The Theresienstadt Ghetto: Its Characteristics and Perspective

Ruth Bondy

[Note: Ruth Bondy is a writer, journalist and translator, residing in Israel. Born in the former Czechoslovakia, she survived Theresienstadt and Auschwitz.]

The Theresienstadt ghetto is difficult to classify. It was not a concentration camp in the usual sense of those words and was in fact unique among the ghettos established across the face of occupied Europe. For one, Theresienstadt was the only ghetto that did not grow out of an existing Jewish community, but was founded in a place where no Jewish population (except for perhaps half a dozen assimilated families) had existed before. It was also the only ghetto the encompassed an entire city, albeit only a small garrison city that had formerly housed a population of 7,000 people - half of them soldiers, half civilians who earned their livelihood primarily by servicing the army. Yet not-withstanding all its limitations and vicissitudes, which were determined by the Germans, the Theresienstadt ghetto (or Terezin, as the Czech inmates preferred to call it) had all the markings of a Jewish city.

That was likewise how it was envisioned in the autumn of 1941 by the heads of the Prague Jewish community (who were also the leaders of the broader Jewish community in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia) and, especially, Jacob Edelstein, the first Judenalteste (“Elder of the Jews”) of Terezin, as preparations were being made to establish the ghetto. I have not been able to find any written corroboration of the insistent rumor that that the ghetto was established on Czech soil at Edelstein’s instigation, though it is well known that in the autumn of 1939 he returned from the Nisko deportation - the first attempt to establish a “reservation” for Jews in the vicinity of Lublin - determined to do everything possible to prevent any further deportations from the Protectorate to the East. In testimony given prior to his trial in Jerusalem, Adolf Eichmann claimed that there was talk of establishing a ghetto in the Protectorate after Reinhard Heydrich was appointed Reichsprotektor of Bohemia and Moravia and boasted at a press conference that the Protectorate would
be purged of Jews within eight weeks. Heydrich’s own statements at meetings held with senior SS officers in Prague in October 1941 reveal only that from the outset the Theresienstadt ghetto was never meant to be anything more than a way station.

The uniqueness of the Terezin ghetto also lay in its administration, which embraced elements of both a municipal bureaucracy and a labor camp. The ghetto’s entire population - from the infants born there (about 700 in number) to the elderly who were brought in from all over Central Europe - received food or at least a hot liquid (or perhaps we should say a hot liquid that had cooled off) three times a day; that included lunch, which consisted of a gruel defined as soup and potatoes or a dumpling and a daily ration of bread. This is not to say that the residents of the ghetto ate to their fill, for even in this ghetto - privileged by contrast to the ones in the East – about 34,000 people died. But the very fact that no one in Terezin remained without food for so much as a single day went a long way toward determining the ghetto’s character. Despite the thefts, pilfering, favoritism, and class differences, the struggle over food was not as desperate there as in other ghettos.

The question therefore arises: Was the uniqueness of the Terezin ghetto – meaning the institutions for youngsters that cared in one form or another for every one of the 15,000 children and youth up to the age of sixteen who passed through the ghetto during the three and a half years of its existence; the health services available to all; the labor service tendered by all residents of the ghetto, young and old, each according to his capabilities and not just as a duty required by the Germans, or is it possible that the inner “Jewish factor” was a decisive force here? To what degree were the nature, administration, and life-style of the ghetto and the illusion that it would serve as a haven until the end of the war related to the character of Central European Jewry and specifically the Jews of Bohemia and Moravia, who made up the ghetto’s leadership between the autumn of 1941 and January 1943, when the ghetto’s image was forged?

I have no doubt whatsoever that the Jewish ethos had a decisive influence on the way of life in the Terezin ghetto, even though it was the Germans who set down most of the basic rules of existence. I do not wish to dwell on the cultural life in the ghetto precisely because this aspect of life in Terezin is so well known today. Instead I wish

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1 Adolf Eichmann, Israel Police, National Headquarters Office 0-6, Reel No.3, pg. 27.
to focus attention on the law-abiding nature so deeply ingrained in the Jews of the Protectorate after living for generations under the Austro-Hungarian monarchy.

