

**To greet the dawning after night:
Examining Creative and Intellectual Expression
in the Holocaust to Rethink Jewish Historiography**

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“He doesn't know the world at all / who stays in his nest and doesn't go out. / He doesn't know what birds know best / Nor what I want to sing about, / That the world is full of loveliness. / When dewdrops sparkle in the grass / And earth's aflood with morning light, / A blackbird sings upon a bush / To greet the dawning after night. / Then I know how fine it is to live. / Hey, try to open up your heart / To beauty; go to the woods someday / And weave a wreath of memory there. / Then if the tears obscure your way / You'll know how wonderful it is / To be alive.”

- *“Birdsong,” a poem by an Anonymous Prisoner of
Theresienstadt*

On December 14, 1941, the highly educated and musically gifted Michael Flack arrived at the Theresienstadt ghetto in Czechoslovakia. Famine, disease, and unpredictability were the norm in this unique and wretched location. The threat of deportation and uncertainty of survival loomed over the heads of Flack and the rest of these unfortunate prisoners, as their lives became wrought with the dehumanizing conditions orchestrated by the Nazis. Miraculously, however, Flack found himself immersed in Theresienstadt's rich and vibrant culture of artistic and intellectual expression. Sounds of classical and folk music permeated the ghetto as a professor gave a lecture on medieval Judaism in one of the barracks while artists were painting their souls in another. Flack participated in one of Theresienstadt's several orchestras and even wrote a play that was performed there. While motivations varied, Flack and other prisoners displayed their humanity and resilience in the face of persecution and

dehumanization by engaging in art, music, literature, and scholarship.¹

However, if one traveled one hundred ninety miles south of Theresienstadt to the Mauthausen concentration camp in Upper Austria, they would have seen music and art being used by the Nazis to torture, degrade, and dehumanize the Jewish prisoners. As the Nazis ruthlessly beat Joseph Drexler to the point of unconsciousness, he was forced to sing the church hymn “Jesus blood and wounds.”² Hans Bonarweitz, who was executed after attempting to escape his confinement, was forced to listen to the Jewish camp orchestra play music as he walked to his death, humiliating Bonarewitz and making the orchestra members feel complicit in his death.³ These stories highlight the simultaneously empowering and tragic effects of creative expression during the Holocaust on the Jewish prisoners.

An analysis of creative and intellectual expression during the Holocaust shows that the history of the Jews is both one of oppression and power. Music, art, literature, and scholarship served many functions throughout the duration of the Holocaust. On one hand, the Nazis used music and art as a form of torture, destruction, propaganda, and humiliation in order to demoralize and dehumanize the Jewish prisoners in ghettos and concentration camps. On the other hand, prisoners used various modes of creative expression to resist the degrading effects of their persecution. Thus, it is important to view creative and intellectual expression in the Holocaust as both an act of resilience and a pragmatic reaction to dehumanization and genocide. Examining creative and intellectual expression in the Holocaust shows that, in order to provide an accurate and humanizing portrayal of Jewish

¹ RG-50.934.0023, Oral history interview with Michael Flack, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC.

² Guido Fackler, “Music in Concentration Camps 1933-1945,” *Music and Politics* I, no. 1 (January 2007): 1-25.

³ *Ibid.*, 9.

history, scholars must emphasize themes of persecution and empowerment simultaneously.

Scholars of Jewish history have traditionally portrayed the story of the Jews as one that is heavily lachrymose or anti-lachrymose. In other words, they have sought to emphasize themes of oppression or empowerment (rather than both) when depicting the story of the Jews. In 1963, Salo W. Baron, arguably the most notable and influential Jewish historian, writes in his article *Newer Emphasis in Jewish History*:

All my life I have been struggling against the hitherto dominant 'lachrymose conception of Jewish history' a term which I have been using for more than forty years - because I have felt that, by exclusively overemphasizing Jewish sufferings, it distorted the total picture of the Jewish historic evolution and, at the same time, it served badly a generation which had become impatient with the 'nightmare' of endless persecutions and massacres.⁴

Essentially, Baron criticized historians like Heinrich Graetz and Simon Dubnow, who were pioneers of Jewish history and of the previous generation, for placing too much emphasis on the oppression, persecution, and dehumanization of the Jewish people. While Baron focused primarily on medieval Jewry, his anti-lachrymose approach has almost been universally accepted by scholars. A heavily lachrymose conception of Jewish history simplifies the story of the Jews to a narrow construct that does not capture the complexities, nuances, and humanity of the Jewish people. Baron argues that Jewish history should not be defined solely by suffering, oppression, and dehumanization.

However, contemporary historians such as Adam Teller and Benjamin Gampel have criticized Baron's anti-lachrymose approach by claiming that Baron downplayed the suffering of Jewish people throughout history. They argue that Baron's work

⁴ Salo W Baron, "Newer Emphases in Jewish History," *Jewish Social Studies* 25, no. 4 (October 1963): 235-248, 240.

does not accurately reflect the reality of the Jewish historical experience. Gampel and other scholars have claimed that “awareness” and “a willingness to accept” Jewish lachrymosity is just as important as anti-lachrymosity. Gampel further argues that Baron’s approach is “not useful either for a way of understanding Jewish history or even for Jewish life today.”⁵ Similarly, Teller advocates for a reinsertion of lachrymosity in the discussion of Jewish history in order to fully understand “normal” Jewish life and not downplay Jewish oppression and persecution.⁶

