

Brundibár: Confronting the Misrepresentation of
Resistance in Theresienstadt

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Theresienstadt, Theresienstadt,
wann wohl das Leid ein Ende hat,
wann sind wir wieder frei?

-Ilse Weber, poet and inmate of Theresienstadt

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ABSTRACT

Brundibár, a children's opera written by Czech composer Hans Krása (1899-1944), routinely appears in Holocaust musical scholarship as a depiction of "thriving" Jewish cultural activity during the Holocaust. First performed clandestinely in a Prague orphanage in 1942, the work was ultimately co-opted by Nazi authorities in Theresienstadt. Under the jurisdiction of the *Freizeitgestaltung* (Leisure Time Activities), the opera came under control of the camp administration and became part of several propaganda schemes, including the 1944 Nazi propaganda film, *Der Führer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt* (*The Führer Gives a City to the Jews*). In preparation for the International Red Cross's visit in 1944, camp authorities initiated a *Stadtverschönerung* (city beautification) campaign in Theresienstadt. Accordingly, *Brundibár* performances moved into a performance hall, stage-managed by the SS. Yet only weeks following the Red Cross visit, most prisoners involved in the *Brundibár* production were sent to their deaths at Auschwitz.

The conscious resistance underlying the work's Prague performance evaporated in the Nazi-orchestrated Theresienstadt performances. The first performance of *Brundibár* remains largely ignored, in favor of scholarship that focuses overwhelmingly on the concentration camp performances and inscribes them within redemptive narratives. *Brundibár* repeatedly appears in the commodification of memory increasingly subject to retrospective recastings of "spiritual resistance." Through a contextualized examination of *Brundibár*, I argue that the inherent social stratification in Theresienstadt offered cultural activity to a select few and *Brundibár's* function within the *Freizeitgestaltung* merely furthered Nazi agenda.

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INTRODUCTION

“*Brundibár* was our life. We would never forget it.”¹ Rudi Freundenfeld

“Memory cannot reconstruct the totality of the past—that would be both impossible and undesirable. It can only reconstruct a selection of those elements we consider worth remembering.”² Tzvetan Todorov

A Light in the Darkness

On August 20, 1944, children nervously assembled in Theresienstadt’s Sokolnova Hall and sang the finale of *Brundibár*: “*Brundibár poražen, utíká dodáli. Zaviřte na buben, válku jsme vyhráli!*”³ (We’ve won a victory over the tyrant mean, sound the trumpets, beat your drum, show us your esteem!)⁴ This performance of *Brundibár* occurred at the behest of the SS and was one of the last performances in Theresienstadt. The presentation played a pivotal role in the deception of the International Red Cross Commission, and to a larger extent, the entire world. Survivors recall their nervousness and agitation on the Sokolnova stage as they sang below cameras and spotlights.⁵ Paul Rabinowitsch immediately recalled the radically different atmosphere, “When the SS was present, I always had this shadowy feeling at the back of my head. I knew I could not play wrong...Rahm would notice, I thought

¹ Susan Goldman Rubin with Ela Weissberger, *The Cat with the Yellow Star: Coming of Age in Terezín* (New York: Holiday House, 2006), 30.

² Tzvetan Todorov, *Facing the Extreme: Life in the Concentration Camps*, trans. Arthur Denner and Abigail Pollak (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1996), 257.

³ Hans Krása, *Brundibár: Children’s Opera in Two Acts*, ed. Blanka Červinková, trans. Joža Karas, Matthias Harre and Frank Harders-Wuthenow (Prague: Tempo Publishing, 1993), 70-71.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Hannelore Brenner, *The Girls of Room 28: Friendship, Hope, and Survival in Theresienstadt*, trans. John E. Woods and Shelley Frisch (New York: Schocken Books, 2009), 236.

to myself, and be mad at me, and put me on a transport. And in those moments it was as if I were playing for my life.”⁶

