

# Theresienstadt: Hitler's Gift to the Jews or Way Station to Hell?

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**Abstract.** During the Holocaust, over 140,000 Jews were imprisoned in the Theresienstadt/Terezin ghetto. I will demonstrate that the Nazis did not originally intend to create an illusory "model ghetto;" rather, Theresienstadt was always intended to be a significant component of the Final Solution. By examining primary materials in German, particularly documents of the chief implementer of the Final Solution, SS General Reinhard Heydrich, I will show that the Nazis established Theresienstadt/Terezin as a collecting point and transit camp for Jews who were then sent to concentration/death camps (referred to as the "East" by the Nazis). They later called it a Jewish Settlement, exploiting the artistic and musical activities created by the prisoners, thereby creating a propaganda tool to convince the world of their supposedly humane treatment of Jews.

## 1. Introduction

During World War II, as Nazi Germany instigated war with much of Europe while simultaneously committing genocide against the Jews and others, the garrison town of Theresienstadt in Czechoslovakia (Terezin in Czech) was appropriated by the Nazis following their occupation of that country in March 1939. Less than half of Theresienstadt was used as a collecting point for Jews largely from Czechoslovakia, Germany, Austria, and Denmark; the remainder of the town housed members of the SS. From this transit camp Jews were deported initially to ghettos in Warsaw, Lublin, and Riga, Latvia [1]. Later, prisoners were transported to concentration and death camps such as Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen and Treblinka [2].

## 2. Discussion

Theresienstadt was unique among the camps and ghettos created by the Nazis for the internment and elimination of the Jews during World War II as a result of the extraordinary cultural environment that evolved due to the large number of artistically endowed individuals interned there. Nevertheless, Theresienstadt was a significant mechanism in the plan to exterminate the Jews and was so from its inception. Furthermore, the creative activities that took place resulted from the impetus of the prisoners and were not the product of a preconceived Nazi plan to create a pseudo model ghetto or Jewish settlement. The confusion regarding the true purpose of the camp is due in part to the minutes (protocol) of the Wannsee Conference held on January 20, 1942, at which the "Final Solution to the European Jewish Question" was discussed. During the discussion regarding the specifics of "evacuations" (deportations) of Jews to transit ghettos and then to the "East" (i.e. concentration/death camps), SS General Reinhard Heydrich, chief of both the Reich Security Main Office and the German Security Police and also the Acting Reich Protector of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, stated that Jews older than 65 would be sent instead to an "old-peoples' ghetto," Theresienstadt in particular [3]. Furthermore, author and historian H.G. Adler, who compiled an extensive 800-plus page record while interned at Theresienstadt (completed after liberation), wrote that elderly Jews were deceived with this term and even paid large sums of money to move to *Theresienbad* (Theresien spa) to avoid deportation [4]. The "beautification" of the town in preparation for a visit by the International Red Cross in June 1944 and the later "documentary," *Der Führer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt* (Hitler's Gift to the Jews), made by the Nazis has helped contribute to the misperception that Theresienstadt was a so-called "model" ghetto.

The indisputable conditions of the camp, and its actual function as part of the Final Solution, prove that Theresienstadt was not, in fact, a model ghetto but rather a "Potemkin village" [5]. Heydrich's reports, written while he oversaw the Protectorate and now compiled in a book outlining German policy in Bohemia and Moravia, reveal that as early as October 6, 1941 a conversation took place at Hitler's headquarters in which Hitler stated that all Jews must be removed from the Protectorate to the "East" [6]. By October 10, 1941, before the intended date of the Wannsee Conference (December 9, 1941), SS General Heydrich convened a meeting in Prague regarding a "Solution to the Jewish Question" in the Protectorate in which he stated that Theresienstadt should be used for the purpose of a collecting point, where the Jews would certainly be extremely decimated (*stark dezimiert wurden*) [7]. From there all Jews would be "evacuated" (deported) to the "East" and Theresienstadt could then become a beautiful German settlement [8]. That the Nazis never intended for Jews to remain in the ghetto for long is unambiguous in

