

Jennie Minor

INLS 890: Libraries in the Czech Republic

Professor Wildemuth

14 August 2013

**Reading as Refuge during World War II:  
A Discussion of the Theresienstadt Ghetto Central Library**

*“The Jews have been the People of the Book. In Theresienstadt too, the book played a prominent role and helped many of the Ghetto inmates to pass their free hours.”*

---Jacob Jacobson, an inmate of Theresienstadt<sup>1</sup>

In their work, *Why We Read and How Reading Transforms Us: The Psychology of Engagement with Text*, N.S. Schutte and J.M. Malouff explain, “For some readers harsh living conditions or times of physical or emotional distress bring the importance of consciousness and emotion altering power of reading to the fore.”<sup>2</sup> Undoubtedly, the written word has, throughout history, had an enormous impact on readers. This is often true especially in times of great turmoil or stress. Indeed, in order to recognize the significance of reading as a tool that can influence, empower, relax, rejuvenate, etc., one only need look at current trends within librarianship such as bibliotherapy. It is because of this great impact that books and libraries have that I have chosen to consider libraries in Jewish ghettos and concentration camps during World War II, specifically the Ghetto Central Library at Theresienstadt (Terezín in Czech).

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<sup>1</sup> David Shavit, *Hunger for the Printed Word: Books and Libraries in the Jewish Ghettos of Nazi-occupied Europe* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., Publishers, 1997), 128-129.

<sup>2</sup> N.S. Schutte and J.M. Malouff, *Why We Read and How Reading Transforms Us: The Psychology of Engagement with Text* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), 108.

Although a few Jewish ghettos during World War II, including the Warsaw Ghetto, the Łódź Ghetto, the Kovno Ghetto, and the Vilna Ghetto<sup>3</sup>, all had libraries and access to books and other reading materials, the library at Theresienstadt, as well as the ghetto of Theresienstadt itself, is particularly fascinating for a variety of reasons. Through this paper, I will briefly explain the general history of Terezín, as well as the history of the Theresienstadt ghetto and library, and then explore and discuss the benefits and drawbacks of the library for both the Nazis and their prisoners, the importance of reading, both privately and together, for the prisoners, and finally, the post-war fate of the library's materials.

Contrary to many other concentration camps and similar facilities run by the Nazis during World War II, Theresienstadt was not originally constructed by the Nazis nor did it have a significant Jewish population<sup>4</sup>, however, the town of Terezín did have a rich history prior to World War II. The fortress town of Terezín was built by the Austrian Emperor Joseph II in 1780. Joseph II named the town, which is located approximately sixty kilometers from the Czech Republic's capital city, Prague, after his mother, Maria Theresa. The fortress consisted of two sections, one on each side of the Ohře and Elbe Rivers. Of these sections, the larger part, which consisted of the town, was titled the Main Fortress. The Small Fortress, on the other side of the river, housed a prison. Terezín only remained a fortress town until 1882, although the Small Fortress prison was still utilized until the Nazis took over the establishment in 1941.<sup>5</sup> Many important and interesting people were imprisoned at Terezín during this time, including

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<sup>3</sup> David Shavit, 41-53.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>5</sup> Miriam Intrator, "'People were literally starving for any kind of reading': The Theresienstadt Ghetto Central Library, 1942-1945" (*Library Trends*, Volume 55, Number 3, Winter 2007), 514.

Gavrilo Princip, the man convicted of assassinating the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and his wife, Sophie.<sup>6</sup>

As one could imagine, the town of Terezín seemed a perfect setting for the Nazis to establish a Jewish ghetto as it already included massive walls, a prison, and barracks, and was situated outside of Prague. After the Nazis decided on Terezín, now referred to by its German name, Theresienstadt, as an ideal location, the first group of Jews arrived from Prague in November of 1941.<sup>7</sup> The Nazis had taken over the entire town by June of 1942 and subsequently forced all of its Czech inhabitants to leave their homes.<sup>8</sup> Theresienstadt was unique as a ghetto for myriad reasons, the first being, as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website explains, that Theresienstadt was not simply a ghetto like others such as Warsaw or Vilna. In fact, Theresienstadt served three different purposes: as a transit camp for Jews on their way to other concentration camps to the East, as a “ghetto-labor camp” where “certain categories of German, Austrian, and Czech Jews, based on their age, disability as a result of past military service, or domestic celebrity in the arts and other cultural life”<sup>9</sup> were held and expected to work, and finally, simply as a sort of prison for the Jews, the Nazis expecting that many would die from poor living conditions or would be shipped off to camps in the East.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Theresienstadt was a *mélange* of facilities, not simply a ghetto, concentration camp, or transit camp, but rather all three at once.

