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Reading material for

"Holocaust and Art"
THE COMPLEXITIES OF WITNESSING

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Abstract — Drawings of the camps done by inmates are not only witness reports. They involve choices of style and content and the influence of earlier artworks. A comparison of the ways inmates treated similar subjects reveals differences in approach between photographs and drawings, art in the camps and post-liberation art, the treatment of daily life versus that of death, and the depiction of the façade of reality as opposed to the truth behind it. The need to reveal the truth differentiates the Expressionistic works of some artists at Theresienstadt from those of other camps and raises new problems about inmate art.

How did witnesses depict the Holocaust in art? What scenes did they select? The answer seems at first to be simple: they covered all aspects of the Holocaust to such an extent that, arranged in their proper order, these art works could be used to make a detailed documentary movie on the subject, replacing film-clips and photographs. In fact, despite the vast amount of photographic material that exists on the Holocaust, many drawings and paintings depict otherwise unrecorded scenes. However, on analysis, this answer turns out to be simplistic. Although, taking all the works together, every aspect was covered, different artists chose different subjects. Furthermore, the artist’s experience of the Holocaust and the aims of his art not only determined his choice of material, but its treatment.

Much has been written recently about the reasons inmates created art in the camps and ghettos under almost impossible and often dangerous circumstances. The reasons usually cited fall roughly into five categories: official art; spiritual resistance through the assertion of individuality; the affirmation and commemoration of life; catharsis; and witnessing. This paper will deal primarily with the problem raised by the last category, which is perhaps the most widespread of them all.

Being a witness is not as simple as it sounds: the artist must choose not only what to depict, but how to depict it. Here the problem of style enters the arena: is he to be a ‘camera’ — an objective realist portraying every detail? Or is he to be an Expressionist, heightening reality with his own subjective feelings in order to convey not only what life in the camp looked like, but also what it felt like, and thus to make the spectator respond emotionally with pity, identification or revulsion. That such a choice was available to the camp artist emerges from the fact that many of them were not novices, but had either studied art or worked as artists before their incarceration, and thus had a fair knowledge of past and contemporary art and of the range of styles and iconographical schemes open to them.

Most artists, whatever their previous style had been, opted for naturalistic descriptions.

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of camp life. However, even this situation is not clear-cut: there are differences in style not only between different artists, but even between an individual artist’s treatment of different themes. For instance, many of Boris Taslitzky’s linear sketches of Buchenwald depict scenes which could be taking place anywhere (Fig. 1). His figures often have sad expressions, but they seem to be simply hanging around and chatting while they wait for food. They talk to other inmates through the barbed-wire fence or lean nonchalantly against it. In another sketch, two men sit quietly talking, remembering Paris, in a scene which could have been drawn at a Paris café, while his depiction of the official camp orchestra portrays men who could be playing anywhere. These drawings, done in a light, sketchy style, exhibit the external appearance of the camp without distorting it. He did not beautify the scenes — he simply chose scenes of daily life that look almost normal. In fact, this choice was forced on him by his role as eyewitness: he chose moments when he himself could rest and draw what he saw around him, something he could not do, for instance, during a work detail. There is a major difference, however, between these works and photographs of the camps. Instead of portraying the masses seen in many camp

Fig. 1. Boris Taslitzky, Along the Barbed Wire, ca 1943–4. Boris Taslitzky, 111 Dessins faits à Buchenwald (Paris: Bibliothèque Française, 1945), No. 25. Artist’s coll.
photographs, Taslitzky, like most camp artists, focused on a relatively small number of people, both as a means of preserving his own and the other inmates' individuality against the Nazi attempt to dehumanize them, and as a way of dealing with the subject in terms which could be grasped by artist and spectator alike.  

Although Taslitzky used the same naturalistic, objective style in depicting more horrifying subjects, such as Block 51 and Block of Human 'Guinea Pigs' or the skeletal figure of Prof. Halbwachs Enduring Medical Care a Few Days Before his Death, an element of Expressionism creeps into the shocked faces of the New Arrivals Regarding a Corpse Carried by Them (Fig. 2), completely distorting the face of one of them and turning him into a living corpse. This tendency to Expressionism is further heightened in his numerous renderings of death and corpses. This difference in style derives from a clear artistic choice to heighten the communicative power of scenes of death, as well as from an unconscious reaction: one can remain relatively objective about a line of people waiting for
soup, but death, especially in Holocaust terms, evokes both anger and a strong subjective
response which surfaces in art as Expressionism.

Henri Pleck, on the other hand, preferred a heightened realism combined with a
choice of dramatic subjects in his depictions of Buchenwald. His realistically drawn skeletal
figures are carried by friends: some barely manage to sit up; others collapse and die while
waiting for the doctor. To underline the physiognomic differences between Jewish and
Russian prisoners, he exaggerated their facial features. Occasionally, however, his
exaggerations verge on caricature, as he tried to express grotesque situations, such as the
Dutch prisoner who gloats over his 'booty of potato-peelings, or the French inmate smoking
a cigarette butt beside unburied corpses, while others fight over barrel-scrapings in the
background. Here again the artist chose his style to suit his material, treating it subjectively
in order to clarify his message to the spectator.7

