



Hate is a Failure of Imagination A Literary Collage An Encouraging Testimony

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In the infamous extermination machinery of the NS-Regime, Theresienstadt (or Terezin) played a special role. Originally established as a collection camp for the Jews who lived in the "Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia", it served as a "model ghetto" after the Wannsee Conference. It was a propaganda instrument to distract the world from the Final Solution. Especially prominent Jews and Jewish veterans from World War I were brought to Theresienstadt. In 1944 a delegation of the Red Cross visited Theresienstadt. For a while the inmates of Theresienstadt were granted certain privileges. They had the chance to be active artistically and could organize readings, concerts, plays, even cabaret performances. But behind this cynical disguise, the systematic death machinery of the Holocaust continued to function without constraints. Of the 140,000 Jews deported to Theresienstadt, about a quarter died on site due to hunger, illness, malnourishment, bad hygiene, and exhaustion. 88,000 people were sent on transports to the extermination camps in the East.

The Nazis relentlessly stoked hate against the Jews. They tried to dehumanize them and degrade them to mere numbers. But the artists who were imprisoned in Theresienstadt, countered this hate – which Graham Greene so aptly described as a failure of imagination – with a powerful offensive of imagination. With their artistic phantasy, their creative power, their inventive energy they continuously proved wrong the national-socialist dictum, that Jews were sub-human and as such incapable of any real culture.

Ilse Weber (born in 1903 in Moravia) wrote more than 60 poems during her imprisonment in Theresienstadt. In those poems she described in great detail daily life in the camp. Before she was deported on one of the last transports in 1944 to Auschwitz, Ilse's husband Willi Weber buried a majority of these poems in a bag in a distant corner of the camp. Ilse Weber was killed in the gas chambers of Auschwitz immediately after her arrival there, but her poems were rescued in May of 1945 by her husband who survived the Holocaust.

The Viennese cabaret artist **Leo Strauss**, who also was murdered in Auschwitz in 1944, tried to divert his fellow inmates from the sufferings of life in the camp with his tartly pointed cabaret programs. At least for the duration of those programs he wanted to cheer them up.

Viktor Ullmann, who was born in Teschen in 1898 as the son of an officer of the Austro-Hungarian empire and who himself fought as a soldier of the Imperial Army in World War I in the trenches along the Isonzo river, wrote a highly philosophical essay in Theresienstadt titled "Goethe and Ghetto". His writings as well as his compositions from Theresienstadt were saved, although he himself was killed in 1944 in Auschwitz.

The pianist **Alice Herz-Sommer**, born in Prague in 1903, survived the Holocaust and just recently died on February 23, 2014 at the age of 110 in London. "Music saved my life," she used to say. Her wise aphorisms are evidence of her unshakable optimism and her deep kindness towards humanity. When confronted again with the atrocities of the Holocaust during the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, Alice came to the conclusion: "One must not hate. Man must not be allowed to learn how to hate!"

Paul Aron Sandfort, born in 1930 in Hamburg, who died in Copenhagen in 2007, depicted his experiences as child in Theresienstadt many years later in several plays and novels.

The literary collage "Hate is a Failure of Imagination" is a testament to the power of imagination and to the profound love and humanity of the artists who were imprisoned in the ghetto and concentration camp Theresienstadt.

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