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<sup>6</sup> University of Minnesota: Center for Holocaust & Genocide Studies, “Terezin Camp” 21 August 2012. <<http://www.chgs.umn.edu/museum/memorials/terezin/>>.

<sup>7</sup> Miriam Intrator, “Avenues of Intellectual Resistance in the Ghetto Theresienstadt: Escape through the Ghetto Central Library, Reading, Storytelling and Lecturing” (*UNC-Chapel Hill Master’s Papers*, 2003), 6.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Holocaust Encyclopedia: Theresienstadt” 10 June 2013. <<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005424>>.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

The facilities of the camp were not the only elements that made Theresienstadt unique from other Nazi camps. Theresienstadt also was distinctive in terms of the specific population of Jews that were sent there as well as its status as a “model ghetto” or “*Paradeisghetto*” in German.<sup>11</sup> During the Wannsee Conference in January of 1942, the Nazis assigned a particular role to Theresienstadt. This place would be a ghetto for a specific group of German, Austrian, and Czech Jews, mainly people disabled from the war, older people, and well-known intellectuals and scholars.<sup>12</sup> This population also included famous artists, musicians, and writers and many wealthy Jewish families.<sup>13</sup> In trying to make Theresienstadt seem like a “model ghetto,” there was a sort of government with different departments run by Jews within the ghetto. These departments were: the Council of the Elders (*Ältestenrat*), the administration department, the economic department, the financial department, the technical department, and health and social care. There were other special departments that were created later such as the labour centre, the youth care department, and the free time activities department.<sup>14</sup>

Theresienstadt was also made to look like a “model ghetto” by the amount of cultural activities that were allowed within Theresienstadt. The Nazis not only sanctioned these cultural and intellectual activities, but in some instances, even encouraged them. Indeed, as Zdenek Lederer explains:

The most amazing aspect of the cultural life in Theresienstadt was the fact that the adverse material and psychological conditions prevailing in the Ghetto did not thwart its development. In particular during the final stages of the embellishment [the

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<sup>11</sup> Miriam Intrator, “Avenues of Intellectual Resistance in the Ghetto Theresienstadt: Escape through the Ghetto Central Library, Reading, Storytelling and Lecturing”, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Kornelia Richter, “La lecture dans le ghetto de Theresienstadt” (*Bibliothèques: revue de l’Association des bibliothécaires français*, 2002), 85-86.

<sup>13</sup> Miriam Intrator, ““People were literally starving for any kind of reading”: The Theresienstadt Ghetto Central Library, 1942-1945”, 514.

<sup>14</sup> Ludmila Chládková, *The Terezín Ghetto* (Praha: Naše vojsko Publishing House, 1991), 9-10.

beautification process in preparation for the International Red Cross visit in 1944], Theresienstadt probably was the freest town in Europe in respect of culture.<sup>15</sup>

Concerts, lectures, and theatre performances were held often and these small shows were performed almost anywhere within the camp. There were Czech, Viennese, and German cabarets performed in Theresienstadt's hospitals, barracks, yards, etc., and many composers such as: Pavel Haas (a disciple of Janáček), Jan Krasa (winner of the Czechoslovak State Prize for Music), and Viktor Ullman, composed choral works, quartets, pieces for piano, and operas while at Theresienstadt.<sup>16</sup> Along with the dramatic and musical arts, poetry and the visual arts were also an important part of life at Theresienstadt. Many artists, including hundreds of children, were able to create numerous paintings and sketches of life in Theresienstadt, leaving distinct evidence of the suffering that occurred in this camp.<sup>17</sup> Some of these artists such as Frederic Fritta, Peter Kien, and Otto Ungar, were extremely accomplished artists and some may even claim that "their works in Theresienstadt were superior to their pre-war works."<sup>18</sup> And finally, another important part of the "model ghetto" façade at Theresienstadt was the Ghetto Central Library (see figure 1).<sup>19</sup>