Pleck's most striking works are his most realistic ones, where he combines grim
details, down to his model's missing teeth, with the strong expression of their faces and
gestures, as they labour or stand behind barbed wire peering out at the spectator (Fig. 3).8
His realism is, however, different from that found in photographs of the camps. For
instance, after the liberation, Margaret Bourke-White visited Buchenwald and photo-
graphed the inmates standing quietly, resigned and almost apathetic behind barbed wire
as they confront the spectator, crowding close to the fence to get into the photograph
(Fig. 4).9 Each has a slightly different expression on his face, as he responds as an
individual to the new situation. Bourke-White has captured their emaciated physical
condition as well as their feelings of anxiety, doubt and hope. Pleck depicted the same
physical condition, but emphasized it by removing the caps of the two men on the left to
reveal their shaven heads. By using a 'close-up', and only hinting at other inmates in the
background, Pleck heightens our awareness of the barbed-wire fence and of the
feelings of the inmates. He enlarges the shiny barbs slightly so that they appear more
ominous, and has the prisoners, no longer apathetic, surge forward against the barbed
wire in a movement which suggests their desire to break out of the camp. The two on the
left rejoice at their liberation, their expressions in marked contrast to that of the man in the
centre, who stares dully ahead, and to the half-crazed look of the Frenchman on the right.
This last can be interpreted either as connoting deep suffering or as the threatening glare
of a man bent on revenge. The emotions Pleck expressed here are stronger and more
dramatic than those in the photograph. The artist exposed the powerful inner feelings of his
fellow inmates, while the camera captured the blander face they had learned to turn
towards the world in order to survive.

The problem facing the prisoner–artist was thus how to reveal feelings as well as facts
so that the spectator would grasp the truth about the camps. The solutions involved
iconographic and stylistic choices which can best be studied by analysing two subjects
involving daily life in the camp as they were depicted by various artists under the same or
different conditions.

The first subject we will investigate, camp labour, raises some of the problems that
confronted the artist interested in creating a convincing witness report. A favourite theme
involved men pulling huge rollers or wagons, to which they are hitched like animals. Odd
Nansen's realistic drawing of inmates yoked to a truck which they pull with all their might
through the mud, done at Sachsenhausen in 1944 (Fig. 5), puts the emphasis on the
difficulty of the labour rather than on the individual character of the prisoners. His depiction
closely resembles photographs of this scene, but he added a touch of bitter sarcasm by
means of the inscription on the barracks 'To Freedom', commenting through this

Fig. 4. Margaret Bourke-White, *Buchenwald*, 1945. Life Magazine coll. (Reproduced with permission, *Time-Life* magazine.)
combination of image and words on the Nazi slogan ‘Arbeit Macht Frei’. Henri Pieck depicted the same scene at Buchenwald in 1945 (Fig. 6), but heightened the picture’s expressiveness and emotional impact. He added rain to the mud, and his yoked Jews pull with the last bit of their strength at a weight too heavy for them to move — a weight which is all the heavier as it exists only in the spectator’s mind — it does not appear in the picture. He concentrated on the effort which doubles the lead figure over, and the physical strain visible in the prisoners’ gestures and in the slightly exaggerated physiognomy of their faces, their mouths open as they gasp for breath.

This type of compositional choice and exaggeration is also found in Maurycy Bromberg’s expressionist Five Jews in One Yoke (Fig. 7) executed at Auschwitz. Instead of individuals, he portrayed shaven-headed ‘skeletons’ whose striped uniforms blend into a single mass. Rather than pulling the roller horizontally or diagonally out of the picture so that all the details will be clear, they lean towards us, sharply foreshortened, focusing our attention on their efforts to pull the weight behind them and on the misery and resignation in their faces.

These three compositions, for all their accurate reportage, have something very surprising in common. They are all based on well-known Russian prototypes with which the artists were clearly familiar. Nansen’s composition, the poses of some of his figures, and even the type of yoke used, are based on his memories of Ilya Repin’s Volga Boatmen of ca 1872 (Fig. 8). Nansen simply added the camp barracks and uniform, and converted the boat into a heavy wagon. Pieck, using the same prototype, went beyond Repin and Nansen in expression: his labourers are even more exhausted, and the object being towed, which Repin barely indicated at the far right, is now totally excluded. Neither artist ‘remembered’ the protesting youth in the centre of Repin’s composition, who formed an important part of the Russian artist’s social protest. What they wanted to portray here was not resistance but unmitigated and hopeless slavery.

Bromberg, on the other hand, adapts another version of Repin’s painting (Fig. 9), adjusting it to his conception of camp labour in another way. While preserving the composition as a whole and especially the positions of the figures, he stressed their misery by means of their bald, skull-like heads, and joined them into one anonymous mass by means of their striped uniforms. He further accentuated the danger their labour entailed by bringing the roller close up behind them — as opposed to Repin’s distant ship — so that it becomes clear that one false move will cause them to perish under its weight.

These comparisons raise important questions concerning camp art and the workings of the minds of the artists. On the one hand, they could declare truthfully that they were interested solely in producing witness reports, or as Karol Konieczny stated:

My drawings ought not to be subjected to scrutiny and aesthetic artistic criticism; an aesthete will not find material in them for professional criticism. I wish them to be considered a living and shocking document of a world of horror and torment.

On the other hand, Konieczny himself had studied art in Cracow for a year before his internment. Thus in analysing inmate art, one must bear in mind that despite their conscious aims, the artists were not created in the camps, and that each of them brought with him his own cultural background, previous knowledge of and often even practice of art. Before ever they arrived in the camps, they had digested iconographical and stylistic traditions that would stand them in good stead when they sought to maximize the expressive and communicative power of their ‘witness reports’. This kind of background
Fig. 5. Odd Nansen, Lorry Fatigue Party, 1944. Sachsenhausen Museum.

Fig. 7. Maury Bromberg, *Five Jews in One Yoke*, undated. Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw.

Fig. 8. Ilya Repin, *Volga Boatmen*, ca 1872. Russian State Museum, Leningrad.
influences even photographers, consciously or unconsciously, dictating the subjects to be photographed and the angle from which the shot should be taken. It is an even more powerful formative force in the case of artists, to the point that very few are able to escape from their inculcated traditions and greet new experiences — including that of the Holocaust — with a *tabula rasa*. Visual associations such as those discussed above automatically creep in and transform the primary experience into a compound which includes conscious goals and artistic prototypes. This will especially be the case when such 'witness reports' were not sketched on the spot — which is the case with almost all depictions of camp labour — but in the secrecy of the barracks, where the memory of the actual scene would tend to blend more freely with that of the visual prototype.  

