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## Poster 1: “Gatekeeper” Concert (Poster 3, Illustration: Poster 31) and Poster 2: Weekly Program

- Study the posters in depth. How are they surprising? What questions do they raise?
- What can we learn from these posters about ghetto theater? (Relate to the information appearing on the poster and how it has been designed.)

The ghetto theater was established by the Head of the Vilna ghetto Jacob Gens, in December 1941, at the start of the so-called “Period of Stability.” The theater staged plays, songs and musical productions. Many of the productions were composed within the ghetto, and expressed the themes of the daily travails of ghetto life, fears, mourning and hope. Besides the central theater, two other theaters were active, one of which performed in Hebrew. In the course of 1942, the theater staged 120 performances and received 38,000 visitors.

Look at the photo below. How does it express what the poster is publicizing?

Read the following excerpts and discuss the following questions:

- Why did people in the ghetto go to the theater? What significance did these visits have for them?
- In your opinion, why did some oppose the existence of ghetto theater?
- According to Sutzkever’s description of the concert held after the “Night of the Yellow Schein (Permits),” what are expressions of life in a world of death?
- What additional meanings do the posters take on after reading the testimonies?

Ghetto News No. 30

On the occasion of the one-year anniversary of ghetto theater

15 January 1943

G. Yashonsky (Cultural Department Manager).

*“[...] I wish to take this opportunity to express certain opinions for and against the theater. Critics say: Theater – this is entertainment, and in the ghetto there is no place for entertainment. Why do objectors criticize only entertainment in the theater; why do they not also object to card games, chess, literature, etc.? Only theater is forbidden. There is no logic in this [...]*

*“One of the critics even said: ‘In the ghetto only one song is appropriate: El Maleh Rahamim [O’ G-d, Full of Compassion, a liturgical prayer eulogizing the dead].’ But if so – there is room in the ghetto for other music. The only question is, where is the limit? My personal opinion is – up until jazz music. But I am willing to entertain other opinions.*

*“[...] One visitor says that the theater is a refuge for people who wish to flee their homes, flee reality. This is true also for us. People want to forget what is going on at home. If it works out, they can even forget where they are for several hours, and that is to the credit of all the actors, illustrators, etc. who are capable of providing this refuge [...].”*

*J. Gens*



*"[...] Before the first concert, it was said that concerts should not be conducted in a cemetery. This is true, but now life itself is a cemetery. It is forbidden to be weak. We must be strong in our spirit and our bodies [...] I am convinced that the Jewish life being developed here, the Jewish fire burning in our hearts, will redeem us from these troubles."*

*Ruska Korczak, Flames in the Dust (Merhavia: Moreshet VSifrat Hapoolim, 1965), pp. 344-345.*

**Ruska Korczak (1921-1988):** an underground fighter and partisan and a native of Poland. Until the outbreak of World War II, she lived in Plotzek. Afterwards, she arrived in Vilna, where she joined the leadership of the Hashomer Hatzair youth group. After the underground left for the forests, Korczak became a partisan. In December 1944, she made *aliya*, where she reported to leaders of the *Yishuv* (Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel) about the Holocaust and the Jewish underground movement. Korczak was a member of Kibbutz Ein Hahoresh and a leader of Hakibbutz Ha'artzi and other educational programs to commemorate the Holocaust.

**Jacob Gens (1905-1943):** Head of the Vilna ghetto and Head of the ghetto's Jewish police. Gens was married to a Lithuanian gentile woman and rooted in Lithuanian society, but nonetheless did not attempt to evade the fate of the Jews and entered the ghetto with them, which raised the esteem in which he was held. He had the natural demeanor of a leader – a sense of Jewish identity and an ambition for power. These were put to the test in the realities of the ghetto. Gens valued communication with the residents, and to this end, he published a weekly newspaper in Yiddish entitled *Ghetto News*. Gens advocated developing cultural activities, and was the initiator of the ghetto theater and orchestra. In addition to the educational activities he spearheaded, Gens understood that the ghetto needed to be considered productive, and its residents should therefore work for the Germans to buy time until the war's fortunes reversed. In October 1942, the Germans demanded that the Jewish police participate in an upcoming *aktion* in the nearby ghetto of Oszmiana, in which they were to "liquidate" 1,500 children and non-working women. Rather than comply, he delivered to the Germans 406 chronically ill and elderly people. Gens justified his actions by claiming that if the Germans had performed the selection, they would have taken women and children vital to the perpetuation of the Jewish people. When the ghetto liquidation began, his Lithuanian friends offered to assist him in leaving the ghetto and finding a hiding place, but he refused, even though he knew what awaited him. In September 1943, Gens was murdered by the Gestapo.

*"In January 1942, as the ghetto began to form... a cultural life, the first concert was staged at the hall of what had been the Reali Gymnasium [high school].*

*"This concert was hard to forget. It was shortly after the 'Night of the Yellow Schein Permits'. The mood in the hall was like that of when the dead are commemorated. Every word, every sound brought to mind the martyrs... people stood as if before an open grave, and listened to the strains of Chopin's 'Funeral March.'"*

*Avraham Sutzkever, Vilna Ghetto (Tel Aviv: Sichbi Publications, 1947), p. 107.*

Avraham Sutzkever (1913-2010): a poet and partisan. During the Nazi period, he wrote more than 80 songs and poems. Sutzkever was active in selecting content for the ghetto theater productions. The Germans forced him to sort Jewish literary works that had been found in libraries throughout the city, and he and his friends smuggled books, manuscripts and artworks into the ghetto in order to save them. At the same time, Sutzkever assisted in acquiring arms for the underground. With the liquidation of the ghetto, he joined the partisans in the forests. Toward the end of the war, he helped bring Nazi war criminals to justice. He later made *aliya*.

Night of the Yellow Schein: In October 1941, the German Labor Office put out “yellow *schein*” (work permits colored yellow) for various tasks in the ghetto. Some 3,500 of these “*schein*,” as they were known, were distributed to heads of households and workers; that is, to a working husband or wife. Anyone with one of these documents could add to it the names of their spouse and two children under 16. Family members added to the yellow *schein* documents were given blue notes. Some 12,000 people in total were given yellow *schein* or had their names added to them. Anyone in the ghetto not listed as such – about the same number again – was sentenced to death. On October 24, 1941, the first *aktion* took place against this group. This became known as the ‘Night of the Yellow *Schein*.’