

Life in the Terezin/Theresienstadt Ghetto

Fear, starvation, and death. No other words can truly convey the conditions of the Terezin Ghetto. The ghetto, which was known as “spa town,” was located in Terezin, Czechoslovakia.¹ Trying to hide the truth about deportation to the ghetto, Hitler told everyone that he was finding a place where the Jews could live. Moreover, it was disguised as a place where the elders of Germany could retire. The Nazis changed the name Terezin to Theresienstadt, its German name, when the first group of Jews came from Prague to Terezin at the end of November in 1941.² This continued for about six months and by the end of May 1942, 28,887 Jews had been deported to the ghetto.³ Terezin was a ghetto where many were deported to extermination camps and other ghettos. Many tried to find exemption from the deportations by working for the war effort or working for the Nazis.

Terezin, a place originally meant for 7,000 people now held anywhere from 30,000 – 40,000 victims. Even with the small and cramped rooms, residents had to share their space with others. Each person only had two square yards for living, and storage.⁴ This included the restroom and the kitchen. The bunkrooms held 100 to 400 people.⁵ At the height of the war,

¹ "Theresienstadt." Holocaust Encyclopedia. 25 Oct 2007. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 23 Jan 2008
<<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005424>>.

² Gutman, Israel. "Theresienstadt." Encyclopedia of the Holocaust. 1st. New York: Macmillan Library Reference. 1995.

³ Gutman, Israel. Encyclopedia of the Holocaust.

⁴ "Theresienstadt: The ‘Model’ Ghetto." Jewish Virtual Library. 2008. The American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise. 23 Jan 2008
<<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/terezintro.html>>.

⁵ "Life Behind Walls: Creation of a Camp: Conditions: Part 1." Terezin. 11 June 2002. Terezin. 23 Jan 2008
<<http://www.interdisciplinary.neu.edu/terezin/life/conditions.html>>.

there were 55,000 residents in the ghetto.⁶ Many people died of disease that spread rapidly, due to the enclosed spaces. “In 1942, the death rate within the ghetto was so high that the Germans built, to the south of the ghetto, a crematorium capable of handling almost 200 bodies a day.”⁷ The construction of the crematorium was completed on September 7, 1942.⁸ Not only did many die from diseases within the ghetto, but also many died from disease that came with people deported to the ghetto. To help with the situation, there were hospitals put into the ghetto to take care of the sick. In total, there were 2,163 beds.⁹

The [International] Red Cross came to the Terezin Ghetto on July 23, 1944 to examine the ghetto and the treatment of the Jews.¹⁰ The Nazis set up a path that the Red Cross would have to take, and put wonderful scenes on every square inch. There were buildings with green turf, playgrounds, sports fields, and even schools that showed that they were closed on holidays. In addition, there were candy shops with treats bursting out, and bakeries with bakers making fresh bread, food the residents had not seen in years. There was singing at the Nazis’ command when the Red Cross passed by. The residents were extremely surprised at the ghettos’ transformation that they could not believe what they saw. “The Red Cross reported dryly that while war time conditions made all life difficult, life at Terezin was acceptable given all of the pressures. The Red Cross concluded that the Jews were being treated all right.”¹¹ The Nazis

⁶ "Life Behind Walls: The History: Part 1." Terezin. 11 June 2002. Terezin. 23 Jan 2008 <<http://www.interdisciplinary.neu.edu/terezin/life/history.html>>.

⁷ <<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005424>>.

⁸ Gutman, Israel. Encyclopedia of the Holocaust.

⁹ "Terezin (Theresienstadt)." Aktion Reinhard Camps. 23 Sep 2006. ARC. 23 Jan 2008 <<http://www.deathcamps.org/reinhard/terezin.html>>.

¹⁰ <<http://www.deathcamps.org/reinhard/terezin.html>>.

were so pleased with their disguise that they decided to make a movie of the ghetto. Immediately after the visit, the Nazis continued deportation to death camps like Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Majdenek.

“Theresienstadt had a highly developed cultural life.”¹² There were musicians and artists, including soloists, string orchestras, jazz ensembles, choruses, chamber ensembles, and cabarets. In addition, there were writers, professors, and actors that gave lectures and theater performances. There also was a library that contained 60,000 volumes.¹³ Many tried to make the most of their time in the ghetto. There were composers that used this time to try out their compositions on ensembles and there were young musicians who took the opportunity to learn from the masters. The Nazis allowed this cultural life so that they could use it as a propaganda technique later. Religion was barely allowed but not officially banned.

This, by no means, hid the terrible conditions of the ghetto. There was a lack of sanitary water, space, food, electricity, and clothing. The ghetto was nowhere close to a “spa town.”¹⁴ There was a total death rate of roughly 33,000 in the ghetto itself.¹⁵ The little food that was available went to the ones that worked. There was a very high death rate in the ghetto and the Nazis tried to hide the death rate by building the crematoriums. They would search the ashes of the dead for gold from the teeth and then store the ashes in boxes. The Nazis did not want anyone to suspect that there were that many people who had died in the ghetto so they disposed

¹¹ "Terezin (Terezienstadt)." Jewish Virtual Library. 2008. The American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise. 23 Jan 2008
<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/Holocaust/terezin.html>>.

¹² <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005424>

¹³ <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005424>

¹⁴ <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005424>

¹⁵ <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005424>

of the ashes. The Nazis threw 8,000 cardboard boxes into a pit and 17,000 cardboard boxes into the Ohre River.¹⁶ “Transports carried 87,000 people from Terezin eastward; of those, 83,000 were murdered, tortured to death, or perished on forced marches.”¹⁷ On May 3, 1945, the ghetto was placed under the protection of the International Red Cross.¹⁸ On May 8, 1945, the Red Army liberated the ghetto.¹⁹

This entire research project has truly given me a new look on the Holocaust. It has also given me a new perspective on the life of the residents of the Terezin Ghetto. I used to see the Holocaust in an “on-looker” perspective. Now, I see a glimpse of the Holocaust through the eyes of the victims. Even in this perspective, I cannot begin to imagine the horrible thoughts and feelings that the Terezin victims faced. The thought of not being able to have the simple necessities like clean water, food, and shelter just makes me really think about the harsh conditions of the ghetto. Moreover, I know that I would not be able to live in a space as small as two square yards. And these were only the small things of the ghetto. To know that one day or even the same day, I may be deported to my death would scare me tremendously. I could not picture myself having to be separated from my dad if I was a girl under twelve years old.²⁰ Moreover, I could not picture having to work all day long just to receive an inadequate amount of food.

This has made me aware that people, even today, stereotype others based on skin color and religion. This has taught me not to look at peoples’ religion or anything else that makes

¹⁶ <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/terezintro.html>

¹⁷ <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/terezintro.html>

¹⁸ Gutman, Israel. Encyclopedia of the Holocaust.

¹⁹ Gutman, Israel. Encyclopedia of the Holocaust.

²⁰ <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/terezintro.html>

them different but to realize that their differences make up the most beautiful person. America is meant to be a melting pot filled with different people who have different ideas that form one great country. In addition, I realize that people are not always going to do the right thing, but it only takes one person to make a difference. I just hope that I can one day be that person, to stand up for what I believe and possibly stop the procession of inhumanity.

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