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# “People were literally starving for any kind of reading”: The Theresienstadt Ghetto Central Library, 1942–1945

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## ABSTRACT

Jews crowded into the ghettos and concentration camps of World War II were desperate for any avenue of resistance or escape, not only physically but also mentally. In the ghetto concentration camp Theresienstadt, the prisoner-run Ghetto Central Library, complete with bookmobile system, reading room, and branch libraries, served as a reminder that minds and imaginations remained active and free, even amidst devastating persecution. With the inclusion of Jewish book collections confiscated by the Nazis, it grew to 100,000 volumes. Brought to the Jewish Museum of Prague Library after liberation, the books are still being returned, whenever possible, to original owners.

Ghettos and concentration camps were integral components in the systematic genocide of Jews during World War II. This article will examine one of these camps, Theresienstadt, which, as will be explained shortly, was distinctive in numerous ways. Of particular interest here is that it had a large and active library, the Ghetto Central Library (*Ghettozentralbücherei*). The library grew, in part, thanks to the frequency with which individuals entering Theresienstadt packed a treasured book instead of a little more food or clothing, an extra pair of shoes, or a blanket in their severely restricted luggage allotment. Most of these thoughtfully selected books ended up in the library. Through its very normalcy as an institution of leisure and learning, the library provided a means for prisoners to resist Nazi attempts to completely humiliate, dehumanize, and annihilate them. The library represented an organized system of life, all the more inspirational and strengthening as it thrived, providing links to the past as well as room to hope for a future within the much larger system of death.

One man, Rudolf Geissmar, did not survive Theresienstadt, but part of an epic poem that he wrote in the camp did. In a stanza entitled "Dedicated to the library," he wrote:

I am lying abed and would like to read something  
 And have already submitted several requests  
 And each time you were accommodating,  
 But what I got I had already studied before.  
 Be once more nice and send me something  
 Because here a body has time . . . .  
 But please no thin and lightweight books.  
 No, rather something to chew on, heavy and hard.  
 . . . at least something serious and good.  
 I place my wish confidently in your hands.  
 And obediently and in good mood look forward  
 To a well meaning gift.<sup>1</sup>

Geissmar's words vividly convey the intense need that existed for the library's books and services. Reading functioned as a crucial tool of comfort, learning, and escape that some believed contributed to their ultimate survival.

To provide some general context before delving deeper into the story of the library, Theresienstadt is the German name for the Czech fortress town of Terezín, located about forty kilometers from Prague. In early 1941 the Nazis decided that Terezín, surrounded by walls and a moat and with a prison and barracks, was ideal for a Jewish ghetto. The first transport of Jews from Prague arrived in late November of 1941, and by June of 1942 the Czech inhabitants had been forced out and the entire town used to imprison Jews.

Theresienstadt can be seen as different from other ghettos and concentration camps in two key ways. First, much of its population, particularly early on, was made up of specially selected individuals including Jews from the Protectorate of Bohemia-Moravia; wealthy and prominent Jews; many famous artists, writers, musicians, and scholars; Jewish World War I veterans, and spouses in or children of mixed marriages. In other words, people whose sudden murder or unexplained disappearance might be noticed, questioned, or investigated by the international community. Second, this predominately privileged population facilitated the purposeful creation of a "model camp" fabricated by the Nazis as a response to questioning outsiders. Theresienstadt was presented as a normal, functioning town where Jews were being kept by choice and for their own benefit.

This deception was achieved through an active propaganda system using commerce and culture. Respected men from the Jewish community were appointed to a Council of Elders to run the day-to-day activities of the camp, ranging from work and housing assignments to food and payment allotments, and even preparing transport lists to the east. Of course, this was all done under Nazi orders, although the Council of Elders did attempt

to soften the harsh blows whenever possible. The system of “commerce” in the camp consisted of a bank that controlled a worthless ghetto currency, a café that served only watery-brown coffee substitute, and shops that sold nothing of any use or were always closed. Even the library and other cultural and intellectual activities were intended to keep the Jews occupied, distracted from the Nazis’ darker intentions, and thus easier to control. In short, behind this flimsy façade, Theresienstadt was a transit camp for Jews on their way to death camps, mainly Auschwitz and Treblinka, and its appalling conditions were such that death from disease and deprivation were constant and substantial.