Moreover, Alexandra Zapruder, the author of *Salvaged Pages: Young Writers’ Diaries of the Holocaust*, implicitly rejects Baron’s approach and embraces lachrymosity. Using diaries and journals from young victims and survivors of the Holocaust, Zapruder argues against an approach that glorifies and celebrates the power and courage of the authors. These literary initiatives, according to Zapruder, cannot be seen as noble examples of the unvanquished and imperishable human spirit that defies overwhelming evil because it misrepresents the reality of their tragic situation and provides false contextualizations. These works, and other creative or intellectual pursuits, were produced in response to genocide, dehumanization, and evil. They were created, Zapruder argues, in an environment of erasure where diarists attempted to retain a place in the world. Representing these works as triumphant or courageous is misleading and does not reflect the annihilistic reality of the diarists’ situations.⁷ Diaries, journals, and other personal memorializations must be seen as responses to suffering and genocide, not “to rescue individual writers from death, to rescue a generation from oblivion, or to

⁵ Benjamin Gampel, “Reembracing the Lachrymose Theory of Jewish History” (lecture, Columbia University, New York City, NY, October 30, 2018).

⁶ Adam Teller, “Revisiting Baron’s ‘Lachrymose Conception’: The Meanings of Violence in Jewish History,” *AJS Review* 38, no. 2 (November 2014): 431-439, 439.

⁷ Alexandra Zapruder, *Salvaged Pages: Young Writers’ Diaries of the Holocaust*, Second (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015), 9.

rescue ourselves from confrontation with the final, disconsolate truth of genocide.”⁸

Ideas of agency in the context of the Holocaust have been a heavily contested topic of concern for historians. Historians such as Lawrence Langer and Michael Foucault claim that Jewish inmates did not have the capacity to exercise agency. In other words, these historians take on a lachrymose conception of Jewish history by arguing that prisoners were not capable of making their own choices or decisions during their imprisonment. However, Anna Hajkova argues in an anti-lachrymose fashion that just because prisoners of the Holocaust did not survive, that does not mean they lacked agency. Many cases in these prisoner societies point to instances of choice, such as decisions concerning who should be transported and acts of resistance. In fact, according to Hajkova, many inmates of the Theresienstadt ghetto survived due to their behaviors, actions, and choices in the ghetto.⁹

This paper seeks to create a more accurate and humanizing depiction of Jewish history by finding a balance between an emphasis on empowerment and persecution of the Jewish people and their complex stories. It demonstrates that the history of the Jews is one of resilience in the face of oppression and dehumanization without downplaying the grim reality of much of Jewish history. Understanding this balance is significant because it allows us to acknowledge and analyze the nuances and complexities of Jewish history, giving us a more accurate and human depiction of the Jewish people and their stories. By striking a balance between lachrymosity and anti-lachrymosity, scholars can write a history that empowers the Jewish people while not downplaying the persecution, oppression, and dehumanization that they have faced.

⁸ Zapruder, *Salvaged Pages*, 12.

⁹ Hájková Anna, *The Last Ghetto: An Everyday History of Theresienstadt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 6.

The sources for this paper primarily come from oral histories in the form of Holocaust survivor testimonies from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Yad Vashem, and the USC Shoah Foundation. It will also consult oral histories from the documentary films *Terezin Diary* and *Paradise Camp*, where survivors of the Theresienstadt Ghetto (and other concentration camps like Auschwitz) relay their experiences and perspectives during their imprisonment. While oral histories may present issues of reliability and accuracy, they nonetheless provide varied and nuanced perspectives that allow us to conceptualize the Theresienstadt ghetto and the Holocaust in elaborate ways. Additionally, this paper consults a multitude of documented creative initiatives such as musical scores, poetry, drawings, play scripts, diaries, and official records that will be used as evidence for the forced and voluntary artistic environment in which the prisoners engaged.

Many of the sources for this paper come from the Theresienstadt ghetto (also referred to as Terezín in Czech) due to its uniquely vibrant culture of creative and intellectual expression. Theresienstadt, which was located in Czechoslovakia, opened on November 24, 1941, and liberated on May 9, 1944. It was a melting pot of Germans, Czechs, and Austrians whose ethnic and national backgrounds marked Theresienstadt's hierarchical and cultured society. For example, German Jews frequented cultural events that featured German classics while Czech Jews attended soccer matches.¹⁰ Also, prisoners of this ghetto inadvertently showcased the simultaneous lachrymose and anti-lachrymose functions of art, music, and literature during their imprisonment.

The Nazis' use of the ghetto changed throughout its history. Theresienstadt was a transit ghetto, an advantage ghetto (for groups considered exceptions such as the elderly), a location to hold Jews for exchange, and a propaganda ghetto.¹¹ This last

¹⁰ Ibid., 4.

¹¹ Ibid., 7.

function was incredibly significant, as Theresienstadt was a model camp to deceive the outside world into thinking that the Jews were flourishing and the Nazis were not engaging in any wrongdoing. In fact, the Nazis used Theresienstadt to film the 1944 propaganda film that successfully fooled the outside world (including the Red Cross) that the Jews in Nazi-occupied territories were being treated humanely and were thriving.