However, even when we can be fairly sure that such prototypes are lacking, it will still be clear that the artist made decisions to heighten the expressive power of his work, even though he may have done so subconsciously. This was the case with the drawings of a talented boy of 14 who later became an artist, using the name Avigdor Arikha. In a drawing eventually captioned "Those no longer able to work were in danger of selection and so hid their weakness as best they could" (Fig. 10), the meaning is actually clear from the drawing itself. The elongated skeletal figure tottering under the burden of the stone he carries, must soon collapse and die, even without the help of the slave-master's stick raised to beat him (on the right). Arikha conveyed this impression by emphasizing the physical distortions and the tilt of the body, and the shadow it casts on the ground. He claims that he made these seemingly mature artistic choices entirely unconsciously, and given his age at the time this is probably true. Yet he too did not do the drawing on the spot but shortly after seeing the scene, rearranging it subconsciously in his memory so that it would convey the message he later appended to it without the need of words.
The second subject we will analyse here, living conditions in the notorious bunk-beds stacked one above the other, called 'boxes', raises somewhat different questions, since many of the drawings to be discussed were done while the artist sat confronting the scene he described. Photographs of these bunks, taken for the most part after the liberation, show masses of figures packed into them with no place to move, their skull-like heads sticking out as though reaching for air.\(^9\) Many of the inmates who depicted the 'boxes' made them seem more bearable, although they too showed heads or limbs protruding from the overcrowded quarters. Taslitzky and Pieck (Fig. 11) drew figures both seated and standing in front of the bunks in Buchenwald, while other inmates are either lying or sitting on the bunks. Taslitzky did so in a naturalistic, sympathetic style, objectively reporting a fact. Pieck, as usual, intensified the scene by means of a heightened realism, stressing the misery of the Russian prisoners and the impossibly crowded conditions in the bunks.\(^0\)

These typical views depict the 'boxes' from the outside. However, in two of Taslitzky's sketches, done in the same naturalistic style, he portrayed the view from within. In one close-up, he crowded two figures into the upper bunk along with a sleeping man, and hinted at the lower tiers of beds by showing the head of another man asleep below. The second sketch (Fig. 12) was drawn seated in the top tier, and shows a number of people sleeping beside and atop each other. At first glance, one notices two men in the centre, but soon we become aware of other figures to the right and left; finally a hand and foot set above the central heads attract our attention to two more figures in the background. By not
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depicting the bed itself, Taslitzky creates the feeling that beneath these figures lie still others and that they are piled high to the beams of the ceiling. He brings the spectator into the bunk-bed, making him experience the conditions there himself. However, if one is not familiar with the photographs or the other drawings in the series, one may not be able to understand exactly what is being portrayed.21

Other artists sought to arouse the spectator’s sympathy by adding an indication of death. For instance, Henry Behr, working in Theresienstadt in 1944, wrote on the back of his picture: ‘In the foreground a young woman mourns her husband’s death.’ This explains why she is clutching her head, and draws attention to the figure covered with a sheet behind her, whose head and feet protrude ever so slightly above the mattress.22 Arnold Daghani, on the other hand, in works done in Transnistria in 1943, stressed the corpse being lowered to the ground from the upper bunk in a composition strongly reminiscent of the Deposition of Christ.23

Auguste Favier introduced the idea of death in a different way. In a 1943 drawing from Buchenwald (Fig. 13), he retained the distant view of the ‘boxes’, but stressed the skeletal quality of the inmates: the bunks are filled with rows of skull-like heads, and two of the figures leaving the ‘boxes’ are nude living carcasses, one of whom has to be helped down by his comrades. This reduction to skin and bones is also stressed on the right: behind a fairly healthy man in a camp uniform, one semi-nude ‘skeleton’ supports another. Here, the choice of subject — not life but a slow draining off of energy into death — led to the choice of style: the elongated thin figures and the walking ‘skeletons’ give the scene a macabre quality not found in the works discussed above. The other artists show scenes that are crowded but livable. Here, we enter a gruesome world which conveys perhaps more ‘truth’ than the more ‘realistic’ depictions.24

Given these different modes of representation, Taslitzky’s change in attitude after the

Fig. 11. Henri Pleck, Interior of a Hut in the Little Camp, ca 1945. Henri Pleck, Buchenwald (Hague: Het Centrum, n.d.), pp. 10–11.
liberation is noteworthy. In The Death of Danielle Casanova at Buchenwald of 1950 (Fig. 14), he abandoned his calm, objective reportage for a dramatic subject and an Expressionist style. In the centre Danielle lies like a Christian martyr, dressed in white, with flowers in her hands. She is mourned frantically by the women around her, one of whom supports her while another kisses her feet in a symbolism evocative of the Pleta. To heighten the pathos, Taslitzky exaggerated the gestures, facial expressions and skeletal quality of the figures surrounding the 'saint': he opened their robes to reveal their distorted bodies, and emphasized their bony arms, one of which hangs down almost lifelessly from the upper bunk. Even more surprising than this dramatic treatment is the style: the figures are elongated, angular, often flattened and always harsh, in marked contrast to his matter-of-fact rendering of camp scenes while he was a prisoner.
Fig. 13. Auguste Favier, *Block in the Little Camp*, 1943. Robert Favier coll., Rouen.