What the Nazis did not foresee was that enclosing so many outstanding people in such a small space, and condoning and even encouraging participation in cultural activities, allowed for intellectual and spiritual resistance to bloom and grow in the camp. In Theresienstadt the Nazis walked a thin line between empowering the Jews by allowing them certain privileges, such as the library, while depriving them of their belongings and adequate basic necessities, like food, fresh water, and hygienic living conditions, so that in the end they would be too weak and ill to revolt.

In November of 1942, almost one year exactly after the first transports arrived in Theresienstadt, the Jewish Council of Elders issued an order which read as follows:

The Ghetto Library will be opened in L304 on Wednesday, November 25th, 1942. It is equipped as a mobile library. According to the number of books on hand, boxes of books will be loaned to buildings, or for stewards of the buildings or houses. . . . Individual borrowers will be given special permission by Dr. Emil Utitz, who has been appointed head of the library by the Central Secretariat. (Utitz, 1965, p. 264)

Prior to the start of the war, Emil Utitz had been a professor of philosophy and psychology at Charles University in Prague. A few days after the library’s opening, he wrote: “In spite of great difficulties we succeeded to create a center of serious cultural work and even save many interdicted works. We hope this library set up with much effort and dedication won’t be torn to pieces.”<sup>2</sup>

Surviving writings and reports from the library and librarians, as well as countless diaries, memoirs, and histories, provide evidence of the enormous demand for a library, for books to read, to learn from, and to escape into. Emil Utitz wrote of the library’s opening, “It had been awaited with great excitement, for people were literally starving for any kind of reading” (Utitz, 1965, p. 264). Hana Muller Bruml, who worked as a nurse in Theresienstadt, wrote, “We needed to read. Not being able to read was a deprivation” (Bruml, 1998, p. 47). A young boy lamented in a poem to his father, “Truly, I have nothing to read” (Shavit, 1997, p. 130). And in another section of his epic poem, Rudolf Geissmar quoted, “Well, don’t you have anything for me to read?” He continued: “This question you can hear from

early to late here / The urge for culture has never been this great // Each book becomes a rarity."<sup>3</sup>

These examples illustrate that Theresienstadt prisoners were literally desperate to escape through reading. Books made it possible to withdraw from an unendurable reality and to take temporary mental refuge in other worlds, past or present, real or fantasy. In Theresienstadt those who succeeded in this recognized their small, but not insignificant, triumph over Nazi efforts at total control. In her memoir of Theresienstadt, Lucy Mandelstam wrote: "As time passed I learned my way around the ghetto . . . and took advantage of the few good things that were available, like . . . a very well stocked library. I had always been an avid reader, and being able to get all the books I wanted was great and it helped me to forget my surroundings for hours on end."<sup>4</sup> Her words express the experiences of many. Of course not all had access to or even knew about the library, but for those who did, being able to read, share, and discuss books was a reminder that minds and imaginations were alive and free, in spite of the conditions and restrictions that threatened to destroy everyone in the camp.

Upon opening, the one-room library held about 4,000 volumes and had a staff of six, three men and three women, at least one of whom, Else Menken, had been a professional librarian in Hamburg before the war. It was far too small both in terms of space and books to satisfy Theresienstadt's large, diverse, book-hungry population, which at the time was at its severely over-crowded peak of over 58,000. Most inhabitants were Czech or German, but they were also Austrian, Dutch, Danish and Polish; the inhabitants were all ages, backgrounds, religious upbringings, and education levels, and all in constant flux as transports regularly came and went. Within a year, the collection had grown close to 60,000 volumes, and there were fifteen librarians and assistants on the staff. Both of these numbers continued to increase.

The majority of books in the collection were scholarly. Table 1 shows a November 1943 breakdown of the book collection, where Hebraica and Judaica far outnumber the belles-lettres and classics.

Consequently, many books were in German or Hebrew, an imbalance bemoaned by the camp's majority who wanted to read for pleasure and escape and in their native language, often Czech. Librarian Hugo Friedmann wrote, "Alas, the stock of Czech books is totally insufficient and unable to meet the minimal demands of the public."<sup>5</sup> And Frederike Papanek wrote in her memoir, "There is a lot of intellectual nurture . . . [including] good books though a bit one-sided [in] Jewish literature."<sup>6</sup> The scholarly slant to the collection was due to confiscated Jewish institutional, community, and personal libraries being shipped to Theresienstadt. Books from the collections of the Rabbinical Seminaries of Berlin and Breslau and of the Jewish communities of Berlin and Vienna were also transferred to the Theresienstadt library.