Figure 1: The Theresienstadt Library, Alfred Bergel, 1943



<sup>15</sup> Zdenek Lederer, *Ghetto Theresienstadt* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1983), 125.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 126-127.

<sup>17</sup> Chládková, 14-15.

<sup>18</sup> Zdenek Lederer, 130.

<sup>19</sup> Dominique Foucher and Sabine Zeitoun, *Le Masque de la Barbarie: Le ghetto de Theresienstadt 1941-1945* (Lyon, France: Centre d'Histoire de la Résistance et de la Déportation, 1998), 170. Figure 1: Drawing by Alfred Bergel reproduced with permission from the Terezín Memorial.

The Ghetto Central Library (*ghettozentralbücherei*) officially opened on November 17, 1942, and Dr. Emil Utitz, who had previously been a philosophy and psychology professor at Charles University in Prague, was appointed head of the library. Emil Utitz remained the head of the library until Theresienstadt's liberation in 1945.<sup>20</sup> The library's creation was originally initiated by the leisure department (*Freizeitgestaltung*), which had been previously established as part of the Jewish Council of Elders.<sup>21</sup> In her research on the Theresienstadt Library, Miriam Intrator includes Emil Utitz's writings: "It [the library] had been awaited with great excitement, for people were literally starving for any kind of reading."<sup>22</sup> Originally, the Ghetto Central Library (which was one room) housed approximately 4,000 works and had six staff members. Only one of these staff members, Else Menken, was a professional librarian who had previously worked at the Aby Warburg Library in Hamburg, Germany.<sup>23</sup>

At this time, the majority of the books in the library were scholarly materials, especially theological and philosophical works in German and Hebrew, having been sequestered from the Rabbinical Seminaries of Berlin and Breslau and some Jewish communities in Berlin and Vienna.<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, this collection was not nearly sufficient for the over 50,000 inhabitants of Theresienstadt, most of whom were Czech or German, but also included Austrians, Dutch, Danish, and Polish.<sup>25</sup> Intrator notes that the Jewish Council of Elders realized the library was in need of more volumes and suggested that the collection could be expanded if the books taken

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<sup>20</sup> Miriam Intrator, "Avenues of Intellectual Resistance in the Ghetto Theresienstadt: Escape through the Ghetto Central Library, Reading, Storytelling and Lecturing", 35.

<sup>21</sup> Andrea Jelínková, "Books in the Terezín Ghetto and their Post-War Fate" (*Judaica Bohemiae*, 2012), 89.

<sup>22</sup> Miriam Intrator, "“People were literally starving for any kind of reading”: The Theresienstadt Ghetto Central Library, 1942-1945", 515.

<sup>23</sup> David Shavit, 127.

<sup>24</sup> Miriam Intrator, 516.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 516.

from prisoners during the arriving and departing transports were given to the library.<sup>26</sup> This was extremely intelligent on the part of the Council of Elders as the majority of prisoners had brought at least one, or more, books with them in their fifty kilograms of allotted luggage. Soon after, the collection grew to over 60,000 volumes.<sup>27</sup>

With this new influx of books came the creation of a library reading room (*Volkslesehalle*) in June of 1943. One librarian, Hugo Friedmann, wrote of the room's reference collection: "There is the most important lexicographic and encyclopedia material, atlases, basic works of art history and all the professional [subjects], as well as magazines, art publications, poetry and plays, [and] history of literature."<sup>28</sup> With the reading room, some stipulations were introduced for library patrons. The prisoners had to pay a fee of fifty *kronen* (the official ghetto money) and they had to provide proof of having received higher education.<sup>29</sup> Of course, these were not overly ambitious requirements as many of the prisoners were intellectuals and scholars.