Fig. 14. Boris Taslitzky, *The Death of Danielle Casanova at Buchenwald*, 1950. Artist’s coll.
Taslitzky explained the painting's religious symbolism as well as its non-realistic style. After he had completed his large painting of Buchenwald,28 his friend, Laurent Casanova, a leader of the French communist party and former Resistance fighter, proposed that he do something that would touch the hearts of French women, and he responded with a theme which symbolized for him the true nature of their struggle against Fascism and their martyrdom — the death of another communist Resistance leader, Laurent's wife, Danielle, at Auschwitz on 9 May 1943. On the painting, he wrote a line from a poem by Louis Aragon: 'There will be flowers when you return', because.

the subject of the picture is the theft from all the Marias of France ... of the flowers that had been promised to them. ... The subject of the picture is my indignation! ... The subject ... is the branch of lilacs set in Danielle's hands. ... You know, flowers were forbidden in the camps. The women who worked outside the camps brought back, at the risk of being searched, under their clothes, this small branch of lilac to be placed in the hands of the dead Danielle. ... [It] expresses the love of the women there for one whose death was not felt to be that of just anyone. ... It was Danielle, the extraordinary helpmate, who would not know the liberation they knew was approaching; who had helped many to hold out till then, to survive. ... [Her] memory remains a living example. ... My subject is a resurrection ... .

The scene that I represent was never susceptible to any photographic realism. Danielle did not die in the midst of her companions. It would have been treason, however, to paint her in solitude. The truth is the branch of lilac. I did not make a historical reconstruction. ... Danielle is dressed in white: ... Why? Traditionally, one gives the dress to virgins, to saints ... For Danielle, it was simply that being a dentist, she had the right to [wear] a white blouse. In that, pictorial traditions are superimposed on reality ... a new content is substituted for an ancient one ... one could say that the whole subject is religious.27

Taslitzky's explanation clarifies the reasons for his changes in style and subject-matter. In 1950, he was no longer recording scenes he saw before his eyes, but drawing on his memories to express the nightmare he had survived. Gone is the restraint; it has been replaced by a violent anger and aggressiveness that makes itself felt in both subject and style. No longer simply an eyewitness, he is now the prosecutor out to arouse his audience through full use of his emotive powers, in order to express truths which lie behind the visual facts.

An entirely different approach to an Expressionist rendering of the living conditions in the camps was taken by Bedrich Fritta at Theresienstadt. In one drawing (Fig. 15), an emaciated man, his elongated body distorted and his head enlarged to stress his near skeletal condition, is portrayed within the confines of the barracks.28 Although the components of the scene were also found in Favier's drawing, Fritta, as opposed to Favier, took distortion beyond exaggeration into the realm of the grotesque, and heightened his effect by his unsympathetic view of some of the figures in the background. In the lowest bunk on the right, a fat man gorges himself on food which he keeps hidden in a suitcase, while all that is visible of the figure in the upper bunk is a pair of legs and one big, undoubtedly smelly foot. The sharp perspective of the room heightens the feeling of a lack of normalcy in this hopeless situation.

Here, there is an element of self-criticism which arose from several causes, at least one of which involved the peculiar privileges of life at Theresienstadt. In another drawing, Fritta contrasts the 'luxurious' quarters and high life of a ghetto big-wig with the condition of the masses.29 The former has a room to himself — albeit made of crates and a curtain — with furniture, flowers in a vase and paintings, one of which depicts an erotic scene. This
painting on the wall suggests the relationship of the couple in the room who drink a toast and read poetry while reclining in easy chairs. They are shown in a caricatural style, which despite their emaciated bodies, can arouse only antagonism. Sympathy is reserved for the poor Jews huddled below. Although they are also treated in an Expressionist style which verges on caricature, emphasis is placed on their helplessness: the dying woman at the left will soon join the corpses which litter the foreground, among whom sit a wide-eyed emaciated child and old folk hunched over and withdrawn into themselves. One young man looks upwards blindly towards the privileged pair. Beside him sits a man with a prominent Jewish star who clearly expresses the artist’s feelings: looking with fury at the corpse in front of him, he seems to be brooding on a horrible revenge.

Anger, however, is not the only cause for this style in Fritta’s work; he undoubtedly first turned to it in an attempt to influence the spectator. *In the Attic* (Fig. 16) does not contain bunk-beds, but it stresses the impossibly overcrowded conditions under which Jews were forced to live even in the model camp. The accent is on the old and helpless, on people who have lost their will to live. Although most are sunk in deep apathy, some try to carry on normal functions, such as the women going to the bathroom and getting dressed at the right. Fritta’s treatment of the scene enhances his message: large figures appear beside small ones, upside-down heads are set into odd corners; every space is filled in this topsy-turvy world in which all sense of proportion has been lost. Here, Expressionism has again been pushed to the level of caricature and the grotesque, but there is no mockery:

![Image](image.jpg)

*Fig. 15. Bedrich Fritta, Lodging in the Attic, ca 1943–4. State Jewish Museum, Prague.*
the spectator is asked to pity those living in these wretched conditions and to help them.

The result of these miserable conditions is brought out in Fritten’s symbolic use of bunk-beds in *Quarters of the Aged* (Fig. 17). Here the bunks are set into a niche in the wall, like shelves in a catacomb, and the vertical supports become bars imprisoning the elderly who turn into corpses before our eyes, unable to reach the ‘offerings’ of food placed between the bars. Fritten chose a shaky line here to accentuate the death-throes of the inmates. The style is Expressionist in the extreme, but the method differs from that of Favier’s drawing or Taslitzky’s *Death of Danielle*. Rather than giving us even an exaggerated depiction of the ‘boxes’, Fritten has symbolized their meaning as death-traps for the inmates.