Table 1. Ghetto Central Library Collection, November 17, 1943

| Collection              | Number of Volumes |
|-------------------------|-------------------|
| Hebraica                | 10,810            |
| Hebrew periodicals      | 270               |
| Judaica (Zionist)       | 10,930            |
| Jewish periodicals      | 1,900             |
| Yiddish literature      | 100               |
| History (art and music) | 1,300             |
| Ancient languages       | 600               |
| Modern languages        | 500               |
| Natural sciences        | 600               |
| Publications            | 2,100             |
| Reports of activities   | 7,000             |
| Belles lettres          | 5,300             |
| Classics                | 3,000             |
| Juvenile literature     | 250               |
| Miscellaneous           | 2,500             |
| Total                   | 48,710            |

Source: Starke (1975, p. 196).

Other books came from camp prisoners themselves. Leaving their entire lives and worldly possessions behind, each incoming prisoner could only bring fifty kilograms of personal belongings with them. Nevertheless, prisoner Dr. Norbert Frýd believed that “practically no one . . . had not brought at least one book in the fifty kilograms allowed him” (Frýd, 1965, p. 207). Another prisoner, Jana Friesová, wrote, “Everyone chose [the book] that . . . was closest to his or her heart” (Friesová, 2002, p. 87). Ultimately it did not matter as all arriving and departing transports had to pass through a terribly invasive and traumatic process known as the “sluice” (*Schleuse* in German; *šlojs* in Czech), when guards searched and often virtually emptied all the carefully packed suitcases, bags, and parcels. In the library’s founding deed, the Council of Elders suggested that “The stock of books could be much expanded if books left by evacuated Jews were given to the disposal of the ghetto . . . after being checked and sorted out.”<sup>77</sup> Thanks to their foresight and efforts, confiscated books were sent to the library and thus saved.

In June of 1943 a reading room opened; librarian Hugo Friedmann described its reference collection as follows: “There is the most important lexicographic and encyclopedia material, atlases, basic works of art history and all the professional [subjects], as well as magazines, art publications, poetry and plays, [and] history of literature.”<sup>78</sup> Because the library’s physical space was too limited to allow open access, the Council of Elders created two stipulations for potential patrons. First, payment of a deposit of 50 ghetto *Kronen*, the worthless ghetto currency, and second, a successful interview with Emil Utitz or his assistant librarians to provide proof of having completed higher education. Neither of these requirements was difficult

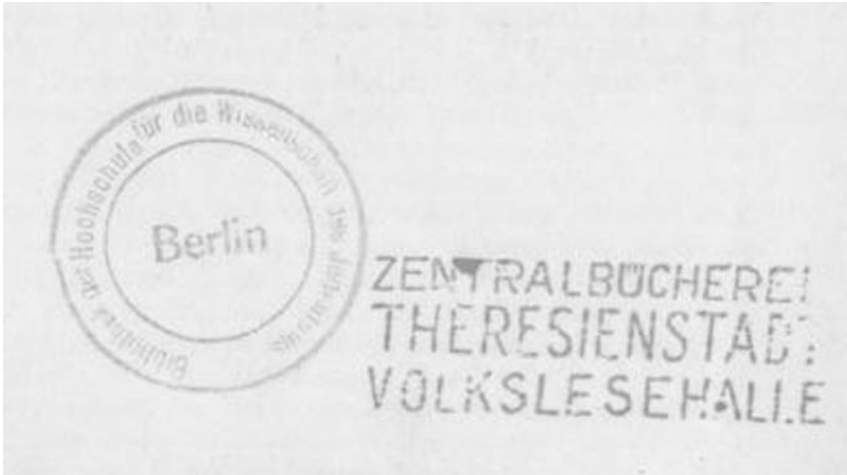


Figure 1. A title page of an unidentified book showing the *Zentralbücherei Theresienstadt Volkslesehalle* (Ghetto Central Library public reading room) stamp alongside a stamp from the originating library, that of the renowned *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* of Berlin. Courtesy of the Library of the Jewish Museum in Prague.

to fulfill as most prisoners had more ghetto *Kronen* than they knew what to do with and, as previously mentioned, the camp population was overall very highly educated, intellectual, and academic, and thus many easily passed the interview. Library cards with the patron's name, transport and ghetto home numbers, notation of payment, date, signature, and the ghetto library stamp were awarded to those who met both conditions.