Brundibár, the children’s opera written by Czech composer Hans Krása, routinely appears in Holocaust musical scholarship as an example of “thriving” Jewish cultural activity during the Holocaust. *Brundibár* became one of the most popular works under the auspices of the *Freizeitgestaltung* (Leisure Time Activities), an officially sanctioned Jewish-led cultural organization, and served as a showpiece of Nazi propaganda. Moreover, *Brundibár* became a chief symbol in the commodification of memory increasingly subject to redemptive narratives. Richard Ebenshade argues that “memory becomes available for any ad hoc construction of identity.”⁷ Musicologist Shirli Gilbert offers evidence of this phenomenon through “consoling stories” in Holocaust scholarship. Gilbert defines spiritual resistance as “a channel through which Nazism’s victims derived emotional comfort and support, but also as a life-affirming survival mechanism through which they asserted solidarity in the face of persecution, the will to live, and the power of the human spirit.”⁸ Rebecca Rovit further posits, “We understand creativity as being born from spirit and thus we are inclined to grasp onto the evocative, yet vague notion of a kind of spiritual resistance and find it attractive.”⁹ While both scholars caution against use of a redemptive rhetoric, Samuel Edelman conversely argues that in Theresienstadt, “the only means of resistance

⁶ Brenner, *The Girls of Room 28*, 238.

⁷ Richard Esbenshade, “Remembering to Forget: Memory, History and National Identity in Postwar East-Central Europe,” *Representations* no. 49 (Winter 1995): 86.

⁸ Shirli Gilbert, *Music in the Holocaust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2

⁹ Rebecca Rovit, Introduction to *Theatrical Performance in the Holocaust: Documents, Texts, and Memoirs*, eds. Rebecca Rovit and Alvin Goldfarb (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 9.

was in words and art.”¹⁰ Echoing this assertion, Alvin Goldfarb attributes the survival of the performing arts to their use as “acts of resistance.”¹¹ Ebensshade further argues that “distinct and often opposite perspectives on memory, rather than stimulating introspection and exploration, seem instead to create new variations of ever more powerful forgetting.”¹²

Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer offer two motives of Jewish redemption in Holocaust scholarship, to remember and rebuild: “...to remember, so that it will never happen again...so that we, or history, or Judaism, or the lives or memories of the six million may be redeemed...[I]t is possible not only to remember...the Holocaust but also to establish upon that memory the dreary and yet glorious work of rebuilding a sound Jewish community. From the ashes of destruction rises a new people.”¹³ While Bernard-Donals and Glejzer present legitimate claims applicable to the Jewish community, contrasting redemptive narratives embody a disparate motive reflecting an egocentric need among the wider public, namely, to expunge any traces of guilt and ease the horror of the Holocaust through “consoling stories.”

While scholars and survivors remain clearly divided on the existence of cultural or spiritual resistance in Holocaust creative activity, a contextualized examination of *Brundibár* complicates the claim that any form of resistance occurred in the Theresienstadt performances. This study argues that *Brundibár* offered the children an opportunity for

¹⁰ Samuel Edelman, “Singing in the Face of Death,” in *Theatrical Performance during the Holocaust: Documents, Texts, and Memoirs*, eds. Rebecca Rovit and Alvin Goldfarb (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 132.

¹¹ Alvin Goldfarb, “Theatrical Activities in the Nazi Concentration Camps,” in *Theatrical Performance during the Holocaust: Texts, Documents, and Memoirs*, eds. Rebecca Rovit and Alvin Goldfarb (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 123.

¹² Ebensshade, “Remembering to Forget,” 84.

¹³ Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer, “Teaching (after) Auschwitz,” in *Witnessing the Disaster: Essays on Representation and the Holocaust*, eds. Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glajzer (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 244.

escapism, but did not engage the performers in an act of spiritual or conscious resistance. Furthermore, *Brundibár*'s extensive embodiment in current literature, theater, and Holocaust pedagogy reflects the ubiquitous tendency to redeem the Holocaust through varying cultural forms. This practice exists as an outgrowth of American culture's unbridled focus on children in Holocaust representation. Explaining the synecdochical usage of children in American cultural representations, Mark Anderson writes, "Transcending history even as it affirms the most dreadful historical reality, it appeals to our own memories of childhood, our identities as parents, sister, brothers: it speaks to us in existential and moral terms, and only secondarily in historical or political ones."¹⁴ Anderson's assertion offers a clear impetus behind the use of a children's opera in American Holocaust representation. However, the result of scholars' inaccurate labeling of the performances in Theresienstadt merely champions the popular rhetoric of "consoling stories" and manufactured retroactive narratives. This practice ultimately ignores survivors' experiences and results in a gross misrepresentation of Theresienstadt's cultural activity.

