



*Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students*

**“Children’s Art and Poetry at Terezin”**

**by Abigail Cheskis**

**April 28, 2007**

I first found out about children expressing themselves during the Holocaust through art and poetry when I went to the Holocaust museum in Washington, D.C. I saw pictures that children drew in this exhibit and felt that the idea of children drawing during the Holocaust was a surprising concept. This experience caught my interest because I have always liked anything that had to do with creativity. From when I was very young I liked to color and paint. Now I scrapbook, knit, make fleece blankets, draw, make collages, and more. I also like to write. When I work on a project I feel enjoyment, accomplishment, relaxation, and a good feeling about being able to express myself. My parents and grandparents are also supporters of art. They enjoy observing art and having it in their homes, but do not necessarily enjoy making art. I think my experience with creativity has made it easier for me to understand why art and writing comforted and helped the children in Terezin, a concentration camp especially known for the amount of art that was created there.

The Holocaust was a time when many Jews in Europe were put into concentration camps and killed by the Germans. This started during the late 1930’s and it ended when Hitler was defeated in 1945. There were many death camps in different countries. The most well-known of these death camps was called Auschwitz, in Poland.

Terezin is forty miles northwest of Prague, in the Czech Republic. Terezin’s better know German name is Theresienstadt. It was founded by Emperor Joseph the 2<sup>nd</sup> of Austria. He named it after his mother, Maria Theresa. In the 1700’s Terezin was an Austrian military base, then it was converted into a town for civilians (in 1882), and then later converted into a ghetto to contain the Jews during the Holocaust. Terezin had an odd shape. The town was enclosed by twelve walls in the shape of a star. Inside the town was a fortress.

In 1941 all of the non-Jewish residents of Terezin were removed from their homes by the Nazis. After the Nazis removed the residents they brought in Jews from all over Europe. There were many different types of Jews in Terezin. There were elders, honored and disabled veterans of World War I, Jews with special connections, and people with non-Jewish spouses. The Jews were all housed within the fortress.

Terezin was not technically a death camp, but it was a stopping place for the killing of Jews. It was created to hide from the outside world that Jews were being murdered. Red Cross inspectors who were internationally trusted and could influence world opinion were brought to Terezin to show how the Nazis were treating Jews well and that Jews weren’t getting starved or overworked.

There were two main elements of Terezin that were shown to the visitors. The Nazis tried to convince the visitors that it was a special place for the elderly where they were treated well. They were also shown that there was a lot of creative expression, through art, music, plays, work and other cultural activities. But really what the Nazis were showing was a disguise and the exact opposite of reality. People were actually starving, the elderly weren’t treated well, many people were sick and dying, and many people were sent to death camps regularly.

The Nazis in Terezin made some of the adults who were artists work for them to make signs and items that they needed. Because of this the adults had many art supplies available to them. The adults snuck out some of the art and writing supplies (which put them at risk of getting caught and in trouble by the Nazis). They used these supplies to teach the children how to draw and how to write. The adults hosted secret art classes. There is also evidence that prisoners brought art supplies with them, the most famous being the artist Friedl Dicker-Brandeis.

There are many reasons that the adults hosted these classes, given other worries and fears that they had about survival at the time. I have thought of four reasons that may explain why the adults influenced so much art and writing. My first, and I think most important, reason is they were trying to help the kids make a bad situation better. I know if I were in a ghetto I would have wanted to make my situation better even though I was in a bad, sad, and mad place.

The next reason is the adults were showing resistance and trying to shape the children's futures. They resisted by teaching the children to draw and write and by not following the Nazi's rules and by taking their supplies. They resisted because they were trying to show the Nazis that they can capture the Jews but they can't completely control what they do. It also showed that the adults had hope that the children would be alive and living full lives after being released from the concentration camp. If the adults had no hope they wouldn't have been trying to teach the kids anything.

My third reason is that art and poetry helped the children to express their feelings. When I write a poem there is usually some feeling hidden in the poem that is related to real life. The adults knew that the children's creative expression would help to make the bad situation better.