Along with the reading room, "mobile libraries" and "branch libraries" were created. The "mobile libraries" (*Wanderbibliotheken*) were essentially a grouping of boxes, each with thirty books, that traveled around the Theresienstadt barracks and stayed within those barracks for a period of two weeks. Nearly 50,000 books were in circulation due to the creation of these mobile libraries. The logic behind this was to try to give book access to many more people living in the camp.<sup>30</sup> "Branch libraries" were also eventually created. These included a Hebrew library (*hebräischer Raum*), a technical library, a medical library, and a youth/children's

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<sup>26</sup> Miriam Intrator, "Avenues of Intellectual Resistance in the Ghetto Theresienstadt: Escape through the Ghetto Central Library, Reading, Storytelling and Lecturing", 36.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>28</sup> Miriam Intrator, "“People were literally starving for any kind of reading”: The Theresienstadt Ghetto Central Library, 1942-1945", 517.

<sup>29</sup> Kornelia Richter, 87.

<sup>30</sup> Andrea Jelínková, 91.

library.<sup>31</sup> The youth library contained around 35,000 works, including books on Judaism and Zionism and children's literature written in both Czech and German.<sup>32</sup>

It is interesting to note that the Ghetto Central Library not only had immense benefits for the prisoners of Theresienstadt, which will be discussed in more

Figure 2: Ghetto Central Library Sign



detail later, but also for the Nazis running the ghetto and camp. Of

course, as previously mentioned, the Ghetto Central Library was an extremely important part of the “model ghetto” façade the Nazis were using to deceive other European citizens.

Indeed, a town with a library could easily be looked upon as a normal civilized town where Jews were being kept by choice

rather than being kept as prisoners. In preparation for a visit from the International Red Cross on June 23, 1944, the Nazis began a “beautification” process of

the camp. During this process, the library was moved to a different and larger building with modern shelving and a new library sign saying “Zur Bücherei” was erected underneath an endearing reading gnome (see figure 2).<sup>33</sup>

This newly renovated library was also later featured in a Nazi propaganda film (see figure 3)<sup>34</sup> about

Theresienstadt entitled, “Die Führer Schenkt den Juden

Figure 3: Library in Nazi propaganda film, 1944



<sup>31</sup> Kornelia Richter, 87.

<sup>32</sup> Andrea Jelínková, 92.

<sup>33</sup> Yad Vashem, “Yad Vashem Photo Archive: Theresienstadt, Czechoslovakia, 1944, Stills from the German propaganda film about the ghetto” 2011. <[http://collections.yadvashem.org/photosarchive/en-us/5855859\\_76570.html](http://collections.yadvashem.org/photosarchive/en-us/5855859_76570.html)>. Figure 2: Theresienstadt, Czechoslovakia, 1944, A sign pointing to the library, taken from a propaganda film.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., <[http://collections.yadvashem.org/photosarchive/en-us/5855859\\_29983.html](http://collections.yadvashem.org/photosarchive/en-us/5855859_29983.html)>. Figure 3: Theresienstadt, Czechoslovakia, Prof. Dr. Heinrich Klang in the library, from a Nazi propaganda film, 1944.

eine Stadt” or “The Führer Presents the Jews with a City.”<sup>35</sup> Käthe Starke explained that by this point, the library, along with the rest of the camp, was almost completely distorted:

The library itself, like its name, has been embellished to the point of being unrecognizable. Its store of books—almost doubled by the contents of the book-cases of all families evacuated from all the territories occupied by the Germans, has been neatly arranged on modern steel racks in four brightly lighted connecting rooms. Everywhere, in the gangways between the rows of books, leaning against the walls, against the doorposts, there are SS.<sup>36</sup>

Perhaps not surprisingly, the International Red Cross left Theresienstadt with no major concerns or wary feelings about the camp. In fact, the International Red Cross’s report of Theresienstadt described the camp and the library in an approving manner, stating:

We must say that we were astonished to find that the Ghetto was a community leading an almost normal existence, as we were prepared for the worst. The library [at Ghetto Theresienstadt] contains 160,000 volumes, part of which forming a lending library, another part remaining at the library where readers have a pleasant reading room at their disposal.<sup>37</sup>