This analysis shows that the artist’s personality and goals strongly influenced the manner in which he drew his witness report. But there is an added factor involved, which helps to explain why Fritten’s work is so different from that of the other artists we have examined. Most camp artists worked alone, often in secret, and this solitude may have intensified their need to make accurate reports of what they had seen, although they felt free to exaggerate in order to increase the emotional impact and to reveal the truth. On the other hand, at Theresienstadt, a group of artists from among those in the camp — Fritten, Otto Unger, Leo Haas and Felix Bloch — had joined together in an act of organized resistance to the Germans. Leaving pure documentation to artists such as Malvina Schalkova and Charlotte Buresova who did not take part in their secret work, they set out to use an Expressionist style whose conscious goals were not essentially different from those of other camp artists. However, as we shall see, there were a number of characteristics inherent in modern Expressionism which influenced their works in ways they may not have envisaged when they espoused this style. The result is an art which is markedly different from that of other inmates.
The fact that this was a conscious group decision rather than a coincidental alliance between four Expressionist artists, can be seen in the development of Leo Haas, one of the most highly Expressionist of the artists in the group. In 1939 in Nisko and in some of his early Theresienstadt work, his style is much less exaggerated, and he returned to naturalism in 1945 at Sachsenhausen. The choice of Expressionism was undoubtedly prompted by the revulsion these artists felt against the academic naturalism they continued to use in their 'official' works. Naturalism thus became for them the style of lies rather than a documentary account of the truth. Compounding this revulsion was the feeling that they were in a basically Expressionist situation: they lived in a 'model' camp which masked the true meaning of the camps from the world. It was their duty to strip off this pleasant mask and expose the rotten truth hidden behind it, or as they put it, to encourage each other: 'Tell it like it is.'

This revelatory function of their art can be seen clearly in the works of Fritta and Haas, especially those connected with the visit of the Red Cross to the camp on 23 June 1944 and the making of a film on Theresienstadt in July 1944. In Film and Reality, Fritta depicts a sad Jew whose make-up is being applied by a lovely Jewish beautician, a semi-robot organically attached to her table. The film is photographed by another human machine — a movie camera wearing the boots of a Stormtrooper. As sad as the poor Jew looks, the reality hidden by the curtain behind him is still grimmer: death appears there in the form of a
skeleton lying in a concentration camp. This work symbolizes both the truth behind the lies of the Nazi propaganda film and the story of its production. Written and directed by Jews who had been forced to create it, the film showed concerts, sports, coffee-houses, the non-existent bank and even a garden party — all signs that life in Theresienstadt was ideal and was run by the Jews. After the film was completed, those who had participated in it were shipped to Auschwitz.38

Fritta presents a similar approach in Potemkin-style Shops. Here the stores built to impress the Red Cross, mockingly labelled ‘Parfumerie’ and ‘Lebensmittel’, are shown to be false fronts with decomposing corpses behind them.39 In the foreground, a skeletal couple, embracing before a sloping stone building, are watched from the window by Death — a skeleton behind bars. To understand fully the connection between death and these false fronts, one must realize that to make the camp less crowded before the inspection, the Germans shipped the surplus prisoners, including children, the old and the infirm, to Auschwitz.40 Fritta’s style in these works is exaggerated and caricatural, far from a documentary treatment of reality, but, as in his Quarters of the Aged, he is really ‘telling it like it is’.

Haas relates the same story more subtly. In the background of Ghetto-Swingers he portrays the ‘façade’: the band which played to crowds of well-dressed spectators for the Red Cross inspection and the film.41 Then in the foreground he takes us ‘behind-the-scenes’, revealing the true story: the hearse used to convey new arrivals and their packages, lines of people arriving or leaving on one of the numerous transports, and an old woman wheeling a corpse covered with a tallith, followed by a woman hiding her face in mourning. The same message is conveyed in Ghetto Scene, where the ‘stores’ are inhabited by the old and dying, while the dead lie on stretchers outside. In the foreground, a blind man walks the street, seeing neither the misery around him nor the naked child dying of malnutrition who extends a bony hand towards him, begging for food.42 This blind man is a leitmotif in the works of Haas, Fritta and Unger, and undoubtedly represents not only the actual blind people in the ghetto, but the blindness of those who did not realize what was going on.43

A few of these blind folk inhabit The ‘Café’ (Fig. 18), especially constructed for the Red Cross and the film.44 Here truth is not juxtaposed to illusion, although the German guard at the window indicates that these people are acting under orders, without choice. Instead, Haas conveys the truth behind the ostensibly joyous scene through his Expressionistic treatment. His café-goers are more skin and bones than flesh, most are old and several are bandaged, showing that force was needed to get them to come. The atmosphere is claustrophobic, the glasses on the tables and on the waitress’s tray are empty, and the people are all in a deep depression, staring downwards or blankly in front of them. Few of them converse, most are withdrawn into themselves, and no contact is established even with the waitress, whose low décolletage reveals her dried-up breasts.

Haas’s style in these drawings is highly Expressionistic, verging on caricature, in a manner inspired by George Grosz. While this style works in pictures dealing with reality versus illusion, it creates certain problems here, which were equally present in Fritta’s depictions of barracks life (Figs. 15–16). To understand these problems, one must consider the goals of the German Expressionist artists before and after World War I — the artists who created the prototypes for such scenes. The Brücke artists, Emil Nolde, Ludwig Meidner, Max Beckmann and Grosz all wanted to satirize the café-goers, to show them up as decadent, dissipated, often ugly people rather than the ‘beautiful people’ the café-goers considered themselves to be. To this end, their physiognomies were exaggerated and
caricatured, and they were often pictured as depressed and withdrawn rather than gay and sociable. The spectator was supposed to be repulsed by this true picture of café-society. 45

This manner of depiction was used in Theresienstadt, but not necessarily for the same reasons, and this is the crux of the problem. Unger’s depiction of the café is closest to the original prototype. 46 There are no Nazi guards and his blue-toned people discuss life while the band plays in the background exactly as if they were in Berlin. Taken out of context, one would say that he and Grosz had the same goals, and that the desiccated man in the foreground was dying of dissipation, not of hunger. Fritta’s version is easier to understand. Like Haas, he positions a German guard outside, clarifying his meaning by adding a barbed-wire fence. In the foreground, the Jews, dressed in their Sabbath best, sit like zombies while the band plays under a large clock which ticks the moments of fraud away. 57

There is no communication between the figures: they have been set here as stage props and they behave like objects, giving the lie to the supposedly gay time to be had at a café. Despite the caricatural style, Fritta’s message is clear.