The last reason I have thought of is that drawing and writing can help time go by quickly. When I do art, I look at the clock and before I know it an hour has passed. The children were mistreated, hungry, and not taken care of in Terezin, so the adults tried to make time pass by quickly for them.

There were over four thousand pictures found at Terezin. There were also hundreds of poems and other writings found. All of these poems and pictures had been hidden. It was mostly girls from the ages ten to fifteen who drew and boys who wrote. These kids used anything they could find to draw on and write on: packing paper, blotting paper, and forms.

Different people have different ideas about the purpose that art and poetry had at Terezin. Anita Frankova, an archivist at the Jewish Museum in Prague, thinks the pictures were drawn to express joy and sorrow, share memories, longing for home, fears, and hopes. The poems have memories of lost homes, happy childhoods, bitterness at being taken away from normal life, strong longing to return home, and the idea of life after escape. Also the leaving of friends caused children a lot of sadness, so their poems sometimes reflected a longing to follow their friends and meet them somewhere, sometime in the future although it was unknown. In an essay by Sybil Milton, who was a writer and Holocaust historian, she states her opinion that children used art "As an outlet for their imagination as well as an escape, enabling them to gain control of their own personal space and time." My own observations are that the children drew and wrote the pictures and poems to express the topics: Never give up, the longing for and the belief in freedom, the idea that you should stick to your beliefs, resistance, memories of home, and the importance of sticking together.

In children illustrating the topic “never give up” they expressed thinking about happy times in the future, trying to escape when they had a chance, and holding on to dreams. I have chosen a poem to share from the book I have not seen a butterfly around here. The child who wrote this poem is unknown.

I've lived in the ghetto here more than a year,  
In Terezin, in the black town now,  
And when I remember my old home so dear,  
I can love it more than I did, somehow.

Ah, home, home,  
Why did they tear me away?  
Here the weak die easy as a feather  
And when they die, they die forever.

I'd like to go back home again,  
It makes me think of sweet spring flowers.  
Before, when I used to live at home,  
It never seemed so dear and fair.

I remember now those golden days...  
But maybe I'll be going there soon again.

People walk along the street,  
You see at once on each you meet  
That there's a ghetto here,  
A place of evil and of fear.

There's little to eat and much to want,  
Where bit by bit, it's horror to live.  
But no one must give up!  
The world turns and times change.

Yet we all hope the time will come  
When we'll go home again.  
Now I know how dear it is  
And often I remember it.

As you can see this poem also expresses longing for home, which is another one of the topics I am writing about. This person also mentions that times change, so somehow even though she is going through horrible times she still has some hope left in her body. The other poem that I found about never giving up is called “To Olga” by Alena Synkova, who survived.

Listen!  
The boat whistle has sounded now  
And we must sail  
Out toward an unknown port.  
Listen!  
Now it's time.

We'll sail a long, long way  
 And dreams will turn to truth.  
 Oh, how sweet the name Morocco!  
 Listen!  
 Now it's time.

The wind sings songs of far away  
 Just look up to heaven  
 And think about the violets.  
 Listen!  
 Now it's time.

This poem is about a fantasy that two girls developed together about sailing away to Morocco. The poem expresses the longing to go to another place that is not full of hatred of the Jews. When the writer talks about going on a boat to Morocco she said "And dreams will become truth." She is saying that something that she dreamed of and never thought could happen will become real. She also says "Listen! Now it's time!" This shows that you should try to escape when you have a chance and if you give up, you may never have that chance.

In Terezin the children's lack of freedom was always on their minds. They weren't allowed to do anything when they wanted to. It was all controlled by the Nazis: their eating times, reading times, and everything else. The longing for freedom is expressed in another poem by Alena Synkova.

I'd like to go away alone  
 Where there are other, nicer people,  
 Somewhere into the far unknown,  
 There, where no one kills another.

Maybe more of us,  
 A thousand strong,  
 Will reach this goal  
 Before too long.

Alena wrote "Where no one kills another." She wants to be some place where there is peace and freedom. In this poem she also expresses the idea of sticking together.