Conditions inside the Theresienstadt ghetto were relatively better than other ghettos and concentration camps primarily because of its role as a model camp. However, the conditions were still abhorrent as illness, hunger, and transports were defining experiences of Theresienstadt.¹² With scarce food supplies and inhumane living conditions, the Jews in Theresienstadt struggled to survive. Norbert Troller, a survivor, remembered:

“Our rations were shortened to such an extent that hunger weakened and absorbed one's every thought. It took three to four months until one reached a plateau where the pangs of hunger were less apparent ... it seems that the human organism can get used to hunger as well.”¹³

Even more detrimental was the constant threat of deportation to concentration camps, like Auschwitz, where they would likely face death. One survivor describes the trepidation surrounding deportations in Theresienstadt, reporting that “the whole air was shivering because everybody was so nervous and waiting for the transports because nobody knew who would be in it.”¹⁴ According to Michael Barenbaum, a Rabbi and scholar of Holocaust studies, “Some 144,000 Jews were deported to Theresienstadt; of those,

¹² Ibid., 132.

¹³ Norbert Troller, *Theresienstadt: Hitler's Gift to the Jews* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 94.

¹⁴ Paul Rea, *Paradise Camp*, YouTube, 1986, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xNdOydrWDmc>.

33,000 died there and 88,000 were deported to Auschwitz. By the war's end, only 19,000 were alive."¹⁵

From 1941 to 1942, the Nazis forbade creative and intellectual expression in Theresienstadt, prompting a secret culture of improvisation and adaptation. Prisoners engaged in art, music, and literature in hidden locations around Theresienstadt, such as the attics of barracks.¹⁶ Artists who wanted to depict the grim realities of Theresienstadt hid their works in attic lofts or hollowed-out walls. Musicians were forbidden to possess sheet music or instruments and had to rely on memories from their past lives to perform. They could only engage in music by solely using their voices or adopting materials from the ghetto and transforming them into musical instruments. Zdeněk Ornest, a survivor of Theresienstadt, discusses how Jews creatively manifested these artistic initiatives, reporting:

“These performances took place almost anywhere. In lofts, in the barracks. They made the sets from anything they could find. They used something called ‘heraklit’ and other construction materials. The costumes were made of underwear and T-shirts, simply using whatever was around.”¹⁷

Then, at the end of 1942, the Nazis decided to legalize and normalize a free and vibrant cultural life for the prisoners. This most salient reason for this policy change was that the Nazis believed that Theresienstadt could be used to deceive visitors from the Red Cross and neutral countries and convince them that Jews were thriving under Nazi rule. In other words, the Nazis used Theresienstadt's cultural life to enhance the facade of a

¹⁵ Michael Berenbaum, *In Memory's Kitchen: A Legacy From the Women of Terezín*, ed. Cara De Silva, trans. Bianca Steiner Brown (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aranson Inc., 2006), x.

¹⁶ David Bloch, “Hidden Meanings: Musical Symbols in Terezín,” *India International Centre Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (2006): 110-124, 114.

¹⁷ *Terezín Diary* (The Terezín Foundation, 1989), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4X0079WImc&t=258s>.

“privileged” ghetto.¹⁸ By showcasing Theresienstadt as a place of flourishing Jewish culture to the outside world, the Nazis believed that they could get away with genocide.¹⁹ It is unclear as to why the Nazis prohibited cultural expression in the beginning of the ghetto’s existence since they were never concerned with Theresienstadt’s cultural life.²⁰ Thus, a combination of propaganda and indifference accounts for the Nazis behavior towards cultural life in Theresienstadt.

Drawings and paintings served paradoxical functions in the Theresienstadt ghetto. On one hand, the Nazis forced prisoners to create idealized and false depictions of Theresienstadt for propaganda. It was the job of many prisoners to create images that falsely represented the ghetto by depicting Theresienstadt as a productive, organized community of Jews who were thriving and self-ruling. Most of these works do not portray individuals or scenes in immense detail. Instead, these drawings and paintings were kept generalized (for example, depicting faceless individuals) so that viewers would not be provoked to raise suspicion or ask questions about the Jews’ well-being under Nazi occupation. The goal of these works was to reassure the outside world that the Jews in the Nazis’ concentration camps and ghettos were self-ruling and being treated fairly and humanely.²¹ For example, one drawing by Jo Spier depicts a bank run by Jews in Theresienstadt. Spier was a survivor of Theresienstadt who was compelled to create idealized depictions of Theresienstadt. This work is a false idealization of Theresienstadt which was intended to fool the outside world into believing that the Nazis were not engaging in any wrongdoing.²²

¹⁸ Hájková, *The Last Ghetto*, 172.

¹⁹ Marjorie Lamberti, “Making Art in the Terezin Concentration Camp,” *New England Review* 17, no. 4 (1995): 104–11, 105-107.

²⁰ Hájková, *The Last Ghetto*, 172.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 172-173.

²² “The Jewish Self - Administration's Bank -- a Drawing by Jo Spier, an Internee in the Terezin (Theresienstadt) Ghetto,” Ghetto Fighter House

On the other hand, artists in the ghetto created illegal and secret drawings and paintings that reflected the grim reality of the ghetto. Many show highly detailed and dejected figures suffering from Theresienstadt's horrid conditions. Their works are a clear marker of their attempts to display and retain their humanity and resilience while desperately seeking to maintain their place in the world in the face of suffering and erasure. These works, as mentioned before, were illegal and kept hidden from the Nazis. However, the Nazis found many of these works and sent the artists to Auschwitz, where most of them died.²³ Figure 1 shows a drawing by Bedrich Fritta, an artist from Theresienstadt who died in Auschwitz. He draws crestfallen and distorted figures in their barrack, representing the despondent atmosphere of Theresienstadt.²⁴

Archives, accessed December 29, 2022,

https://www.infocenters.co.il/gfh/notebook_ext.asp?book=110928&lang=eng, 1.