There is speculation that Hitler and the Nazis were planning on creating a “Museum of the Extinct Race” upon completion of their extermination of Jews. Therefore, the Nazis may have wanted Hebrew books and other artifacts to be organized in order to be included in this museum. One prisoner, Gonda Redlich, explained in his diary that, “People who know Hebrew were ordered to translate and catalog books. It seems they want to send Hebrew books here for cataloging.”<sup>38</sup> The hundreds of cataloged Hebrew library materials in Theresienstadt would have been invaluable to the Nazis in preparation for their Jewish museum. Finally, the Nazis may have felt that a lending library would distract Jews and other prisoners from their eventual fate, transit to other camps such as Auschwitz or Treblinka, which ultimately resulted in death. As

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<sup>35</sup> David Shavit, 115.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>38</sup> Miriam Intrator, ““People were literally starving for any kind of reading”: The Theresienstadt Ghetto Central Library, 1942-1945”, 519.

Zdenek Lederer states, “Cultural freedom would lull the prisoners into a false sense of security and would also provide a harmless outlet for any will to resistance.”<sup>39</sup> However, this idea may have backfired on the Nazis, as Miriam Intrator explains, “What the Nazis did not foresee was that enclosing so many outstanding people in such a small space, and condoning and even encouraging participation in cultural activities, allowed for intellectual and spiritual resistance to bloom and grow in the camp.”<sup>40</sup>

Though there were most likely numerous reasons for prisoners in Theresienstadt and other concentration camps and ghettos to read, the majority of instances, in my opinion, could be categorized in one of three ways: as a form of intellectual resistance or hope despite the horrific conditions of Theresienstadt, as a form of escapism from the terrible living conditions of the camp, or as a means of comprehending their ultimate fate by connecting with others who had previously suffered similar plights. In viewing the diaries and memoirs of prisoners in Theresienstadt and examining the types of books they often read, one can see multiple examples of each of these aforementioned reasons. In her extensive research on the subject, Miriam Intrator read countless prisoner diaries and memoirs and discusses some specific examples.

Intrator recounts the story of Karel Švenk, a Czech artist involved with the theatre and cabaret in Theresienstadt. Švenk was eventually sent “East” to another concentration or death camp and for his long and arduous journey, Švenk only took one item, an old edition of *The Three Musketeers* by Alexandre Dumas.<sup>41</sup> Of course, Dumas’ story is that of three men who are consistently faced with challenges over which they always triumph. Perhaps in this sense, Švenk was trying to instill a sense of courage and hope, not only in himself, but also in the other

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<sup>39</sup> Zdenek Lederer, 126.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 515.

<sup>41</sup> Miriam Intrator, “Avenues of Intellectual Resistance in the Ghetto Theresienstadt: Escape through the Ghetto Central Library, Reading, Storytelling and Lecturing”, 43.

passengers who accompanied him to the concentration and death camps in the East. Goethe's *Faust* was also a popular work read by Theresienstadt prisoners. Again, this work may have served as a "reflection of the human condition of struggle and hope in any situation."<sup>42</sup> A previous student at Charles University in Prague, Jana Renée Friesová, had the middle stanza of Rudyard Kipling's poem "If" pinned to her ceiling. It read:

*If you can dream-and not make dreams your master  
 If you can think-and not make thoughts your aim:  
 If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster  
 And treat those two imposters just the same;  
 If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken  
 Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,  
 Or watch the things you gave your life to broken,  
 And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools.*

*If you can make one heap of all your winnings  
 And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,  
 And lose, and start again at your beginnings  
 And never breathe a word about your loss;  
 If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew  
 To serve your turn long after they are gone,  
 And so hold on when there is nothing in you  
 Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'<sup>43</sup>*

There is certainly something to be said for such a pronounced display of hope, determination, and endurance while living amidst such bleak circumstances.

