at all, I either read in

bed or retreat into fantasy, into a better place. Of course, I do have to come back to *this* place, but at least for a little while I am out of the misery.” (Silten 1995, 146)

Another motivation for reading in ghettos and concentration camps was to try to find ways to comprehend or come to terms with the trauma of what was happening. For example, a favorite book was *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* by Franz Werfel, which documents the genocide of Armenians by the Turks during World War I, and the heroic resistance and miraculous rescue of one Armenian community.

The idea of total extermination of a racial group, the methods of the annihilation, the helplessness of the victims and the worthlessness of the diplomatic intervention – all of these stood in amazing analogy to the situation in the ghetto, that we read that book with a shiver – like a prophetic vision, of what will our fate unfold for us.” (Shavit 1997, 136).

Often the greatest fear is that of the unknown. The Jews in ghettos and in Theresienstadt were not at all certain of their fate. The experience of reading about Musa Dagh, described repeatedly throughout Holocaust diaries and memoirs, seemed to draw its readers in, not so much as a means of escape, but rather as a means of making sense of their awful situation through connection with others who had suffered similar plights. Musa Dagh may also have served as an example of the resistance of an oppressed and persecuted people, and perhaps as an inspiration to the seemingly nonexistent possibility of rescue, or even of successful resistance.

Goethe’s classic work *Faust* is mentioned over and over in multiple Theresienstadt diaries and memoirs. Jana Friesová remembered how “one of my courtiers brought me the second volume of Goethe’s *Faust* when I was able to climb out of bed and collect it. Inspired, I read for hours and hours.” (Friesová 2002, 155). Alice Ehrmann, who was in her twenties at the time of her imprisonment, wrote in her diary on November 1, 1944, “am I afraid? I will read *Faust* and Isaiah and Jeremiah, and I will try to bear witness as best as I can ...” (Zapruder 2002, 406) She is making a careful and conscious directed reading decision in order to maintain courage and strength. Goethe’s *Faust* is a “reflection of the human condition of struggle and hope in any situation.” (Fewster

2003) The prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah are two of “the men whose image is our refuge in distress, and whose voice and vision sustain our faith.” (Heschel 1962, xiii)

Another young Theresienstadt survivor recalled bringing from home and then reading in the camp, “*Thorn Roof* by Younghill Kang, an inspiring account of people trying to survive Japanese occupation in Korea.” (Friesová 2002, 86–87) Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* was a Warsaw ghetto favorite because, as Ringelblum put it, “Being unable to take revenge on the enemy in reality, we are seeking it in fantasy, in literature.” (Dawidowicz 1975, 259)

Being able to read was considered by many to be symbolic of their ability to survive. On December 1, 1942, Gonda wrote, “Reading papers is not merely a pleasure but also work, a subject for debate, *the basic substance of life* (my emphasis).” (Friedman 1992, 88) A young woman remembered the moment she realized that a friend would survive.

Arthur had taken the grave risk and led away electricity from the bulb of the hall, which gave out only dim light, suspended high from the ceiling. His illegal source of light allowed him to read. Arthur brought with him to camp a few of his favourite books. Right then and there I knew that if anybody had the mettle to survive the war, it had to be Arthur. (Schiff 1996, 130)

On the other hand, becoming too ill, weak, exhausted or distracted to read or study was very distressing to many. On October 8, 1943 Eva Roubíčková, who was twenty at the time of her arrival in Theresienstadt at the end of 1941, wrote, “I’m so tired all the time, I can’t get any reading or writing done.” (Roubíčková 1998, 102). Then again on July 17, 1944 she wrote, “I can hardly get any reading or studying done.” (Roubíčková 1998, 150) For some, this seemed to signal the beginning of the end. It was a sign that they were beginning to fail in their struggle to resist and therefore, to survive. Janusz Korczak, the Polish teacher and director of the Jewish orphanage in the Warsaw ghetto wrote, “Reading as relaxation begins to fail. A dangerous symptom. I am distracted and that itself worries me.” (Korczak 1978, 150) His no longer being able to read for solace signified to him a disturbing turning point in his personal struggle to hold out against the Nazis.

Reading out loud and together

Reading out loud and discussing books was another stimulating outlet for prisoners. For some it was a favorite activity, for others it was the only way to gain access to books. Due to the library's great lack of fiction, Hugo Friedmann suggested that:

By reading aloud (collective reading) each book should be made accessible to the largest reader-circle possible. This collective reading is an order of necessity...It is clear that this procedure can't satisfy the reading-hunger of the individual and can hardly fulfill their reading-demands. But in opposite it has an advantage: the reader is obliged to read the book slowly, to digest it spiritually and to think about it. (Friedmann, n.d.)