The majority of scholarly research on Theresienstadt routinely touts *Brundibár* as a highlight of the camp's cultural activity. Alvin Goldfarb attributes the survival of performing arts in the camp to its ultimate use as "vital acts of resistance."¹⁵ Echoing popular sentiment, Goldfarb further argues that the opera offered an allegorical attack on Hitler, in addition to its function as a "necessity for survival."¹⁶ Supporting this theory of cultural

¹⁴ Mark Anderson, "The Child Victim as Witness to the Holocaust: An American Story?," *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 14, no. 1 (Fall 2007): 3.

¹⁵ Alvin Goldfarb, "Theatrical Activities in Nazi Concentration Camps," *Performing Arts Journal* 1, no. 2 (Autumn 1976): 10.

¹⁶ Ibid.

resistance, Nicholas Stargardt asserts, “Such occasions offered precarious moments of collective optimism in an anxiety-ridden and intensely individualistic environment.”¹⁷ While *Brundibár* unarguably played a large role in the lives of the prisoners directly involved, the opera had no effect on the majority of the prison population. The work was sung in Czech for all performances and involved only Czech Jewish children. Multiple sources acknowledge the difficulty in obtaining tickets. Furthermore, Theresienstadt’s hierarchical social composition prevented many prisoners from participation in *Freizeitgestaltung* activities. In spite of the rhetoric of *Brundibár* as an act of conscious resistance in Theresienstadt, a contextualized examination of the performances complicates this claim. Furthermore, the representation of *Brundibár* as evidence of a thriving, culturally active community in Theresienstadt plays a larger role in the misrepresentation of memory in Holocaust studies.

The organization of the *Freizeitgestaltung* and its sponsored performances ultimately functioned as another method of German propaganda. Although some performers may have indeed felt vestiges of hope and resistance in their musical activities, generalizations of *Brundibár’s* role in Theresienstadt ignore the work’s function within the larger framework of the Nazi-controlled *Freizeitgestaltung*. Maurice Sendak, illustrator of a children’s picture book adaptation of *Brundibár*, regards “*Brundibár* as a reassuring closure for lifelong cultural and personal traumas inflicted by the Holocaust.”¹⁸ This retrospective recasting of *Brundibár’s* role in Theresienstadt as a redemptive one says more about a desire to redeem the Holocaust than it does about the camp itself. As survivor Charlotte Opfermann argues,

¹⁷ Nicholas Stargardt, “Children’s Art of the Holocaust,” *Past and Present* 16 (Nov. 1998): 207.

¹⁸ Cited in Hamida Bosmajian, “The Tropes of Trauma,” *Children’s Literature* 37 (2009): 298.

“These presentations help maintain the myth about the supposedly active cultural life in the camp, easing the conscience of a world which stood by idly while millions of innocents were tortured and killed.”¹⁹

The premiere of *Brundibár* occurred clandestinely in a Prague orphanage in 1941. After Krása and the children reunited in Theresienstadt along with the original creative team, they continued their musical labors and offered 55 performances of *Brundibár*. The *Freizeitgestaltung* offered musical performances for a select few in Theresienstadt, ostensibly encouraging cultural activity. Sanctioned by the SS, the *Freizeitgestaltung* officially came into being in 1942. The organization employed artists and scientists and exempted them from manual labor.²⁰ Comprised of many departments, the *Freizeitgestaltung* included areas such as cabaret, Czech and German theater, and a music division subdivided into vocal, instrumental, and popular music sections.²¹

As *Brundibár* fell under the jurisdiction of the *Freizeitgestaltung*, the opera came under control of the camp administration and became part of several propaganda schemes, including the film, *Der Führer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt* (*The Führer Gives the Jews a City*). In preparation for an International Red Cross visit in 1944, the camp authorities initiated a *Stadtverschönerung* (city beautification) campaign and transformed Theresienstadt into a charming town lined with sidewalks, coffee shops, and playgrounds. The SS stage-managed a performance of *Brundibár* for the Red Cross, and the visiting committee left with the impression that prisoners received adequate treatment. Yet only weeks following the Red

¹⁹ Charlotte Opfermann, *The Art of Darkness: Marat/Sade and Adolf Eichmann* (Houston: University Trace Press, 2002), 57.

²⁰ Joža Karas, *Music in Terezín*, 2nd ed. (Hillsdale: Pendragon Press, 2008), 16.

²¹ Ibid.

Cross visit, most prisoners involved in the *Brundibár* production were loaded on transports to Auschwitz.