Haas’s drawing is more problematic, as were Fritta’s barracks scenes. Many of the faces could almost be taken for antisemitic caricatures, stressing the subhuman qualities of the Jews. In fact, one’s first reaction to Haas’s café is repulsion rather than sympathy, and if one overlooks the bandages and the Nazi guard in the background, one might misinterpret the scene and feel that Haas was laughing at his fellow inmates. This ambiguity points to a psychological problem which must be taken into account in dealing with these works. Expressionism involves the rendering of one’s feelings about a subject into art, but the feelings of a camp inmate are complex. In most camps, Expressionism was
held in check and these feelings were channelled in a given direction: the rendition of witness accounts. At Theresienstadt, the pronounced Expressionism of the artists revealed perhaps more than they consciously intended. It revealed their hatred of the situation, and their anger and revulsion not only against the Germans, but also against themselves for yielding to the fraud being perpetrated in the camp — a fraud they helped to promote in order to stay alive. This idea is occasionally expressed in the post-war works of former inmates; in Theresienstadt it existed in the works done in the camp itself. This explains the Expressionist prototypes chosen by the artists, and the feeling of revulsion that often emerges from their works.

This ambivalence and the problems entailed can be seen through an examination of two works by Haas called Hunger. In the first (Fig. 19), he concentrated on the revolting sight of people scavenging for food: pushing to get into the hearse that delivered the bread to the camp so as to pick up the last crumbs, scraping the bottom of the barrel and searching the rubbish heaps on all fours for morsels of food. His style is reminiscent of the pictures Grosz and Otto Dix produced on World War I, and it bears an uncanny resemblance to the paintings Grosz began creating at this time on the destruction of Germany in World War II. Haas’s picture is a personal comment as well as a document. He has turned the sufferers into subhuman creatures inhabiting a nightmare world that can only repulse the spectator.

On the other hand, his second picture (Fig. 20), is a direct appeal to the spectator. Here the rubbish heap and the soup barrel on the right have been picked clean. Out of the background comes an endless procession of inmates, many of them old, all of them destitute. As they pass through the ruins to wade into the river or cesspool, they hold out their bowls to us begging for food. The style remains the same, the subject is the same, but the goal is different. This work turns outward, rather than inward, translating the plight of the people into a piece of effective propaganda which would make an excellent poster. In the one drawing, Haas himself reacted with repulsion to the ugliness of the situation; in the other, he begs for sympathy and help. Here he not only utilized the two possible faces of Expressionism, but expressed his own ambivalent feelings as well. It is this ambivalence, accentuated by the highly charged Expressionist style, that distinguishes the secret works done at Theresienstadt from the rest of camp art.

The above analysis of the works of camp artists points out several important facts that have not been sufficiently stressed by most researchers. First of all, witnessing is a compound experience: artists are not cameras, and their personal reactions to a subject will always "intrude" on their works, even when they try to be objective. The main vehicle for this intrusion lies in the choice of subject and style. Second, since one of the causes of art-work in the camps involves the wish of the artist to preserve or assert his own personality against the impact of Nazi dehumanization, there was good reason for adding a personal slant to the documentary data. This need was compounded by the fact that straightforward depiction often gave only slight information on what was actually happening in the camps. Third, since, many of the artists had been art students or practising artists before the war, they had stored in their memories images from earlier art works which would serve them as prototypes for their camp works. The selection of these models could be fully conscious, or it could be the result of subconscious association and a creative blending of past and present memory-images. Fourth, this artistic past also made available to the artists a choice of styles, and the need to show the truth behind this façade led certain artists to turn more and more to Expressionism, both in camps such as Buchenwald and at Theresienstadt. In doing so, they exposed themselves — as was clear
Fig. 19. Leo Haas, *Hunger*, ca 1944. Terezín Museum.

Fig. 20. Leo Haas, *Hunger*, ca 1944. YIVO, New York.
from the case of the Theresienstadt artists — to a fuller expression of their often complex feelings than they may perhaps have desired. The result of their endeavours is that they furnished us not only with documents on how the camps looked but, equally important, on how they felt about being in the camps and undergoing the experience of the Holocaust. Thus, although not always in the way they intended, the artists found a way of involving the spectator on an emotional rather than a purely intellectual level. Finally, in all the examples discussed here — including that of the young Arikha — the artists did not stop being artists just because they had entered the camps. They continued to make stylistic, compositional and iconographical choices even while trying to produce documentary witness reports.

NOTES

1. Several attempts to do this have been made, including Z. Amishai-Maisels, *Scenes from the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1981)

2. Zentner points out that although the Germans passionately documented their treatment of the Jews, few photographs of life in the camps have survived [Christian Zentner, *Anmerkungen zu „Holocaust“* (Munich: Delphin, 1979), p. 12]. Costanza suggests that this paucity can be explained by the Nazis’ wish that no record be left of the camps [Mary S. Costanza, *The Living Witness* (New York: Free Press, 1982), p. 61].


4. Over five out of six of the artists on whom pre-interment data are available were trained artists, as is indicated by the biographical material on them. See, for example, *ibid.*, pp. 240–68.


6. *ibid.*, pls. 12, 16, 100, and colour pls. 2–5. The same duality of style is found in the works of Zinovii Volkatchev, who liberated the camps with the Russian Army. His objective recreations of life in the camps are in marked contrast to his more Expressionistic renderings of death [Zinovii Volkatchev, *Flowers of Oświęcim* (Cracow: Moses H. Rubin, 1947); Zinovii Volkatchev, *Maydanek* (Warsaw: Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza ’Czytelnik’, 1945); Zinovii Volkatchev (Tolkatchyov), *Osvětim* (Kiev: Mistetzvo, 1965), passim].