the report of October 15, 1941 in which Theresienstadt is referred to as a *Durchgangslager* (transit camp), a camp through which Jews would merely pass before going on to their deaths [9]. Furthermore, Heydrich's plan to exhaust, starve and devastate the Jews before further deportation is evident in his report of October 17, 1941 in which he stated that 50,000-60,000 Jews could be comfortably accommodated; [10] yet, they were to occupy less than half of the town which was built to accommodate 5,000-7,000 inhabitants. The crowded living conditions, unsanitary environment, insufficient food supplies, and high rates of disease led to a severe decline in the health of the prisoners before their transport to the East; many died in the ghetto itself. Indeed, Adler recorded that in September 1942, when the prisoner population at Theresienstadt was at its highest (nearly 60,000), the number of deaths per day averaged 127 [11].

The innocuous-sounding term *Altersghetto* (old-peoples' ghetto) used by Heydrich at Wannsee contradicts the real state of affairs at the camp at that time. In reality, nine prisoners were sentenced to death and hanged ten days prior to the conference; their crime was smuggling letters into the camp [12]. And on January 9, 1942, the day before the public hangings, the first deportation out of Theresienstadt left for the "East" [13].

The Nazis realized that they could influence the way in which the ghetto was perceived by changing the name of the camp, thereby implying a difference in function. The town was initially referred to as a "closed camp," later termed a "ghetto." Beginning in the summer of 1943, it was identified as a "Jewish Settlement" [14] during the period called "normalization" [15]. It was during this time frame that the Nazis took advantage of the cultural activities the prisoners had created. Adler described the actions undertaken by the Nazis, including the establishment of a bank, shops, cafes and businesses (all bogus) that would be found in a normal town. They further embarked on a program of beautification, requiring the prisoners to plant gardens, paint buildings, clean sidewalks and build playgrounds. This work of propaganda was implemented to deceive the International Red Cross, and this effort was successful.

### 3. Conclusion

We must remember the ruthless plans and historic facts that prove Theresienstadt was not originally created to be a propaganda tool. Given our recognition of this massive deception as such, we owe it to the victims and survivors of Theresienstadt to disprove misperceptions. Survivors such as author and professor Ruth Klüger should not need to hear, as she did, that "Theresienstadt wasn't all that bad" [16]. Although Theresienstadt was indeed unique due to the extensive cultural activities of the prisoners, it is important to present the documentary evidence in order to emphasize its typical and valuable function as a component in the Nazis' Final Solution.

### 4. References

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- [2] Institut Terezínske Inicijativy, "Documentation of Names and Commemoration of Victims," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum database of Holocaust Survivors and Victims, [http://www.ushmm.org/online/hsv/source\\_view.php?SourceId=20652](http://www.ushmm.org/online/hsv/source_view.php?SourceId=20652) (accessed Feb. 1, 2014).
- [3] Miroslav Karmy, Jaroslava Milotova, and Margita Karna, *Deutsche Politik im "Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren" unter Reinhard Heydrich 1941-1942: Eine Dokumentation*, ed. Wolfgang Benz, Johannes Houwinkten Cate, and Gerhard Otto, (Berlin: Metropol, 1997), 217.
- [4] Adler, *Theresienstadt 1941-1945*, 126.
- [5] Zdenka Fantlova, *The Tin Ring: How I Cheated Death*, trans. Deryck Viney, (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Northumbria Press, 2010), 120. [6] Karmy, Milotova and Karna, *Deutsche Politik*, 130.
- [7] *Ibid.*, 139
- [8] *Ibid.*
- [9] *Ibid.*, 146
- [10] *Ibid.*, 150.
- [11] Adler, *Theresienstadt 1941-1945*, 527.
- [12] Karmy, Milotova, and Karna, *Deutsche Politik*, 213.
- [13] *Ibid.*
- [14] Adler, *Theresienstadt 1941-1945*, 150.
- [15] *Ibid.*, 124.
- [16] Ruth Klüger, *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered*, (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2001), 73.