The history of Theresienstadt testifies to the extent to which German occupation severely affected intellectual and musical activity among Jews in Eastern Europe. After the Third Reich annexed Eastern European border regions in 1938, all Jewish creative activity was forbidden. In 1940, the Gestapo took control of historic fort *Terezín*, along with its surrounding areas and established the Jewish settlement later known as Theresienstadt. Initially portrayed as a “model camp” by the Nazis, many Jews moved there willingly due to the massive Nazi propaganda campaign that portrayed the camp as a health resort. Prominent Jewish citizens along with artists, composers, and intellectuals eventually faced deportation to Theresienstadt. Accomplished musicians Pavel Haas, Gideon Klein, and Viktor Ullman later played active roles in the musical life of Theresienstadt.

Czech Jewish composer Hans Krása led the music division of the *Freizeitgestaltung* and played an active role in the camp’s cultural community. Krása initially wrote *Brundibár* in 1938 as a submission for a competition sponsored through the Ministry of Education and Culture. He first met avant-garde playwright Adolf Hoffmeister through the Club of Czech-German Theatrical Workers, established in December of 1935. Their collaboration produced *Mládí ve hře (Youth in the Play)*, later followed by *Brundibár*. However, Hoffmeister and Krása abandoned any future plans for *Brundibár* due to Nazi-imposed restrictions. Even so, the Jewish musical population in Prague chose to defy authorities and secretly met at Hagibor, a Jewish orphanage in Belgická ulice in the Vinohrady district. Moritz Freudenfeld, the director of the orphanage, was an amateur singer who, along with his son, regularly arranged choral music for the children. On the occasion of Freudenfeld’s

fiftieth birthday celebration in July 1941, many prominent Jewish musicians, including Gideon Klein and Pavel Haas, convened at the orphanage. After exploring possible future performance repertoire, the attendees jointly decided to mount a production of *Brundibár*.

The first performance of *Brundibár* remains largely ignored, in favor of scholarship that focuses overwhelmingly on the concentration camp performances and inscribes them within redemptive narratives. In contrast to the productions in Theresienstadt, the Prague performance displays conscious resistance to prohibitions on cultural activity on the parts of all involved, in addition to those in attendance. Unlike the camp productions, *Brundibár's* premiere occurred clandestinely and all involved risked danger if their activity came under detection of the authorities. The Theresienstadt premiere of *Brundibár* took place on September 23, 1943 in the Magdeburg Barracks and featured approximately 39 children throughout its 55 performances.

Although *Brundibár* became increasingly popular in Theresienstadt, cast changes were common, due to numerous transports to Auschwitz. Testimonies recall the chaotic rehearsals and constant audition process as roles were recast. However, most survivor testimonies claim that the production provided the children with an alternate reality. A surviving cast member recalls, "It became something that pretended to be normality and was natural. One could suddenly sing. There was a dog, a cat, and a school—all things that didn't exist in our daily lives except in this children's opera."²² Camp inmates regularly called children by their character names outside of rehearsal, and the actor playing Brundibár, the opera's evil organ grinder, became a camp celebrity. Songs from the production were sung throughout the camp, most notably the Lullaby. Members of the cast

²² Rebecca Rovit, "The *Brundibar* Project: Memorializing Theresienstadt Children's Opera," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 22, no. 2 (May 2000): 119.

dreaded missing a performance, and went to great lengths to obscure an illness that could possibly send them to the infirmary. Handa Pollak recalls, “When a doctor examined us we would fake reflexes...we tried anyway and practiced producing the reflexes they wanted. I know I didn’t want to miss a single performance of *Brundibár* for anything.”²³ For those involved in the production, the diversion offered an alternate fantasy world filled with talking animals and gleeful children and gave the inmates an opportunity to transcend their harsh reality in Theresienstadt.

Although little information exists regarding the work’s immediate postwar status, *Brundibár* survives today in multiple forms. The *Brundibár* Project, a Holocaust pedagogical tool conceived in Germany, offers an interactive, intergenerational method to present the history of the Holocaust to school-aged children. In preparation for a production of the opera, the project includes a video with interviews from surviving performers, visits with eyewitnesses, a compact disc of the opera’s music, and clips from the performances in Theresienstadt.²⁴ *Jeunesses Musicales Deutschland*, the German delegation of an international youth cultural organization, orchestrated the German premiere of *Brundibár* in 1995. Although initially guaranteed funding from the German government for the January 27, 1999 Berlin premiere, the group lost the promised funds amidst the debate regarding Holocaust representation surrounding the plans for the Berlin Holocaust Memorial in Germany during the 1990s. Rebecca Rovit argues that the historical background of *Brundibár* only fueled further debate regarding the memorialization of the Holocaust:

²³ Brenner, *The Girls of Room 28*, 167.