The mobile library envisioned by the Council of Elders was basically an improvised bookmobile system (*Wanderbibliotheken*) consisting of boxes containing thirty books each of what was described as "a cross section of the works of which most copies were available" (Starke-Goldschmidt, 1965, p. 172). These traveled around the camp according to a specific plan, resulting in many more individuals gaining access to books than would have otherwise been possible. Since there was a terrible dearth of the fiction that was in greatest demand, library staff attempted to fill the traveling boxes with as many fiction books as possible to enable broader access. Of course, even under the best circumstances, library books are damaged, lost, or simply never returned. In Theresienstadt, the severe lack of paper, whether for fuel, hygienic purposes, or personal diversion, meant that books occasionally became irresistible sources of this crucial material. Inge Auerbacher recalled: "Usually there was one stove in a large room and fuel of course was very meager so we threw in books."<sup>9</sup> Many other books disappeared from the traveling

ZENTRAL-BÜCHEREI <sup>1419</sup>

Name Ernst Michaelis, Ernst

Trsp. Nr. 11-4457 Ubik. 1419

hat für entliehene Bücher eine Kautions von

Kronen 50.-

erlegt.

Dat. 20/9 1943.

**Ghetto-Bücherei**

Michaelis 1419

Rückgabe d. Kautions erfolgt nur gegen Rückstellung dieser Bestätigung.

1580-K-43/k

Figure 2. Zentral-Bücherei; Ghetto Central Library card of Ernst Michaelis; Theresienstadt (Concentration Camp) Collection, AR 2275. Courtesy of the Leo Baeck Institute, New York.

boxes to be read repeatedly and shared outside the planned system, or to be taken east in transports. Given the situation in the camp, Emil Utitz understood and accepted this reality, frustrating and painful for any librarian. He maintained that “a book was serving its purpose as long as it was read, whatever the circumstances” (Starke-Goldschmidt, 1965, p. 172).

Hebrew, technical, medical, and children’s branches were another means used to disperse books as widely as possible throughout the camp. The Hebrew library (*hebräischer Raum* or *hebräischer zimmer*) was one of the largest. On June 26, 1943, Gonda Redlich, a Zionist youth leader, noted in his ghetto diary that “People who know Hebrew were ordered to translate and catalog books. It seems they want to send Hebrew books here for cataloging” (Friedman, 1992, p. 123). Indeed the Nazis did want the Hebrew books cataloged for eventual inclusion in their planned “Museum of the Extinct Race” for which Jewish religious and cultural artifacts were being confiscated, then sorted and identified by Jews, and finally stored in large warehouses in Prague and elsewhere. In Theresienstadt individual catalog cards were created for close to 30,000 Hebrew and Judaica volumes, and the many cases of multiple copies of single works were carefully identified (Braunová, 2001, p. 165).



Smaller collections were placed in various group homes throughout the camp, including a collection of 1,500 books for a private reading group, and a separate very popular and well-utilized children's library containing around 35,000 volumes. Books in poor condition were generally brought to hospitals and sick rooms and were intended not to circulate outside of those areas due to the risk of spreading disease. One camp inhabitant, Gerty Spies, surmised that the library staff had such a high rate of illness as a result of handling books in a camp devastated by disease and illness, with no possible method of decontamination available (Spies, 1997, p. 17).

In early 1944 a "beautification" process began in Theresienstadt in preparation for a visit by a delegation from the International Red Cross. This occurred on June 23. As part of the beautification, the library was moved to larger rooms and modern metal shelving was installed, which came as an enormous relief after the dusty, insect-ridden, wood crate-like shelving used in the original library space. The metal provided the books and those who worked in and visited the library with desperately needed protection from the insects that infested and endangered the entire camp. In addition, a brightly painted welcoming sign reading "*Zur Bücherei*" was posted in the street. Using the human-drawn wooden carts that were used to move everything in the camp, from bread to corpses, it took three days to move the 65,000 volumes about one kilometer, from one end of Theresienstadt to the other. Though this task was difficult and exhausting for the weak ghetto inhabitants, librarian Käthe Starke recorded the way in which it was also inspiring. She wrote, "During the removal the weather was fine, the young men's enthusiasm over being so near the books, even though only to help moving them, was gratifying" (Starke-Goldschmidt, 1965, p. 175). The observation that simply being in the presence of so many books had a positive impact on these suffering young men is quite extraordinary.