There are also numerous examples of prisoners reading simply as a form of escapism while living in Theresienstadt. Intrator discusses the story of one young boy, Petr Ginz, who died at the age of sixteen after being deported to Auschwitz. While in Theresienstadt, Petr kept monthly lists of all the books he read. Many of these works were not related to the living conditions present at Theresienstadt, making it seem as though Petr was reading these works, not as a form of comprehension of the challenges he was facing in everyday life, but rather as a form

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<sup>42</sup> Miriam Intrator, "Avenues of Intellectual Resistance in the Ghetto Theresienstadt: Escape through the Ghetto Central Library, Reading, Storytelling and Lecturing", 44-45.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 47-48.

of intellectual resistance and as a form of escapism against the harsh living conditions. Some of his book lists read as such:

June 1944—I have read: Otáhalová-Polelová: *Seneca's Letters*; Arbes: *A Mad Job, My Friend the Murderer, Satan*; London: *The Lost Face*; Musil: *Desert and Oasis*; H.G. Wells: *Christina Alberta's Father*; part of Descartes' *Discourse on Method*.

September 1944—I have read: Schweitzer: *From my Life and Work*; Binko Šimonovič: *The Vinčić Family*; de Vries: *Rembrandt*; Thomas Mann: *Mario and the Magician*; Dickens: *A Christmas Carol*; Daneš: *The Origin and Extinction of the Aborigines of Australia and Oceania*; Milli Dondolo: *An Angel Spoke*; Karel May: *The Son of the Bear Hunters*; Oscar Wilde: *De profundis and Other Stories*.<sup>44</sup>

Another example of escapism through literature in Theresienstadt is seen through the popularity of *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy.<sup>45</sup> Seeing as the prisoners were helpless inasmuch as exacting revenge on the Nazis who held them hostage, perhaps the prisoners were using this famous work in order to take revenge upon the enemy in a fantastical setting, in literature.

Finally, some prisoners were reading, not for the means of escaping their reality or the means of becoming more hopeful despite their situation, but rather in order to more fully comprehend their situation or relate to others who had undergone similar situations and events. One young boy who survived living in Theresienstadt brought a copy of Younghill Kang's work, *Thorn Roof*, which is an account of people in Korea who were trying to survive a Japanese occupation.<sup>46</sup> Miriam Intrator notes that one of the more popular books read by Jews during World War II was a work by Franz Werfel entitled, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*. This story is the account of the Armenian genocide by the Turks that took place during World War I. It also includes a description of how one Armenian community was eventually rescued.<sup>47</sup> Interestingly enough, the same young woman who had the Kipling poem above her bed had also posted

<sup>44</sup> Miriam Intrator, "Avenues of Intellectual Resistance in the Ghetto Theresienstadt: Escape through the Ghetto Central Library, Reading, Storytelling and Lecturing", 46-47.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 44.

another poem, a much darker poem that highlighted the inevitable fate of many prisoners in Theresienstadt. This poem was Jiří Wolker's, "At the Palmist's":

*this short line here means a short span of life  
and your hand sir, is marked by a short line.  
The gods have granted you but a short life  
And soon you'll die.*<sup>48</sup>

Though there are accounts of many prisoners in Theresienstadt reading on their own and for their own pleasure or escape, there are also descriptions of prisoners reading together. This "collective reading" was done for a number of reasons, including: a limited supply of available books or the inability of some prisoners to read books on their own because of age, illness, or a lack of energy. One library staff member, Hugo Friedmann, suggested that reading together within Theresienstadt would be advisable considering the lack of fiction materials, explaining, "By reading aloud (collective reading) each book should be made accessible to the largest reader-circle possible...it [this procedure] has an advantage: the reader is obliged to read the book slowly, to digest it spiritually and to think about it."<sup>49</sup>

Although the Ghetto Central Library, mobile libraries, and branch libraries were inevitably a powerful and important part of life in Theresienstadt for the prisoners and by May of 1944 had approximately 120,000 books<sup>50</sup>, the Ghetto Central Library also had its fair share of problems and difficulties. As previously mentioned, many of Theresienstadt's inhabitants were of Czech or German descent, but there were also numerous prisoners of Austrian, Dutch, Danish, and Polish descent. Unfortunately, as many of the original library acquisitions were scholarly works from seminaries and Jewish communities throughout Europe, most of these were works