²⁴ Rebecca Rovit, “The ‘Brundibar’ Project,” 119.

The complex history of *Brundibár* and its role in Theresienstadt's organized *Freizeitgestaltung* make it especially susceptible to the criticism that art created within the Holocaust was coerced and worthless. This criticism may promote the misconception that the *Brundibár* project belongs to the so-called 'Holocaust Industry,' a term attributed to the rash of Holocaust-related events peripheral to the Berlin memorial debate...One may wonder why young Germans and their teachers would stage a musical play dedicated to dead children, especially as most of the original *Brundibár* players were doomed.²⁵

However, organizers continued preparations and adjusted the budget in order to successfully premiere the work. The initial skepticism in Germany surrounding the *Brundibár* Project reflects legitimate claims regarding Holocaust representation.

Although camp authorities ultimately co-opted *Brundibár* for propaganda purposes, the opera premiered in a clandestine, resistance-fueled environment. Much scholarly discourse represents the work's premiere in Theresienstadt as a redemptive act of free will. However, the camp authorities created the *Freizeitgestaltung* for their ultimate propaganda purposes and thus indirectly controlled cultural activity in the camp. Furthermore, the Council of Jewish Elders played a key role in the Nazis' deception and arguably furthered the ruling Party's goals and propaganda through their cooperation in Theresienstadt. Dependent upon the leadership and involvement of the Elders, the Nazis ceded some control of the camp to the Council as part of their ultimate plan. While this study does not suggest the Elders were complicit in Nazi plans for Jewish extermination, it explores the pivotal role of the Council as part of the ultimate deception in Theresienstadt. Moreover, this study

²⁵ Rebecca Rovit, "The 'Brundibar' Project," 115.

explores the misrepresentation *Brundibár* in cultural representations of Theresienstadt and aims to present an accurate narrative based upon the historical facts that trace the work's journey from its Prague premiere to Nazi co-option in Theresienstadt.

CHAPTER ONE

“Terezin was a unique place: a piano concerto on a rooftop one night, and a transport to death the next day.”²⁶ Alfred Kantor

Prelude to Theresienstadt

Theresienstadt’s function as a “model camp” played a crucial role in the Nazis’ intended goal of total Jewish annihilation. Events leading up to the camp’s establishment reveal the meaningless bureaucratic menagerie employed by the Nazis in efforts to further their deceptive agendas. Furthermore, the unique creative environment fostered indirectly by Nazi administration’s formation of the *Freizeitgestaltung* requires careful consideration, as the camp’s cultural activity ultimately aided Nazi propaganda. The use of Theresienstadt as a *Presentierlager* (show camp) and the resultant web of Nazi deception figures prominently into the complexity of *Brundibár* performances in Theresienstadt.

Although the intentionalism versus functionalism debate over the Holocaust’s origins may never find a clear resolution, intentionalist historians can point to compelling evidence that Hitler fully intended to exterminate Europe’s Jews.²⁷ In a speech to the Reichstag on January 30, 1939, Hitler declared, “Today I shall make a prophecy: should international Jewry inside and outside Europe again succeed in involving the nations in a world war, its end will not be World Bolshevism and Jewish victory, but the liquidation of the Jewish race in Europe.”²⁸ Two years later, on January 20, 1941, Hitler referenced his preceding speech, further alluding to his ultimate plans for European Jews, “The Jews like to laugh today, just

²⁶ Susan Goldman Rubin, *Fireflies in the Dark: The Story of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis and the Children of Terezin* (New York: Holiday House, 2000), 29.

²⁷ See works by Richard Evans and Ian Kershaw.

²⁸ Cited in Zdeněk Lederer, *Ghetto Theresienstadt* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1983), 4-5.

as they previously laughed at my internal prophecies. The coming months and years will show that I had correctly prophesied here.”²⁹ H. G. Adler, a Theresienstadt survivor and author of a groundbreaking study of Theresienstadt, asserts, “The fate of Jews in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia in the years 1939-1941 was a prelude to the following tragedy of the Theresienstadt ghetto from 1941 until 1945.”³⁰ As Adler suggests, Nazi propaganda and ever-increasing restrictions imposed upon Czech Jews merely foreshadowed impending efforts to eradicate European Jewry.