Shortly thereafter, the "beautified" camp was cruelly featured in a propaganda film. It is noteworthy that the library appears in the film, confirming its necessary contribution to making the Nazi's model camp a successful reality. After the beautification and the filming, transports began taking Theresienstadt prisoners to death camps further east in unprecedented numbers, intensifying the terror and uncertainty that had always weighed heavily on the camp. The result of these constant transports is reflected in the library staff numbers, which fell to fifteen in the summer of 1944 and then to just five later that year (Starke, 1975, p. 234). Upon liberation in May of 1945, the only surviving library staff were director Emil Utitz and his assistant Käthe Starke. Their extreme dedication to the library kept them in Theresienstadt for three months after liberation, cataloging and organizing the collection of approximately 100,000 books. The books were then transferred to the Jewish Museum of Prague and its library, which were reinstated after the war. In the words of Emil Utitz: "Finally came the hour to disband, thanks to the victorious Soviet Army. Now began the liquidation



of the camp. We took charge of the proper packing of our stocks of books in many hundreds of boxes. So 100,000 volumes were returned to Prague, whence the majority had come" (Utitz, 1965, p. 266).

The Jewish Museum of Prague Library integrated the books with other incoming collections, and whenever possible returned books to original owners, a process that continued inconsistently over the years. Only in 2001 did this become a concentrated provenance research project into the many books of unknown origin as a result of World War II. Most books from the Theresienstadt library can be recognized by the *Ghettozentralbücherei* stamp found on their title pages (Utitz, 1965, p. 266). The project, time-consuming and extremely detail-oriented, entails looking for any symbol of previous ownership including stamps, signatures, notes, card inserts, imprints on the binding or ex-libris stickers. Whenever possible, these volumes continue to be returned to very grateful and emotional Jewish communities, families, or their descendants.<sup>10</sup>

As Emil Utitz so poignantly said: "Here ends the short, and yet so long, history of this unusual library. The books with the stamp 'Ghettobücherei' will, however, recall this library again and again throughout the decades or, perhaps, centuries" (Utitz, 1965, p. 266). It is to be hoped that he will be proven correct and the extraordinary example offered by the Theresienstadt library and its librarians, unfailingly dedicated even amidst the worst of human suffering, will serve as a reminder and as an inspiring lesson long into the future.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The title of this article is taken from the writings of Dr. Emil Utitz, the ghetto library's director: *The Central Ghetto Library in the Concentration Camp Terezín*, ed. Frantisek Ehrmann (Prague: Council of Jewish Communities in the Czech Lands, 1965), 264. In the Library History Seminar XI Conference program the title of this paper is given as "The Theresienstadt Ghetto Central Library, 1941–1945: Reading and Books as Means of Defiance and Escape."

## NOTES

1. Rudolf Geissmar, "Theresienstaedter Tagebuch," ME 182, Leo Baeck Institute, pp. 52–53.
2. Emil Utitz, "Activity Report for the Founding Year," Beit-Theresienstadt Institute, 1942, p. 3.
3. Geissmar, "Theresienstaedter Tagebuch," p. 12.
4. Lucy Mandelstam, ME 1472, Leo Baeck Institute, p. 14.
5. Hugo Friedmann, "Excursion Through the Ghetto-Library in Th.," Beit-Theresienstadt Institute, p. 2.
6. Frederike Papanek, "Aufzeichnungen über mein Leben im Kamp durch zwei Jahre für meine Kinder," ME 1471, Leo Baeck Institute, p. 24.
7. Council of Elders, "Founding Deed of the Central Ghetto Library," Beit-Theresienstadt Institute, p. 1.
8. Friedmann, "Excursion Through the Ghetto-Library in Th.," p. 3.

9. Inge Auerbacher, interview by Stella Wieselstier, transcript, November 4, 1975, Museum of Jewish Heritage, New York.
10. Description of provenance research project taken from interview with then Hebraist of the Jewish Museum of Prague Library Andrea Braunová, July 2002.

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