7. Henri Pieck, *Buchenwald* (Hague: Het Centrum, n.d.), pp. 6–9, 12–21, 25, 29, 32. All of Pieck’s works were done in 1945 as opposed to Taslitzky’s which date from 1944 to 1945, and at least some of them (e.g. pp. 18–19) were done after the liberation.


10. Blatter and Milton, *Art of the Holocaust*, No. 313. For a comparable photograph, see Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978), pl. 17. The reader should be warned, however, that while similarities to photographs show the objectivity of the artist, too great a similarity often means that he copied — often after the war — from a photograph. Thus Franciszek Wieczorkowski’s *Auschwitz 1942*, ostensibly done in 1942 [Überleben und Widerstehen, Zeichnungen von Häftlingen des Konzentrationslagers Auschwitz 1940–46 (Cologne: Pahl-Rugenstein, 1980), p. 11]; not only renders all the details with camera-like objectivity, but actually copies a photograph which had been published in one of the earliest books on the camps, *Konzentrationslager* (Karlsbad: Graphia, 1934), opp. p. 80, and depicts a scene from Dachau rather than Auschwitz. Wieczorkowski exchanged the original prisoners’ garments for striped camp uniforms, gave the inmates numbers and Polish or Jewish badges, added a barbed wire fence in the background, and “created” a witness report from Auschwitz. He heightened the difficulty of moving the roller by making the inmates paunchy and stressing the glasses worn by one of them.
12. Blatter and Milton, Art of the Holocaust, No. 288. Both these compositions were also used by Adolf Adler, who experienced this form of work in a Nazi labour camp and is apparently haunted by this theme [Erwin Detroy, Adolf Adler (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Rot, 1986), pp. 19–21, 24, and pls. ii–iii, 14, 17].
13. Alexandre Benois, The Russian School of Painting (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1916), opp. p. 132. Ilya Repin (1844–1930) was one of the most famous and most frequently reproduced Russian naturalist painters, and the "Volga Boys" is one of his most popular works. Nansen may also have known Yuri Pimenov’s Give to Heavy Industry of 1927 (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Russian and Soviet Painting, 1977, p. 47), which turns Repin’s depiction into one of "voluntary" effort to industrialize Russia. This is suggested by some of the poses and by his use of the background with its sarcastic inscription ostensibly pointing to a better future. A similar ambiguity exists in Pimenov’s work, where the industrial complex in the background neither lightens the load of the labourers, nor stops them from literally being burnt by the flames.
14. Ibid., p. 62. This fate was actually portrayed by Jerzy Brandhuber in a drawing done in 1946 (Überleben, p. 65). Brandhuber, who had been an inmate at Auschwitz and Sachsenhausen, built his composition diagonally up the page, so that the effort to pull the weight seems still harder. By portraying only the legs of the workers, he focused attention on his main subject—the fallen prisoner who is being crushed under the roller. Details such as this are typical of postwar works and although Brandhuber may well have witnessed such a scene, he used it here to symbolize the murderous effect of camp labour in a manner meant to clarify what ‘mere depiction’ had left unsaid. For an even more symbolic postwar version, see Józef Szajna’s The Roller of Kopan Krakow (Oświetcim Malarstwo Rzeźba Grafika) (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Artystyczno-graficzne, 1959), No. 42.
17. See, for instance, Konieczny’s comment: ‘During the day, I worked with other prisoners on labor details. I drew mostly at night, when the others enjoyed their well-deserved rest’ (ibid., p. 142).
18. Avigdor Arikha, Boyhood Drawings Made in Deportation (Paris: Amis de L’Aliya des Jeunes, 1971), No. 5; and interview with the artist. For a similar Expressionist rendering of labour, see Agostino Barbieri’s Arbeit Macht Frei, which shows a living skeleton pushing a wheelbarrow full of stones [Arturo Benvenuti, KZ (Treviso: Trivigiana, 1983), No. 10]. Barbieri not only distorts and elongates his figure, but using the dripping ink of his pen, creates the impression that the man, the stones and the background are bleeding. After the war, trying to convey a similar idea, Julian Studnicki simply showed a skeletal corpse leaning against an overturned wheelbarrow, sarcastically entitling the drawing ‘Arbeit Macht Frei’ (Oświetcim Malarstwo Rzeźba Grafika, No. 11).
20. Taslitzky, Buchenwald, pls. 34, 37, and Pieck, Buchenwald, pp. 10–11. See also Malvina Schalkoff’s even moreuyderly depictions of the bunk-beds at Theresienstadt, where she portrays women exchanging confidences or resting on their crowded but neat beds [Miriam Novitch, Resistenza Spirituale: Spiritual Resistance 1940–1945 (Milan: Commune of Milan, 1979), pp. 83–84; Blatter and Milton, Art of the Holocaust, No. 69; Miriam Novitch, Lucy Dawidowicz and Tom L. Feudtshelm, Spiritual Resistance: Art From the Concentration Camps, 1940–1945 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981), p. 167]. Schalkoff’s approach was not only posited by the fact that she was documenting Theresienstadt rather than Buchenwald, but by her general tendency to gain control over her ordeal by bringing order and normalcy into camp life at least in pictures.
21. Taslitzky, Buchenwald, pls. 35–6. See also Benvenuti, KZ, No. 153 and Odd Nansen, Day after Day (London: Putman, 1949), opp. p. 184 for other close-ups of the bunks. Taslitzky’s ‘mound’ of sleeping inmates is further emphasized in Reichtenthal’s rendering of the theme [Fr. Reichtenthal, ‘Arbeit Macht Frei’ (Bratislava: Central Union of Jewish Communities of Slovakia, 1946), pl. 7].
22. Blatter and Milton, Art of the Holocaust, No. 112. The only other figure here is the
disinterested man at the right; the other inhabitants of the bunks are indicated only by their scattered belongings. As there are only two levels of bunks here, the picture must have been made after the removal of the third level preceding the Red-Cross inspection, an act which is documented in a drawing by Helga Weissowa-Hoskova (ibid., No. 110).