²³ Paul Rea, *Paradise Camp*, *YouTube*, 1986,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xNdOydrWDmc>.

²⁴ Samuel Gruber, "Blogger," *Blogger* (blog), September 19, 2014,

<http://samgrubersjewishartmonuments.blogspot.com/2014/09/remembering-terezin-artist-bedrich.html>, 4.



Figure 1, Bedrich Fritta. *Dwelling of the Feeble Minded*. 1942-1944. Pen and Ink Drawing.

The Theresienstadt ghetto provided the Jewish prisoners with a voluntary culture of intellectual and artistic expression. There were several motives for prisoners to engage in such activities during their persecution. Michael Flack was a musician and playwright in the Theresienstadt ghetto, and his survivor testimony is representative of the experiences of many other prisoners. Michael Flack explains that, by engaging in art, music, literature, and scholarship, he was “feeding [himself] with normalcy.”²⁵ Before the war, Flack explains how he and his family surrounded themselves daily with music and art in Czechoslovakia. Music, according to Flack, played a significant role in his adolescence and pre-war life. A skilled violinist, Flack was a member of various orchestras, including the Brno Symphony Orchestra. In short, Flack engaged in music and art in the Theresienstadt ghetto, because it was normal for him to do so in

²⁵ RG-50.934.0023, Oral history interview with Michael Flack, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC.

his pre-war life. Flack coped with the tumultuous situation and chaotic conditions that surrounded his everyday life in Theresienstadt by doing what he felt was normal: engaging in music and art. Thus, creative expression allowed Flack to resist the degrading and dehumanizing effects of Nazi persecution and gain a sense of normalcy. As Anna Hájková states:

“For the prisoners it could establish a connection to the past, giving them a sense of agency, meaning, or self-assurance. Music, moreover, is an activity that feels deeply intimate and familiar, a pursuit in which people can reconnect with their sense of individuality, humanity, and dignity.”²⁶

Children’s art in the Theresienstadt ghetto also exemplifies the use of creative expression as a coping mechanism and maintaining a sense of normalcy. Many of the drawings and paintings that children created show scenes of life before their imprisonment. Marianna Langová was from Prague and was deported to Theresienstadt on July 2, 1944. As seen in Figure 2, Langová painted a watercolor landscape with a house at the center, a garden in the foreground, two girls standing at the front of the house, and a mountain in the background. Its vibrant colors and decorous composition highlight Langová’s joyfulness and appreciation toward her home in Prague. Langová’s painting is a physical manifestation of her coping with persecution and suffering and longing to return home to life before the war. She paints normalcy to cope with the surrounding chaos and to maintain a sense of normalcy. Langová died on October 6, 1944, in Auschwitz.²⁷

²⁶ Hájková, *The Last Ghetto*, 177.

²⁷ Hana Volavková, *I Never Saw Another Butterfly: Children's Drawings and Poems from Terezín Concentration Camp, 1942-1944.*, trans. Jeanne Némocová (New York City, NY: Schocken Books, 1978), 51.



Figure 2, Marianna Langová. *House with Garden*. 1944. Watercolor on shiny red paper.

Before the war, many children engaged in art as a form of leisure. They drew or painted what they saw or scenes of current events. And so, just like Flack did, children responded to suffering by going back to what they knew to be normal. They painted what they saw every day in Theresienstadt: the streets, the people, the landscape. Sonja Waldsteinová was a trained and talented pupil who painted a Theresienstadt barrack in watercolor in immense detail. As seen in Figure 3, the barrack is large and imposing, dominating the composition while the colors are muted and dull, possibly expressing Theresienstadt's despondent atmosphere. Painting or drawing was a normal activity that many prisoners engaged in and allowed them to cope with and resist the Nazi's dehumanizing efforts. Waldsteinová chose to cope with the chaos surrounding her by doing what she felt was normal.²⁸ Acting to retain a sense of normalcy and cope with suffering and persecution allowed Jewish prisoners to display their resilience and humanity and defy the Nazi's dehumanizing efforts.

²⁸ Hana Volavková, *I Never Saw Another Butterfly: Children's Drawings and Poems from Terezín Concentration Camp, 1942-1944.*, trans. Jeanne Némocová (New York City, NY: Schocken Books, 1978), 11.

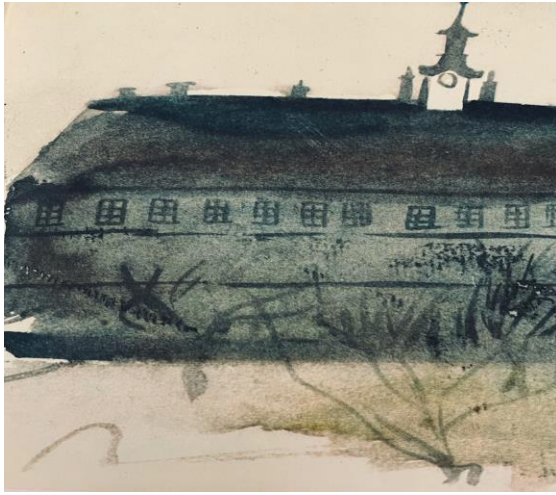


Figure 3, Sonja Waldsteinová. *Terezín Barracks*. 1943. Detail of watercolor on tinted paper.