On the one hand, in their reverence for regulations, discipline, and the law in general, the Jews actually made it easier for the Germans in confiscating Jewish property prior to the deportations (for example, by supplying detailed lists enumerating every article that was about to be stolen from them. This same attitude was probably one explanation for the relative paucity of escape attempts. (The small number of Jews who went underground in the Protectorate can be explained, inter alia, by the character traits common to the Czechs and the Jews who lived among them. The Czechs, too, were accustomed to obeying the law – at least for the sake of appearances – and therefore refused to shelter Jews, even in return for payment.)

On the other hand, these same characteristics were the ones that shaped the way of life in the ghetto. Despite the ghastly overcrowding – about 150,000 people per square kilometer at the height, when as many as 30-50,000 people were crammed between the walls of the garrison, whose streets measured 700 meters long – there was no violence. No one’s life was threatened – at least not by a Jew (with the exception of the “official” liquidation of an informer from Vienna). Nor was there a single incident of robbery, rape, or serious physical assault*. Most of the criminal offenses committed by Jews were thefts – primarily of food – and with the perspective of time it sometimes seems that the transgressors were punished too harshly by the Jewish courts. The effects of unrelieved tension, fear of deportation to the East, the wear and tear of waiting on seemingly endless lines, and the unspeakable congestion found an outlet, at most, in raised voices, a word of reproach, or, rarely, a fistfight, slap across the face, or shove, which were regarded as misdemeanors and treated most severely by the Jewish courts. Their sentences were published regularly in the Tagesbefehl (“Daily Instruction”).

* The phenomenon of the nearly complete absence of physical assaults and murder in the ghettos was not limited to the Theresienstadt ghetto. This characteristic generally exemplified life in Eastern Europe. -Ed.

“Alfred Reichmann has been sentenced to three weeks imprisonment for pushing a woman resident of the ghetto so forcefully that she fell and injured her right ankle.”

“Leopold Kogos has been sentenced to twenty-four hours’ imprisonment for slapping a fellow resident of the ghetto.”
Another factor that influenced the life of the Terezin ghetto was the pioneer-Zionist bent of its leadership, certainly until the removal of Edelstein and his closest aides in the autumn and winter of 1943 and, to a steadily lessening degree, until the liberation of the ghetto in May 1945. This point was the focus of my interest as I was writing a biography of Jacob Edelstein. It is also the reason that my lecture deals primarily with the first two years of the ghetto’s existence, that is, until the initiation of the beautification campaign (Verschonerung) to prepare Terezin for the June 1944 visit of a delegation from the International Red Cross.

It was not incidental that Zionists assumed a leading role in running the larger communities of Bohemia and Moravia after the Nazi occupation. The Zionist movement was the only well-organized Jewish political body, despite the paucity of its membership, and to a certain degree the Zionist ideology had prepared its adherents for the shock of being segregated from the population at large. The concept of “a people that dwells alone” was not something new for them – at least not in theory – and this is why the Zionists regarded themselves as bearing the chief responsibility toward both the bewildered Jewish population and the Germans.

“Today only the Zionist movement can rightfully take on the leadership of the people,” Chaim Hoffmann (Yahil) and Jacob Edelstein, leaders of the Socialist-Zionists, after the Munich Agreement. Unquestionably, however, long-standing Zionist ambitions also came into play here. Considering the new circumstances that crystallized after the Munich Agreement and the subsequent German takeover of March 15, 1939, the Zionists hoped to make inroads among the Jewish masses (something they had never been able to do before) and prepare them – or at least the youngsters – for immigration to Palestine when the proper time came.

This was the policy followed by Jacob Edelstein, who had been director of the Palestine Office in Prague from 1933 to 1941. In fact, it had been the guideline even before there was an idea of establishing a ghetto or ghettos within the Protectorate, i.e., during the deliberations of the Madagascar Plan, after Edelstein’s participation in a meeting on this subject in Eichmann’s Berlin office in July 1940, and even when compulsory labor service was instituted in the Prague community at the end of that year. Providing Zionist-oriented leadership, training for a pioneering life, integrating the Jews in the Wehrmacht’s war effort, and ensuring a haven for the Jews until the