Hitler’s 1941 speech suggests that he possessed full knowledge of a proposed plan for Jewish elimination. Zdeněk Lederer, a survivor of Theresienstadt, further notes the realization of Hitler’s ultimate goal in the last stage of German plans for the Final Solution: “Yet not until the last period of German rule, when news of the atrocities committed against the Jews became more definite, did a few of the potential victims guess that the statements of the leaders and of the subordinates of the murderous German system had to be accepted at their face value, that they were no mere catch-phrases designed to win the masses, but part and parcel of a detailed plan of physical annihilation.”³¹ Historian Miroslav Kárný echoes this assertion, contending that the initial German occupation of Czech lands symbolized a greater agenda declared in Hitler’s “prophecy.”³² The entire erection and settlement of Theresienstadt was part of an elaborate propaganda scheme. The Nazi-sanctioning of the *Freizeitgestaltung* and encouragement of cultural activity within

²⁹ Cited in Lederer, *Ghetto Theresienstadt*, 17.

³⁰ H. G. Adler, *Theresienstadt 1941-1945: Das Antlitz einer Zwangsgemeinschaft; Geschichte, Soziologie, Psychologie* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1955), 4.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

³² Miroslav Kárný, “The Genocide of the Czech Jews,” in *Terezín Memorial Book: Jewish Victims of Nazi Deportations from Bohemia and Moravia 1941-1945* (Prague: Terezín Initiative Melantrich, 1996), 29.

Theresienstadt may have offered temporary solace to inmates, but ultimately it fulfilled Nazi objectives. “True, we had more freedom of movement inside the fortified walls of Terezín than outside. But it was all a mirage.” recalls survivor and actress Zdenka Ehrlich-Fantlová. She continues, “They had their own definite plans for our future—and kept them strictly to themselves. They had condemned us to death, but meanwhile allowed us to play and sing. Why shouldn’t we? The smiles would soon be wiped from our faces.”³³

The first of several bureaucratic ploys towards exertion of Nazi control over Jewish life emerged with establishment of the *Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung in Böhmen und Mähren* (Central Committee for Jewish Emigration in Bohemia and Moravia) under *Reichsprotektor* Konstantin von Neurath. Announcement of the foundation of this organization, routinely referred to as the *Zentralamt*, appeared in the official Prague newspaper, *Der neue Tag*, on July 22, 1939.³⁴ Led by *SS-Sturmbahnführer* Hans Günther, the *Zentralamt* functioned as a branch of the larger *Reichszentralamt für jüdische Auswanderung*. Reinhard Heydrich commanded the organization until his assassination in 1942 and was succeeded by Ernst Kaltenbrunner. However, Adler argues that in actuality, Adolf Eichmann ultimately controlled the organization, “Heydrich und sein Nachfolger Kaltenbrunner, wie über beiden Himmler, waren nur durch ihre hierarchische Funktionen die Oberleiter des *Zentralamtes*, während Eichmann der praktische Leiter wurde und bis zum Kriegsende blieb.”³⁵ (Heydrich and his successor Kaltenbrunner, in addition to Himmler, who presided over both, were only chief leaders of the *Zentralamt* through their hierarchical functions, of

³³ Zdenka Ehrlich-Fantlová, “The Czech Theater in Terezín,” in *Theatrical Performance during the Holocaust: Texts, Documents, and Memoirs*, eds. Rebecca Rovit and Alvin Goldfarb (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 235.

³⁴ Adler, *Theresienstadt 1941-1945*, 5.

³⁵ Ibid.

which Eichmann became and remained the practical leader until the end of the war.) The meaningless bureaucratic hierarchy reveals a key element of Nazi strategy.