Creative and intellectual expression in the Holocaust also served as a mechanism for prisoners to retain their humanity and preserve their mental state. Prisoners who engaged in music, art, literature, and scholarship were constantly expressing and affirming their humanity. This rich cultural activity created a medium of release from the misery of their current situation, enabling prisoners to display incredible resilience. Felix Kolmer, a survivor of Theresienstadt, reports that “This cultural resistance was really a fight for the self-preservation of the inmates [and] for the improvement of their mental state.”²⁹ Creative and intellectual expression allowed prisoners to resist the process of dehumanization and counter the Nazis’ attempts at mental degradation. The famous Czech composer Raphael Schacter and his choir bravely and covertly condemned the Nazis by performing Verdi’s “Requiem” in Latin. The lyrics expressed the resilience of

²⁹ *Terezín Diary* (The Terezín Foundation, 1989), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4X0079WImc&t=258s>.

the Jews, as one verse proclaims that “Whatever is hidden shall be revealed and nothing shall remain unavenged.”³⁰ The Nazis could never achieve their ultimate goal, the complete dehumanization of the “Jewish race,” because prisoners in the Theresienstadt ghetto were constantly affirming their humanity by engaging in an exceptionally vibrant cultural and artistic atmosphere.

This cultural resistance as a mechanism of prisoners expressing their humanity and resilience was showcased in the performance of a children’s opera called “Brundibar” by Hans Krása. Originally written in 1938 for a government competition, which was canceled due to Nazi occupation, Krása and his cast reconstructed his musical based on memory in Theresienstadt. “Brundibar” became the most popular performance in the Theresienstadt Ghetto largely due to its symbolic message. “Brundibar,” tells the journey of children who have to deliver milk to their sick mother. However, their voyage is thwarted by an evil organ grinder named Brundibar. Eventually, the children defeat Brundibar and deliver the milk to their sick mother. The themes of Krása’s works, good triumphing over evil and the ability to maintain strength despite hardship, greatly appealed to the Jewish audiences in Theresienstadt and explains its popularity.³¹ Zdeněk Ornest describes what the musical meant to the Jewish prisoners:

The story of Brundibar ends like this: “Brundibar is defeated. We have beaten him. Play the drums. We have won. We have won because we did not give in because we all sang our happy song.” And these words, they were not only about Brundibar, they were not. And that is why even the grown-ups who came to see it took it to mean that, someday, good will prevail over

³⁰ Susan King, “Defiant Requiem’: Nazi Prisoners Found Humanity in Music. This Concert Keeps the Message Alive,” *Los Angeles Times* (*Los Angeles Times*, April 10, 2019), <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-defiant-requiem-20190410-story.html>, 6.

³¹ Jennifer Blackwell, “Brundibar in Terezin: Music as Spiritual Resistance during the Holocaust,” *Nota Bene: Canadian Undergraduate Journal of Musicology* 4, no. 1 (2011), 18-19.

evil and prevail over this evil Brundibar. And that is why it was such a huge success and why it was performed so many times until all were gone.³²

In other words, “Brundibar” was so popular because the Jewish prisoners used the messages in the musical and recontextualized it to their situation under Nazi oppression.³³ Just like how the good children triumphed over the evil Brundibar, the good Jews will eventually triumph over the evil Nazis. “Brundibar” provided an outlet of hope for the prisoners and expressed their resilience and willingness to never give up despite their persecution and suffering. It was an artistic manifestation of Jews retaining their humanity and displaying their determination to survive. One survivor, interviewed in the 1986 documentary *Paradise Camp*, describes:

The only thing I still see in my mind is the main figure, which was a little boy, fantastic actor, with a little mustache looking like Hitler, acting like Hitler, but like the crazy Hitler. So he absolutely ridiculed Hitler and they ridiculed the system. How they could perform it, how they dared to perform it, and how they got away with it, it is still a puzzle for me.³⁴

Performers of Brundibar outwardly resisted the Nazis by mocking Hitler while triumphantly expressing that the Jews will defeat the Nazis. One must bear in mind that it was young children performing and taking on a physical embodiment of hope, resilience, power, and humanity.

Class position, ethnicity, and gender defined the character of Theresienstadt’s cultural life. One’s place in Theresienstadt’s social hierarchy, their role or impact on cultural life. For example,

³² *Terezín Diary* (The Terezín Foundation, 1989), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4X0079WImc&t=258s>.

³³ Blackwell, “Brundibar in Terezin,” 19.

³⁴ Paul Rea, *Paradise Camp*, *YouTube*, 1986, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xNdOydrWDmc>.

young Czech Jews, who occupied the highest status in Theresienstadt, could gain access to tickets to performances to events like operas, which were particularly popular in the ghetto. Also, all three of the Elders of the Jews, who were a part of Theresienstadt's Jewish self-administration, gave talks in lecture series because doing so allowed them to gain status and publicity. Additionally, different cultural activities affirmed ethnic affiliations. Typically, Czech Jews attended soccer matches and Czech theater, cabaret, and operas. They rarely attended German and Austrian dramatic productions. Some Czech Jews even expressed disdain for German theater. On the other hand, German and Austrian Jews tended to attend chamber music concerts and participated in education, which was particularly significant to their culture before the war. However, Theresienstadt also offered a space for interethnic interactions. For example, most groups attended performances that played music from Mozart. Additionally, on rare occasions, German Jews would attend Czech musical productions. Still, these interethnic encounters were rare as different ethnicities in Theresienstadt tended to define cultural life for themselves based on their pre-war lives. Finally, even though women rarely participated in Theresienstadt cultural life, gender still was key for cultural production in the ghetto, as female figures in performances saliently established ties to an ethnic entity. Thus, social hierarchies, gender, and the interconnectedness of ethnicity and class played important roles in the character of Theresienstadt's artistic and intellectual environment.³⁵

Physical resistance during the Holocaust was incredibly rare. The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943 was the largest and perhaps most significant example of physical resistance during the Holocaust when Jewish prisoners took up arms and fought the Nazis for nearly one month. Although 13,000 Jews perished, Marek Edelman, the only survivor from the Jewish Combat Organization, explains that they resisted in order to prevent “the

³⁵ Hájková, *The Last Ghetto*, 175-200.