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3 The biography was published recently in Hebrew; see, Edelstein, Neged ha-Zman, Tel Aviv, 1981.
Nazi’s were defeated – and their defeat appeared to be inevitable even during the days of Germany’s great victories on the eastern front – were Edelstein’s objectives. They changed somewhat in December 1941, just prior to his departure for Terezin, and especially a month later, after the first hangings there and the initial deportation to the East. Then he and his aides realized that the ghetto was something quite different from the “Jewish city” that its planners in the Prague community had envisioned as an organized, productive, self-sustaining unit that would prove indispensable to the German war economy. Edelstein expressed his personal creed on this subject in a letter sent to his aides in December 1942, marking the end of the ghetto’s first year:

Was it right to take my good friends with me [and they went with him to the ghetto voluntarily], to draw them into chaos and tragedy? Where did I find the moral justification for such conduct? Today it can be said that our pioneering ideology taught us that we must always be wherever the fate of the Jewish people is leading to tragedy but at the same time is being created anew. Who if not we are called upon to come to [its] aid during moments of unsurpassed agony and fateful decision? I never understood or explained the concept of pioneer in the narrow sense of the word. To be a pioneer means not only to be a laborer but the envoy of fulfillment, to find the positive in the negative, and to lay the foundations of a new life for the community as a whole.⁴

The institutions serving the children and youth in the Terezin ghetto were for the most part a direct extension of the Youth Aliyah schools and the activities of the Zionist youth movements. It was not by chance that the management of the youth care was placed entirely in the hands of members of Hechalutz. The same was true of the Labor Service Department. Edelstein regarded these two departments as prime instruments for forging the image of the Jewish youth of the future (and evidently failed to discern the dimensions of the impending Holocaust).

When the ghetto’s Jewish Council, under Edelstein’s leadership, decided in May 1942 to reduce the bread ration for non-laborers (i.e., the elderly) and increase the ration of those engaged in arduous labor, it was motivated by more than a desire to see to it that the ghetto was well managed. In the summer of 1942, Theresienstadt began to fill up

⁴ Zeev Shek Collection (Theresienstadt collection), Yad Vashem Archives.
with elderly people brought in from all over the Reich (in accordance with Heydrich’s
pronouncement at the Wannsee Conference about transforming it into a ghetto of old
people). The ruling on the bread ration was a very difficult decision, for it was
precisely the elderly who lacked access to additional sources of nourishment (and
because of it, Edelstein clashed with the representatives of the Jews from the Reich
and from Austria who had been opted onto the Jewish Council in the autumn of 1942
by order of the Germans). This shift in the rules for distributing bread (all told, the
difference was one slice per day, but under ghetto conditions the change was
appreciable) was designed to strengthen the labor force, which worked sixty to eighty
hours a week. But most of all it was meant to protect the ghetto’s youth, the
youngsters and workers for the sake of the nation’s future, to ensure the survival of
the biological nucleus. Even though Edelstein was not aware of the systematic
extermination using gas – and said as much during his last days in the Bunker (Prison)
at Auschwitz – he did know that his people were engaged in a war for survival. When
the German regulations concerning the termination of all pregnancies were published,
he commented: “They want to crush our people” (“Sie wollen unser Volk aufreiben”).
It seems to me that traces of this attitude can also be seen in the Jewish Council’s
consent to draw up the lists of candidates for deportation to the East. (No one spoke of
extermination camps. For them “the East” meant a harsh place where people died of
cold, hunger, and disease, but death factories were beyond the conception of the Jews
in the pre-Holocaust age.) When the first transports were sent directly from Prague to
the Lodz ghetto, it was the Germans who made up the lists of deportees from the
general card file, and they left room for reconsidering individual cases. But in Terezin
the Jewish leadership received specifications from the German command as to the
number of deportees and their breakdown by age and country of origin – and
sometimes occupation, physical condition, or special punishments as well. Within this
framework the Transport Committee had to determine exactly who was to be
deported. While it was still within its competence – i.e., before the Germans decided
on the gradual liquidation of the ghetto – the committee tried to preserve a biological
nucleus: children and youngsters. Laborers and pioneers, and a professional work
force (in addition to an appreciable number of people with good connections). If
World War II had ended – as many and the Allies expected it to – by the autumn of

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5 Nuremberg Documents, NG-2586-G
1944, there would have been about 20,000 relatively young people left in Terezin, most of them still of sound body and mind. Then the policy championed by his wife, Miriam, and his son, Aryeh, in June 1944 would have seemed less naive to us and further from German interests.