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<sup>48</sup> Miriam Intrator, "Avenues of Intellectual Resistance in the Ghetto Theresienstadt: Escape through the Ghetto Central Library, Reading, Storytelling and Lecturing", 47-48.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>50</sup> Andrea Jelínková, 90.

written in German or Hebrew.<sup>51</sup> At least upon the library's opening, there was a severe lack of books written in Czech or any other languages spoken by many of Theresienstadt's inhabitants. Another lingering concern was the great deficiency in works of fiction, which is what many people wanted to read. David Shavit explains the lack of fiction within the mobile libraries: "The mobile libraries could not quench the thirst for reading, because they were mostly incidental collections of Judaica books, containing many volumes of Jewish history by Simon Dubnow or Heinrich Graetz, as well as other reference books, while the number of novels in the collection, especially in Czech, was negligible."<sup>52</sup>

Another common problem was the theft of books, which occurred quite frequently. Indeed, the Ghetto Central Library was broken into approximately twenty times and the library also was not able to be protected from raids by SS troopers.<sup>53</sup> Regrettably, the circulation of books also created a major concern. The circulation of books, especially amongst barracks, was a major factor in the spreading of diseases. It is believed that this may have had a large impact on the spreading of skin diseases, scarlet fever, jaundice, and lung and intestinal diseases.<sup>54</sup> Lastly, many books were returned damaged or were simply never returned, usually taken with prisoners when they were sent off to other concentration and death camps in the East. Often, pages would be torn from works for fuel or for hygienic purposes.<sup>55</sup> Although many books were taken East with Theresienstadt's inhabitants, library director, Emil Utitz, understood, explaining, "a book was serving its purpose as long as it was read, whatever the circumstances."<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Miriam Intrator, "People were literally starving for any kind of reading": The Theresienstadt Ghetto Central Library, 1942-1945", 516.

<sup>52</sup> David Shavit, 123.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>55</sup> Miriam Intrator, "People were literally starving for any kind of reading": The Theresienstadt Ghetto Central Library, 1942-1945", 518.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 519.

Unfortunately, Emil Utitz may not have realized until much later that the books being taken East were almost certainly never read.

Theresienstadt was liberated by Soviet troops on May 8, 1945.<sup>57</sup> By this time, Emil Utitz estimated that approximately 200,000-250,000 books and related materials had passed through the Theresienstadt Ghetto Central Library.<sup>58</sup> However, only about 100,000 books were retrieved after the camp's liberation.<sup>59</sup> Emil Utitz and Käthe Starke were the only two remaining library staff members after the camp's liberation and they dutifully remained in Theresienstadt for three months after liberation in order to carefully catalog and organize these remaining 100,000 books.<sup>60</sup> Many of the remaining books were then transferred from the Ghetto Central Library to the Library of the Jewish Museum of Prague. Between 1945-1948, many of these works were returned to their previous owners or given to Jewish communities throughout Eastern Europe.<sup>61</sup> In 2001, the Jewish Museum of Prague library staff began an immense project to determine original ownership of the books, and in some instances, even return books to original owners or the owner's relatives. In order to conduct this project, library staff examined book bindings, stamps, dedications, ex-libris, signatures, margin notes, etc., and put all this information in a database. This project is still continuing through the present day.<sup>62</sup>

For many Jews and other prisoners at Theresienstadt, being able to read was one of the basic elements of life. This was not surprising as there were so many highly educated people imprisoned at Theresienstadt and as noted in the opening quote of this paper, Jews had always

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<sup>57</sup> Zdenek Lederer, 191.

<sup>58</sup> Andrea Jelínková, 94.

<sup>59</sup> Andrea Braunová, "Origin of the Book Collection of the Library of the Jewish Museum in Prague" (*Judaica Bohemiae*, 2000), 165-166.

<sup>60</sup> Miriam Intrator, "“People were literally starving for any kind of reading”: The Theresienstadt Ghetto Central Library, 1942-1945", 520.