Germans alone to pick the time and place of our deaths.”³⁶ In Theresienstadt, some young prisoners planned physical resistance as well. While an armed rebellion never occurred due to the unlikelihood of success, their plans for one show the spirit, humanity, and resilience that remained within the prisoners. However, instances of physical resistance should also be looked at as desperate attempts at survival in an annihilistic context as Felix Kolmer describes:

In Terezín, the young people, in particular, did not want to accept their situation as it was. So there were acts of resistance which while not resulting in an armed uprising, were preparations for one. I, myself, was a member of that resistance. My assignment was to find escape routes from Terezín, because under the ramparts there were many underground passages that led out of Terezín. Although I knew about them, I did not tell about them because it was nonsense to escape from Terezín in those years. It would have been impossible to survive on the outside until the war's end. There was no uprising. The idea had been that in case the SS were to liquidate the camp we did not want to be slaughtered like sheep. We wanted to fight. And if we died, we would take a few SS men along and hope they end up in hell.³⁷

On the other hand, the Nazis forced prisoners of Theresienstadt to engage in art, music, literature, and scholarship as a mode of propaganda. In September 1943, the Nazis planned to deport thousands of Danish Jews to Theresienstadt, Auschwitz, and other ghettos and camps. However, the Nazis were met with heavy resistance from the Danish population and top officials. A few

³⁶ Michael . Kaufman, “Marek Edelman, Commander in Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, Dies at 90,” *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, October 3, 2009),

<https://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/03/world/europe/03edelman.html#:~:text=%E2%80%9CI%20was%20a%20defensive%20action,home%20and%20Polish%20at%20work,2.>

³⁷ *Terezín Diary* (The Terezín Foundation, 1989), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4X0O79WImc&t=258s.>

days before the transports were scheduled, the Danes managed to send 7,000 Danish Jews to neutral Sweden to safety. However, approximately 500 Danish Jews were sent to Theresienstadt. The chaos surrounding these deportations and the growing rumors of extermination camps prompted the Danish Red Cross to petition for a visit to Theresienstadt to observe the Jews living under Nazi rule. The Danes and the rest of the outside world placed substantial pressure on the Nazis to grant this petition. Then, in the spring of 1944, the Nazis permitted the Danish Red Cross to visit Theresienstadt in order to expel these “rumors.” Adolf Eichman, head of the Jewish Affairs and Evacuation Affairs, and the Reichssicherheitshauptamt (Reich Security Main Office) were put in charge of organizing this visit. They realized that if they prepared Theresienstadt to look like a fantastical paradise for the Jews, they could fool the Red Cross and the outside world and eliminate rumors that it was an extermination camp. In other words, by transforming Theresienstadt into a utopian facade for the Jews, the Nazis believed that they would get away with genocide.³⁸

Before the Red Cross visit to Theresienstadt, the Nazis forced the prisoners to “beautify” the ghetto by repairing streets, tearing down abandoned buildings, and converting barracks into refined shops, libraries, or grocery stores. This beautification program, led by SS commander Karl Rahm, converted the town square into a park with a music pavilion, cafe, and a children’s playground. And perhaps most tragic, to alleviate overcrowding, around 7,500 Jews were deported to Auschwitz.³⁹ During the visit, the Nazis showcased Theresienstadt’s vibrant artistic and intellectual culture as delegates toured. They showed them art that the Jewish prisoners created that depicted an idealized and false

³⁸ Lucy S. Dawidowicz, “Bleaching the Black Lie: The Case of Theresienstadt,” *Salmagundi* 29 (1975): 125-140.

³⁹ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. “Theresienstadt: Red Cross Visit” Holocaust Encyclopedia. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/theresienstadt-red-cross-visit>. Accessed on 12/20/22.

depiction of Theresienstadt. Additionally, the Nazis forced Jewish orchestras to perform music for the delegates.⁴⁰ Jewish functionaries were responsible for preparing these cultural events while the Nazis had no information on the details.⁴¹ As historian Lucy S. Dawidowicz wrote, Theresienstadt became a “dazzling fantasy, while the misery would persist unchanged behind the false front.”⁴²

Also, following the visit, the Nazis filmed a propaganda movie that fooled the outside world that, under Nazi rule, Jews were happy and flourishing. It was called “Theresienstadt: A Documentary from the Jewish Settlement Area”⁴³ and included clips of an orchestra performance, prisoners reading in a library, and a lecture. Figure 5 shows a clip of an orchestra performing in a music hall while Figure 6 shows a clip of Jews playing an organized soccer match with spectators surrounding the perimeter of the field. “Brundibar” was also performed for the delegates and included in the propaganda film.⁴⁴ Helga Kinsky, a survivor of Theresienstadt and Auschwitz, reports that “nothing [about the film] was true. They opened coffee shops; they flew in roses from Holland to plant on the main square; they built a stand for the orchestra to look like if we were living in a spa.”⁴⁵ The Nazis’ plan to deceive the Red Cross and the outside world worked.⁴⁶ In their report of the visit, the Red Cross commented that they “were astonished to find out that the ghetto was a community leading an almost normal existence, as we were prepared for the worst.”⁴⁷ Thus, the creative environment forced upon the Jewish prisoners in

⁴⁰ Lamberti, “Making Art,” 107.