The Germans exploited not only the Jews’ weaknesses, their differences in national temperament, internal squabbles, and readiness to close their eyes to reality and believe only what was convenient for them to believe, but also their human virtues: the desire to prove to their persecutors that even under ghetto conditions they were able to live normal lives and maintain a basic standard of sanitation, culture, and human conduct. And so it was that in 1943 they turned Terezin into a model ghetto, a Potemkin village, for a show designed to hoodwink the entire world. The great tragedy, or irony, of it – depending on how you look at the affair – is that the Jews were interested in having a “model city” long before the Germans were. But as they were unable to achieve that standard because of the contrast turnover and the flooding of the ghetto with old people, they hoped at least to create conditions in which they could live as human beings, a place in which they could take pride despite the Germans’ truculence. Even though the letters sent to the free world by Edelstein, his deputy, Otto Zucker, and the rest of the people who held positions of responsibility were written at the instigation of the Germans and under close scrutiny of German censorship, the sense of pride that comes across in Edelstein’s letter of October 1942, for example (the only one he was allowed to send to Switzerland), sounds quite sincere:

As for myself, I am up to my ears in work. As director of the entire organization, I bear great responsibility. Physically and emotionally I live in a constant state of supreme tension, but the belief that I am dedicated to my work and the success of my efforts give me cause for sincere happiness. Work on behalf of the community, difficult as it may be, always generates the strength and courage to embark on new beginnings and new endeavors. Running a community is no simple matter. It is not necessary to explain how complex such work really is. Everything must be organized so that things work in tandem and mesh with one another like gears. An administrative apparatus, technical arrangements, economic enterprises, a sanitation system – everything must be taken into consideration and set up. Choosing the proper
experts and putting them in the right places – that is no simple task either. If I am able to sum up these efforts as a success, you can imagine my sense of satisfaction and share my joy over these achievements.6

In addressing myself to those achievements, I do not wish to devote my remarks to the theatre, concerts, lectures, or children’s opera – things that have been brought to the world's attention over the years – but rather to the technical accomplishments, which are no less impressive in their own right. When the first group of Jews reached Terezin at the end of November 1941, they found only one vat, with a capacity of 300 liters, in the Sudeten barracks; a year later 50,000 servings of “coffee” could be prepared within two hours. During the ghetto’s early days, the heavily taxed small waterworks and electric-power station of the city broke down; within a year, additional wells were dug, the pipes were replaced, and there was enough water for everyone to wash daily – assuming one had sufficient strength to do so and albeit in cold water. The town’s old brewery was converted to supply steam for the kitchens and hospitals. Despite the high water table – a mere 60 centimeters below ground – and the proximity of the Eger River, flooding and the overflow of sewage were prevented. It is true that the vital condition for these improvements was the Germans’ consent to execute them and their willingness to supply the raw materials, or at least approve their improvisation. The Germans obviously agreed for reasons of their own, especially the desire to prevent the spread of disease in a population area right on the border of the Reich. But this condition certainly did not account for everything. In fact, little would have been accomplished had it not been for high professional level of the water and electrical engineers, the doctors, technicians, cooks, and all the other professionals working in the ghetto. Moreover, and here I return to the question of the ghetto’s character, their standards went a long toward preserving the attitude of pride in one’s work, which was inculcated in most of the ghetto’s residents from childhood. People worked to the best of their ability without being forced, without the threat of the whip, because that was the only way they knew.

Another tool exploited by the Germans was the celebrated familial devotion of the Jews, which was the motivation behind many of the thefts of public property (and occasionally private property as well). It likewise turned the day on which the

6 World Jewish Congress Archives, Geneva.
administration of Terezin was turned over to the Jews, after the evacuation of the Aryan population in June 1942, into one of celebration, for from then on it was possible for family members living in different barracks (men and women were housed separately) to see each other, at least after work hours. Thousands of people – children, parents, siblings, couples – volunteered for the transports so that their relatives and loved ones would not have to go off to the terrifying East alone. Those who claim that these people would never have volunteered had they known the true extent of the peril they faced are contradicted by the tales of the 600 mothers in the Czech family camp at Birkenau who went to the gas chambers with their children in July 1944 though they knew precisely what awaited them and could have saved themselves by abandoning their children and joining the drafts of forced labor destined for Germany – a case in point that implies that familial devotion was often stronger than even the fear of death.