The Nazis did not want the Jews to stick to their beliefs and follow their Jewish heritage. No matter how much the Nazis punished the Jews, the Jews still celebrated and observed their religion, beliefs, and Jewish identity. The following two pictures clearly show the Jews' commitment to their beliefs. The first picture shows a Jewish star and a big family sitting together at a large table. You can tell that these people are celebrating Jewish holidays and Jewish traditions. In this picture there is a menorah sitting on a stool with all of the candles lit. This shows the same thing as the last picture. Thinking about and drawing celebrations of Jewish holidays helped the people during the Holocaust to keep their religious traditions alive.

Sticking to Jewish beliefs also shows the topic resistance. Just by writing and drawing the children showed resistance against the Nazis. This is a paragraph written by a girl name Charlotte Veresova. At this time she was fourteen years old and this is from her diary.

“Everything is so petty compared to this thing. Here it is a question of life and we have only one single life. No, it mustn’t happen, they can’t do it, no one will let them! But why shouldn’t they do it? Who prevented them from bringing us here and who will prevent the gas chambers, who—god? I have stopped believing in god, so is this punishment for that? No, it isn’t, Tonicka and Berticka pray and they would be sent to the gas chambers with me. But I won’t give up. I am not a bug, even though I am just as helpless. If something starts, I’ll run away. At least I’ll try, after all, what could I lose? It would be better to be shot while trying to escape than to be smothered with gas. I’ll take Tonicka and we’ll run away to Litomerice together. Perhaps someone will take us in there. I know I’m not the only one, but still I’ll not give up just like that, without resisting! No, I shan’t give up, even if everyone else did, but not I! I want to live, I want to go back home, for after all I’ve done nothing to anyone, so why should I die? It’s so unjust!”

This passage is an example of Charlotte Veresova’s courage and how even though she knew what was supposed to happen to her, she wasn’t going to accept it.

There were many, many poems and drawings to demonstrate the topic “memories of home”. I really liked these pictures and thought that this picture best demonstrated the children’s memories of home. Children probably drew a lot of pictures of home because home is something very important to most people. For example, whenever I’m at camp, I always say I miss my house and my room! The children at Terezin missed their homes a lot and wanted to remember and recreate their homes through pictures and poems. I am also going to share a poem called “Home”, by Franta Bass, who died in 1944.

I gaze and gaze into the wide world,  
 Into the wide and distant world,  
 I gaze and gaze toward the south-east,  
 I gaze and gaze towards my home.

I gaze towards home,  
 Towards the town where I was born,  
 My town, my native town,  
 How gladly I would return to you.

The last topic is the importance of sticking together, which children expressed a lot. In Terezin there was a group of girls that was referred to as “The Girls from Room L28”. These girls developed a tight bond with each other during their “stay” in Terezin. When four of the girls from L28 were deported they ripped the flag they had made for their room into four pieces and said that when they reunited after the war they would put the flag back together. But sadly only one of those girls survived. This picture shows a reproduction of the other three parts with the real fourth quarter.

Other examples of sticking together are pictures of playing with friends and hanging around with friends. Playing with friends keeps your mind off the misery and trouble you are going through. It also gives you something positive and good in your life.

The Holocaust is not the only example of children drawing and writing to express their feelings. For example, there have been books published that include pictures and poems drawn and written by children after hurricane Katrina and by children who have AIDS. One more example of children drawing and writing was after nine eleven. There are many other examples of children using art and poetry to express themselves during challenging and even tragic times. Drawing and writing are known

to provide some level of comfort and healing to people in these circumstances. The writings and drawings can help a child get through a difficult time as well as recover from trauma after the event.

Children's drawings and writings serve the purpose of helping children through the horrible events. The art work also serves as a way to teach us what really went on in Terezin and how people were really treated during the Holocaust.

Events like the Holocaust have no clear way of being stopped in our world today. Something like this event may happen again and I am confident that if children are part of it, drawing and writing will be one of the resources that will help the children through this horrible time.