⁴¹ Hájková, *The Last Ghetto*, 173.

⁴² Dawidowicz, “Bleaching the Black Lie,” 134.

⁴³ Hájková, *The Last Ghetto*, 10.

⁴⁴ Blackwell, “Brundibar in Terezín,” 19.

⁴⁵ *Terezín Diary* (The Terezín Foundation, 1989),

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4X0079WImc&t=258s>.

⁴⁶ Dawidowicz, “Bleaching the Black Lie,” 139.

⁴⁷ Adler Hans Günther, *Die Verheimlichte Wahrheit* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck Verlag, 1958), 355-357.

Theresienstadt intended to depict a false reality of the ghetto in order to reduce any suspicion that the Nazis were dehumanizing and exterminating the Jewish population fooled the Danish Red Cross.



Figure 5, “Orchestra performance,” Kurt Gerron and Ivan Fric, Hitler Gives the Jews a Town, 1944.



Figure 6, “Soccer match,” Kurt Gerron and Ivan Fric, Hitler Gives the Jews a Town, 1944.

The Nazis played music over loudspeakers in several camps to reeducate prisoners and later, demoralize them. In the early stages of the concentration camp system, the Nazis played propaganda speeches and German music over radios and loudspeakers to reeducate prisoners deemed political opponents of the regime. In Dachau, German national music from the anti-Semitic composer Richard Wagner was played to garner support for Nazism from political opponents. In later years, Nazis used loudspeakers to demoralize prisoners and destroy their desires to resist the regime. Victory announcements, even false ones, from German radio stations were played to create a sense of hopelessness among prisoners that they cannot defeat the Nazis. For instance, loudspeakers in Ravensbrück informed female prisoners of a failed attempt on Hitler's life, followed by martial march music. This display of strength and virtual immortality of the Nazi regime was meant to crush the spirits of the prisoners.⁴⁸

In concentration camps like Mauthausen and Auschwitz, the Nazis used music in particular in order to dehumanize, weaken, torture, and humiliate Jewish prisoners. Guido Fackler identifies several ways in which the Nazis sought to use music as a means of destruction. Most commonly, prisoners were forced to sing on command in various scenarios, including during labor, while marching, and to provide background music for punishments. The types of songs prisoners were forced to sing included German folk songs, anti-Semitic songs such as "Judenlied" ("Jews' Song"), and other songs intended to demoralize and dehumanize prisoners.⁴⁹ Eberhard Schmidt, a survivor of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, reported that:

The SS made singing, like everything else they did, a mockery, a torment for the prisoners... Anyone who did not know the song was beaten. Anyone who sang too softly was beaten. Anyone who sang too loud was beaten. The SS men lashed out

⁴⁸ Fackler, "Music in Concentration Camps," 6.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 2-6.

wildly... The SS men always found a reason... when in the evening we had to drag our dead and murdered comrades back into the camp, we had to sing. Hour after hour we had to, whether in the burning sun, freezing cold, or in snow or rain storms, on the roll call plaza we had to stand and sing of... the girl with the dark brown eyes, the forest or the wood grouse.⁵⁰

Thus, for many prisoners who were forced to sing on command, music became a means of humiliation and destruction that weakened them physically and mentally.

Forced singing was commonly used by the guards as a tool of collective humiliation and asserting absolute power over the prisoners. Guards would frequently demand that prisoners sing in the prison yard after a day of hard labor. Wolfgang Szepansky, a survivor of Sachsenhausen, reports his damaging experiences with forced singing, recording:

Whenever it struck his fancy, the camp commander would demand a song. Then a step-ladder would promptly be found for the conductor. He would climb up, announce the title of the song, and then raise his baton. [...] The most popular songs were “Haselnuss” and “Fröhlich sein.” In spite of the cheerful text and jaunty melody, it sounded more like a dirge when from the raw throats of tired men the slow and tortuous line would issue forth: “Then let us sing and be cheerful.” The eerie sound would carry through the air all the way to Oranienburg. And if it was not found satisfactory, then the group would be interrupted and the song would start again from the beginning.⁵¹

The emotional and physical effects of forced singing were incredibly damaging. Singing in the prison yard in often cold and rainy conditions drained the inmates’ last bit of physical strength

⁵⁰ Eberhard Schmidt, *Ein Lied - ein Atemzug. Erinnerungen und Dokumente*. Gesprächspartner und Herausgeber Manfred Machlitt (Berlin, 1987), 130.