On May 14, 1943, Roubíčková recounts meeting with her friend Egon. "We read good books together." (Roubíčková 1998, 79) As the transitory situation of Theresienstadt necessitated, she was forced to move from one study partner to another. April 10, 1944, "I go to the citadel with Otto every morning from six to seven. We're studying world literature. These are wonderful hours, and even though I'm missing sleep, I wouldn't give it up at any price." (Roubíčková 1998, 137-138) Giving up sleep in Theresienstadt was no small matter. Like most other young people who were relatively healthy and able, Roubíčková worked long, hard hours and never had enough to eat. Not getting enough sleep risked becoming weaker and thus more susceptible to illness. But she and so many others did not even think twice about taking this risk. The energy lost by missing sleep was replenished by the stimulation and strength provided through intellectual activities.

Exhaustion combined with starvation and illness led to the hospitalization and subsequent death of many prisoners. For those who were not too ill, being hospitalized allowed them the time to simply lie in bed and read. Many others were rendered physically or mentally unable to read on their own. In response, some who did have the strength took to reading out loud. Being read to is a pleasure generally associated with childhood. However, in Theresienstadt, these traditional roles were often reversed as with youth came strength, health, agility and adaptability. Many adults could not tolerate the drastic transformation their lives underwent upon their arrival in

Theresienstadt, so children were caring for, feeding and nursing, and sometimes reading to their parents and grandparents as well as to strangers who were weaker than they were.

We had to bring the old men food, read to them – from novels and religious books; and all these old people were so touched by this that they wept, and very often it happened that in the midst of this reading these sick and old people would die – the boy would sit and read and the old man would die. (Berkley 1993, 115)

Healthy and able adults read to other prisoners as well. Hannah Steiner led a group of Zionist Jewish women while in Theresienstadt who often visited "the elderly or read and sang to sick children." (Bondy 1989, 366) Another wrote:

My listeners, often seriously ill, lay pale against the pillow and listened, sometimes making an observation or expressing a special request ... I read in the Bodenback Barrack for almost a year, mostly to the same patients. I started with 'Memories of Women' and followed with the *Novellen* of Pentzold, Fontane and anything I could lay my hands on, Heine's 'Rabbi von Bacharach' from the *Buch der Lieder*, etc ... (Schwertfeger 1989, 74)

Conclusions

Librarians are the guardians of certain tools of civilization, and it is our responsibility to understand how to contribute during times of crisis or extraordinary duress. It has always been essential for an effective librarian to understand what, where, how, and why people read, and that these factors are in a constant state of flux and evolution. One central lesson can be learned from the topic of this paper: during trying times, even those as extreme as the Holocaust, libraries, books and reading can be fundamental elements for survival. Unfortunately, even today, people all over the world continue to live in terror and deprivation. Even in the midst of these circumstances, as during the Holocaust, many people participate in intellectual and cultural activities if the possibility exists, and many are stronger because of it.

It is my hope that this paper provides insight into the ability of people, specifically prisoners in the Ghetto Theresienstadt from 1941 to 1945, to use books and reading as forms of intellectual resistance and tools of survival. Periods of challenge and persecution – such as the Holocaust or post-war Eastern Europe, or in the restricted lives

of soldiers and prisoners, or amid current events like the war in Iraq, the Taliban rule in Afghanistan, and even in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 in the United States – all leave people searching for answers, feelings of power and hope, and temporary escape from the pain or chaos. A clear and strong grasp of the experiences of World War II concentration camp prisoners and victims can offer important lessons about the ways in which people seek understanding, achieve temporary mental refuge, and gather strength through participating in intellectual activities. Perhaps what we can learn from the diaries, memoirs and personal narratives of those who experienced the most traumatic event in recent history, will help us face future adversity in the most effective, powerful and meaningful way possible.

Franta Bass arrived in Theresienstadt at the age of eleven and died in Auschwitz at thirteen. The following poem, one of many he wrote, seems to tie together several of the themes covered by this paper in a remarkable manner.

Illness

– Franta Bass

Sadness, stillness in the room.

In the middle, a table and a bed.

In the bed, a feverish boy.

His mother sits next to him

with a little book.

She reads him his favorite story

and immediately, the fever subsides.

(United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 1993, 30).

Note

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Miriam Intrator

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