It seems to me that one of the tragedies that has befallen the Jewish people since the Holocaust – and to some degree this continues to be true to the present – is that the behavior of the Jews during those tragic years has been judged from the point of view of the “victors in battle,” on the basis of the final results, and from this standpoint even human virtues look like weaknesses.

How, for example, are we to react when we hear that until 1944 there was a full-fledged soccer league in the Terezin ghetto. League competitions were held every spring and autumn, with the teams composed according to place of work – the cooks’ team (which could provide the players with the necessary caloric intake), the transport workers’ team, or the clothing warehouse team – or along lines of the established clubs, such as S.K. Vienna or Ha-ko’ah Prague. What are we to infer from the fact that in a place where dozens and later on hundreds of people died every day and fear of being chosen for the transports hovered over everyone like a heavy, dark cloud, soccer was the craze of the young? Are we to understand it as an expression of man’s ability to adjust or as a growing indifference toward death? As a sign of irrepressible vitality, cheery levity, or a desire to escape from reality? The soccer mania was spontaneous, the outgrowth of an established tradition, and it, too, was exploited by the Germans when they made the propaganda film Der Fuhrer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt (“The Fuhrer Grants the Jews a City”).

Life in the ghetto was full of the absurd: the performance of Verdi’s Requiem, for example. Why, of all things, a Christian litany in a Jewish ghetto? The music critic
Dr. Singer (the Jews even engaged in this occupation in Terezin) addressed himself to this question in his review of the performance, which has been preserved. Why not Handel’s Messiah or Elijah, or at least Brahms’s Requiem, based on selections from the Psalms, he asked. One reason was undoubtedly the pervasive influence of European culture, on which most of the residents of the ghetto had been raised. But the choice of Verdi’s Requiem also expressed an element of defiance – primarily on the part of the conductor, Rafi Schechter – and a claim of equal rights to share in all the works of civilization as free men. If I were to report to you about the stashing away of weapons for an eventual uprising or acts of sabotage against relatively modest enterprises serving the Wehrmacht, the word “valor” would seem quite natural and appropriate. But when it comes to the performance of a difficult work by Verdi – which is hard to bring off under the best of circumstances, not to speak of ghetto conditions, with the members of the choir and the orchestra not having eaten properly for months, showing up for rehearsals after a day of hard labor, and not knowing when their turn would come to leave for the East – the words “courage” or “valor” are not considered acceptable.

I used to think that the irrepressible optimism, the waiting for a miracle, for a swift end to the war in another few months, at Passover, at Rosh Hashanah, at Christmas, in 1942, 1943, 1944 was also characteristic of the easy-going temperament of Czech Jewry. But I have come to realize that these traits are common to all Jews, then and now, and the experience of the Holocaust has done little to change that.

We may well ask: If the ghetto’s leadership has been headed not by Edelstein but let’s say, Dr. Frantisek Weidman, the former secretary of the Prague community, a representative of the Czech Jews – or the Jewish Czechs, as they preferred to call themselves – would the ghetto have been very different? Perhaps then Herzl day and Trumpeldor Day would not have been commemorated in the children’s houses, or the study of Hebrew would not have been encouraged, but we can assume that the overall reality would not have been very different. For that reality was determined by the character and quality of the ghetto’s residents. And looking back from this vantage, I cannot imagine that any other nation, given similar conditions, would have been able to preserve the values and achievements of human civilization as did the Jews of Central Europe; they who were taught to respect the law, to believe in fairness and that truth will prevail (as in Masaryk’s motto), never so much as imagined that the systematic extermination of human beings was possible. It is that their faith and
character made the Germans’ work easier, that nothing they accomplished ultimately changed the “bottom line” (less than 10 percents of the Jews of Bohemia and Moravia survived the Holocaust). But their conduct was the only way this Jewish community – considering its education and Weltanschauung – could possibly have responded to the German persecutions, which appeared to be a logical extension of the calamities of the past rather than a new and unprecedented age in the history of mankind.

Gutman, Yisrael, Saf, Avital (Eds.), *The Nazi Concentration Camps*, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem 1984, pp. 303-314

With the help of the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, Inc