24. Blatter and Milton, Art of the Holocaust, No. 216. Blatter states that Favier simply drew what he saw (ibid., p. 29), completely disregarding the thematic and stylistic choices the artist made. For a more brutal depiction of the removal of the living dead from the bunks, see Bernard Aldebert, Chemin de Croix en 50 Stations (Fontenay-aux-Roses: Athérême Fayard, 1946), p. 85, where the corpse-like inmate is yanked out of the bunk under the supervision of a capo, and George Zielezinski's 1943 depiction of the dead falling out of the bunk beds in The Hospital (Fritz Eichenberg, Dance of Death (New York: Abbeville, 1983), p. 95).


26. Arts de France, No. 3 (February 1948), 23.


29. Ibid., No. 97.

30. This detail can be compared with a similar one in the foreground of Taslitzky's Death of Danielle. Both artists use the skeletal child as a contrast to the corpse in order to heighten the tragic implications of the scene.

31. Gerald Green, The Artists of Terezin (New York: Hawthorn, 1969), p. 66. See also his People at Work (ibid., p. 41), in which he gives an X-ray view into two attics and a cellar which are literally crammed with people. For the official view of the situation, which stresses the efficient use of space, see Peter Kien's 1942 illustration [H. G. Adler, Die Verheimlichte Wahrheit (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1958), p. 147].


33. Exceptions to this rule are Auguste Favier and Pierre Mania, who worked together at Buchenwald, and some of the artists at Gurs and at Les Milles [Blatter and Milton, Art of the Holocaust, pp. 152, 257; Novitch, Resistenze Spirituale, p. 21; Les Camps en Provence: Exil, Internement, Déportation 1933–1944, special number of EX (1984), 135, 150–7].

34. Leo Haas, 'The Affair of the Painters in Terezin', Terezin (Prague: Council of Jewish Communities in the Czech Lands, 1965), pp. 157–61. Karel Fleischmann was not an actual member of the group, but he may have been in contact with it and Haas exhibited his work in the group's exhibitions after the war (ibid., p. 161).

35. Green, Artists of Terezin, p. 6; Blatter and Milton, Art of the Holocaust, Nos. 46–9, 106–7, 315. Like many other artists, Haas reverted to Expressionism after the war, ibid., No. 348; Benvenuti, KZ, Nos. 87–92, 94; Mirko Tuma, Ghetto nasich dni (Prague: Jaroslav Salivar, 1948), passim. Most of these postwar works are not, however, as powerful as the works he did in the camps, as can be seen by comparing similar scenes (e.g. Green, Artists of Terezin, p. 62 versus Benvenuti, KZ, No. 90). Fleischmann's works underwent a similar transition from essentially undramatic genre scenes, portraits and landscapes to scenes stressing human emotions and weaknesses [Prague, Zidovské Museums, City of Ceszký Budejovice, Artists' Association of South Czechoslovakia and Political Prisoners of Prague, Dra. Karel Fleischmann, 2 March–2 April 1947, passim; Richard Feder, Zidovská tragedie (Kolin: Lusk, 1947), passim]. Fritta, on the other hand, had been a politically conscious artist even before being deported to Theresienstadt [Paul Von Blum, The Art of Social Conscience (New York: Universe Books, 1976), p. 169].

examples of Unger's and Fritta's 'official' works, see Adler, *Die Verheimlichte Wahrheit*, pp. 117, 205, 207.


39. Green, *Artists of Terezin*, p. 57. This 'false front' aspect was a general characteristic of the camp, as Fleischmann wrote: 'The city is laid out . . . according to an exact plan, according to classic urbanistic theories with representative buildings and façades which are reminiscent of Italy. Balance and harmony in space, mass and color, and between them — the human debris that they mixed one hundred times and kneaded into cereal. This city is full of blood, over-crowded and for all that, dead' (Prague, *Fleischmann*, quotation after No. 91, trans. Susan Landau).


41. Ibid., p. 63.

42. Ibid., p. 76. The starving child may be one of those from Bialystok described by Green, pp. 78–9. This scene should be compared to one of Haas's 'official' works, which depicts a peaceful ghetto scene, with people crowding the street, and women going off to work in the foreground (Emil Ullitz, *Psychologie des Lebens im Konzentrationslager Theresienstadt* (Vienna: A. Sexl, 1948), opp. p. 32). See also Haas's later version of this scene, where a bright shining street with gardens hides the overcrowded ghetto (Tuma, *Ghetto*, No. 8).

43. Green, *Artists of Terezin*, p. 41; Blatter and Milton, *Art of the Holocaust*, No. 78; Benvenuti, *KZ*, No. 85; Adler, *Die Verheimlichte Wahrheit*, p. 262; and the examples discussed below.

44. Green, *Artists of Terezin*, p. 77. For the filming of the café scene, see Hofer, 'Film', p. 184.


47. Green, *Artists of Terezin*, p. 72. This zombie-like quality of the Theresienstadt inmates was described by Fleischmann: 'The human dung heap, the formless mass, lifeless, which finishes playing and doing' (Prague, *Fleischmann*, after No. 124, trans. Susan Landau).

48. Green, *Artists of Terezin*, p. 62. Haas's drawing should be compared to Fleischmann's description of the animal-like behaviour of the starving inmates at meal-time (Prague, *Fleischmann*, after No. 103), and to Fritta's Jews grovelling for food in the dirt (Adler, *Die Verheimlichte Wahrheit*, p. 263). See also Oświęcim Malarstwo Rzeźba Grafika, No. 15, for an Expressionist postwar rendering of this theme.