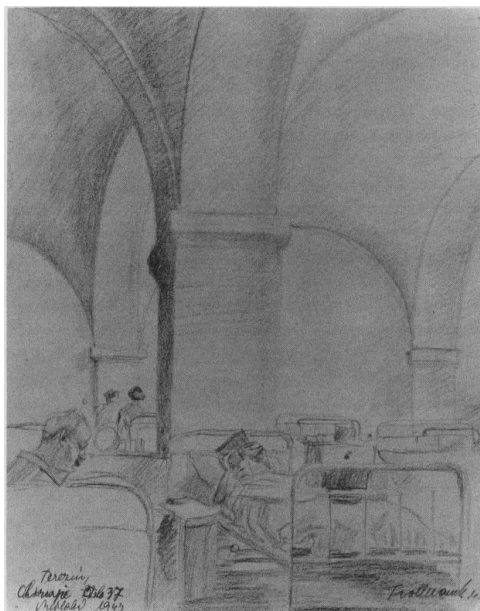
<sup>61</sup> Andrea Jelínková, 100.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

been a “People of the Book” and felt that reading and other forms of intellectual stimulation were incredibly important parts of living a full life. Miriam Intrator notes that, “becoming too ill, weak, exhausted or distracted to read was very distressing to many.”<sup>63</sup> It is astounding to realize how diligent the Theresienstadt prisoners were in their quest for knowledge and to see the true power that reading had upon their lives during such a time of stress, tragedy, and extremely poor

living conditions (see figure 4).<sup>64</sup> In her research, Intrator

Figure 4: Prisoner reading in Hohenelbe Hospital Ward



came across a poem written by Franta Bass, an eleven-year-old living in Theresienstadt who eventually died in Auschwitz at the age of thirteen. The poem reads as such:

**Illness<sup>65</sup>**  
**-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.*

This young child’s poem seems to perfectly capture the power and capacity that reading has to heal, strengthen, unite, and inspire under numerous circumstances.

By studying the impact that reading had upon prisoners in Theresienstadt, hopefully one can truly see the incredible influence that reading can have upon people’s lives. The

<sup>63</sup> Miriam Intrator, “Avenues of Intellectual Resistance in the Ghetto Theresienstadt: Escape through the Ghetto Central Library, Reading, Storytelling and Lecturing”, 51.

<sup>64</sup> Norbert Troller, *Theresienstadt: Hitler’s Gift to the Jews* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 129. Figure 4: *Hohenelbe Hospital Ward*, courtesy of Leo Baeck Institute.

<sup>65</sup> Miriam Intrator, “Avenues of Intellectual Resistance in the Ghetto Theresienstadt: Escape through the Ghetto Central Library, Reading, Storytelling and Lecturing”, 81.

Theresienstadt prisoners chose to read as an act of defiance, an act of refuge and escape, and as an act of intellectual resistance, a sentiment that can be and often still is echoed today in times of great stress. Soheli Begum poignantly explains the importance of reading in challenging and even horrific life circumstances in her article on readers' advisory and escapist reading, stating: "Reading as refuge from terror or decidedly difficult life situations is a testament to humanity and the refusal to become complacent prisoners, regardless of one's surroundings."<sup>66</sup> Indeed, the prisoners at Theresienstadt (see figure 5)<sup>67</sup>, whether they survived to see the liberation of the camp or not, were clearly not complacent prisoners and their reading habits while in Theresienstadt provide genuine evidence of the incredible impact that reading can have on individuals and humanity as a whole.



Figure 5: Ghetto Central Library in Nazi propaganda film, 1944

<sup>66</sup> Soheli Begum, "Readers' Advisory and Underestimated Roles of Escapist Reading" (Library Review, 2011), 744.

<sup>67</sup> Yad Vashem <[http://collections.yadvashem.org/photosarchive/en-us/5855859\\_29285.html](http://collections.yadvashem.org/photosarchive/en-us/5855859_29285.html)>. Figure 5: Theresienstadt, Czechoslovakia, 1944, Prof. Cohn and Prof. Kantorowicz in the library, from a propaganda film.

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