⁵¹ Wolfgang Szepansky, *Beitrag zur Dokumentation der Geschichte des KZ Sachsenhausen: Manuskript über seine Häftlingszeit im KZ Sachsenhausen* (Berlin, without date, Arbeiterlied Archiv, Sign. 10, 8).

which was crucial for survival. Many prisoners collapsed, sometimes fatally, due to the exhaustion from forced singing compounded by hard labor, disease, and lack of food and water.⁵² The survivor Hans Haase explained “How often [the SS guard Gustav] Sorge tortured us in the evenings for hours with singing or saluting by doffing our caps. It isn’t possible to count how many men died of hunger, cold and wet weather, or illness.”⁵³

Forced singing during the Holocaust represents a transformation of the traditional functions of collective singing. Normally, collective singing was, and still is today, a medium of self-expression and leisure. It was a form of pleasure, culture, and recreation that connected people to pleasant experiences. However, in the context of pain, suffering, and oppression, collective singing took on torturous functions for the prisoners. The prisoners were forced to sing cheerful songs that were completely dichotomous to their emotions of suffering and agony. This produced mental anguish as music was remodeled by the prisoners as a form of destruction, torment, and humiliation. Music for prisoners became an experience of violence and torture. In the most basic sense, music was transformed from a positive force to a negative, traumatic influence. As historian Juliane Brauer writes, “Pleasure had been replaced by pain, the sense of enjoyment by despair, the feeling of familiarity by fear.”⁵⁴

Additionally, the Nazis utilized camp orchestras called *Lagnerkapellens* that served a multitude of purposes. Shirli Gilbert writes that *Lagnerkapallens* assisted in the extermination process by helping maintain discipline and order in the camps.⁵⁵ Consisting of amateur and professional musicians, members of the

⁵² Juliane Brauer, “How Can Music Be Torturous?: Music in Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camps,” *Music and Politics* X, no. 1 (2016): 1-41, 12.

⁵³ Hans Haase, *Zeugenschaft an die Staatsanwaltschaft* (Bonn: Februar 1956, Archiv Sachsenhausen, Oranienburg, Sign. JD 2/3), 84.

⁵⁴ Brauer, “How Can Music Be Torturous?,” 13.

⁵⁵ Shirli Gilbert, *Music in the Holocaust: Confronting Life in the Nazi Ghettos and Camps* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 145.

Lagnerkapallen were generally considered “privileged,” giving them a better chance of survival. However, their emotional survival was still vulnerable to destruction. Lagnerkapallens performed during punishments, executions, and the selection process. At the Monowitz concentration camp, the trumpeter Herman Sachnowitz described how the captured man who tried to escape would be forced to shout the words ‘Hurra, hurra, ich bin wieder da!’ (Hurrah, hurrah, I am back again!) while marching to his execution while the orchestra performed parade music.⁵⁶ This humiliated the captured victim while subsequently causing some survivors to accumulate feelings of guilt and depression that would persist throughout their lifetimes.⁵⁷

Furthermore, Lagnerkapallens performed music during the selection process, particularly in Birkenau. Here, the fate of newly arrived prisoners was determined, as the Nazis selected prisoners to either perform hard labor or go to their death. Esther Bejarano, a survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau, writes “We knew that all the people who streamed out of the wagons were going to the gas chambers. And we had to play pleasant music for them.”⁵⁸ Lagnerkapallens played during this process in order to deceive the newly arrived prisoners and make them believe that they were in no danger. They functioned to deceive prisoners and maintain a sense of order and diminish uncertainty and chaos. This made the players feel complicit in the extermination process. Halina Opielka, a Polish musician, records that many newly arrived prisoners “listened eagerly to the music” and were given a false sense of “courage and hope that this place where they had just arrived could not be too terrible if they were being ‘greeted’ by an orchestra.”⁵⁹ Members of these Lagnerkapallens suffered greatly,

⁵⁶ Gilbert, *Music in the Holocaust*, 176.

⁵⁷ Fackler, “Music in Concentration Camps,” 10.

⁵⁸ Esther Bejarano, *Man Nannte Mich Krümel”: Eine jüdische Jugend in den Zeiten Der Verfolgung* (Hamburg: Curio-Verlag, 1991), 23.

⁵⁹ Gabriele Knapp, *Das Frauenorchester in Auschwitz: Musikalische Zwangsarbeit und ihre Bewältigung* (Hamburg: von Bockel, 1996), 229.

especially since the meaning and functions of music for them shifted from a positive mode of self-expression to a medium of deception and torture.⁶⁰

Scholars of Jewish history must find a balance between lachrymose and anti-lachrymose conceptions. When scholars advocate for an emphasis on one or the other, they fail to reflect the nuances and complexities of the story of the Jews. They further fall short of relaying an accurate conception of Jewish history.

Examining the functions of creative and intellectual expression during the Holocaust allows us to show the resilience and power of the Jews without downplaying their suffering. The Theresienstadt ghetto was a place where Jews could voluntarily and almost freely respond to their suffering and persecution by engaging in art, music, literature, and scholarship. By engaging in creative and intellectual expression, the Jews showcased their humanity. The Nazis could never fully dehumanize the Jewish people because they still had a clear and innate drive to perform and express themselves. On the other hand, the Nazis used music and art to torture, humiliate, and dehumanize the Jewish people. Forcing prisoners to sing on command and participate in camp orchestras created a lingering sense of guilt and depression that persisted throughout survivors' lifetimes. It also made prisoners feel complicit in the suffering and deaths of their fellow prisoners.

Therefore, scholars must seek to retell moments and periods in Jewish history through a simultaneous lachrymose and anti-lachrymose lens. They must show that the Jewish people have retained their humanity and displayed incredible resilience in times of crises without downplaying their suffering and oppression.

Doing this will create more accurate, elaborate, and human conceptions of the Jewish people and their complex stories.

⁶⁰ Brauer, "How Can Music Be Torturous?," 13.