Theresienstadt's *Ältestenrat* later faced similar manipulation by camp authorities. However, Eichmann failed to acknowledge his executive role in the creation of Theresienstadt at his trial in Jerusalem, insisting that the camp was "very close" to Heinrich Himmler's heart.³⁶

In efforts to engage Jewish leadership as a governing body under Nazi rule, Prague's *jüdische Kultusgemeinde* (Jewish Community Bureau) emerged as a branch of the *Zentralamt*. Moreover, Adler notes that the *Kultusgemeinde* became an "executive organ" of the *Zentralamt* and bore responsibility for implementation of German commands.³⁷

Through the calculated relationship established with leaders of the Jewish community, Nazi leaders created the illusion that through obeisance and cooperation with Nazi policy, plans for mass deportations could be delayed, or perhaps abandoned entirely. Lederer refers to this illusion as Jewish "gullibility" and "self-deception."³⁸ He further suggests that the prevalent Jewish optimism stemmed from experiences dating back to medieval persecution, "Though the Inquisition and the crusaders were cruel, the Jewish communities attacked by them survived, progressed spiritually, and maintained their vitality. But Nazism was not an angry eruption which could be expected after a time to abate; there was no loophole left for escape; here was a premeditated elaborate scheme, borne along by fanaticism, executed by a streamlined organization and backed by the powerful machinery of the modern

³⁶ Kárný, "The Genocide of the Czech Jews," 60.

³⁷ Ibid., 8.

³⁸ Lederer, *Ghetto Theresienstadt*, 9.

totalitarian state.”³⁹ Nazi deceit persisted on a massive scale through the relationship forged with leaders of the Jewish community.

As plans for mass deportations progressed, officials in the *Kultusgemeinde* proposed to Hans Günther, director of the *Zentralamt*, that all Jews in Bohemia and Moravia receive compulsory work assignments in their communities.⁴⁰ After Günther rejected this proposal, Jakob Edelstein, chief negotiator on behalf of the *Kultusgemeinde* and later appointed head of Theresienstadt’s *Ältestenrat* (Council of Elders), proposed creating a Ghetto within the Protectorate. Edelstein also readily assisted in the search for a suitable location.⁴¹ Jewish leaders remained hopeful that through cooperation with the Nazis, Bohemian and Moravian Jews could remain in their homeland. Lederer vehemently criticizes the Jewish organization in its attempts to negotiate with Nazi leadership, and argues that they “acted like rabbits hypnotized by a snake; they obediently complied with orders of the Germans...thus aiding the Germans to carry out their aims. The Germans fully exploited this Jewish attitude.”⁴² However, Jewish leadership operated to its maximum ability within the confines of Nazi rule in pursuit of their constituents’ best interests. These “involuntary middlemen” hoped to secure stable work and housing for all Jews in the Protectorate. Furthermore, the leaders later played a chief role in the encouragement of cultural activity within the Ghetto and aided the creation of the *Freizeitgestaltung*, indirectly influencing the Theresienstadt premiere of *Brundibár*.

Günther and his superiors in Berlin initially approved Jakob Edelstein’s proposed Ghetto within the Protectorate, located in Prague’s Fifth District. However, plans were

³⁹ Lederer, *Ghetto Thersienstadt*, 9.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 13.

⁴¹ Opfermann, *The Art of Darkness*, 35.

⁴² Ibid., 9.

quickly abandoned “because the Germans felt that the outside world might get a glimpse of the Ghetto, and that was the last thing they wanted.”⁴³ Indeed, Nazi leaders required a sparsely populated location, lest neighboring communities learn of Theresienstadt’s true function. Following consideration of other towns in the area, German authorities chose a garrison town, *Terezín*, and ignored Jewish contestations. Heydrich composed a sixteen-page document outlining plans for an internment camp on the grounds, which would eventually transform into a Ghetto. He outlined these plans in a meeting of Nazi officials on October 11, 1941: “Jews from Bohemia and Moravia will be assembled for evacuation. The Czechs there will be advised to move elsewhere. Fifty thousand to sixty thousand Jews may be comfortably accommodated in Terezin. From there the Jews will go East. After the complete evacuation of the Jews, Terezin will, according to a perfect plan, be settled by Germans and become a center of German life. Under no account must any details of these plans become public.”⁴⁴ Heydrich’s 1941 “perfect plan” clearly outlines intentions to resettle the Potemkin village with ethnic Germans.

Foundation of Theresienstadt

Heydrich’s chosen location was *Terezín*, a garrison town established in 1780 by Austrian Emperor Joseph II and named after his mother, Empress Maria Theresa. Originally built as fortifications against a possible Prussian attack, the settlement included two separate fortresses. Although the Main Fortress was demolished in 1882, the Small Fortress remained in continuous use over the next several hundred years. The Fortress fulfilled

⁴³ Opfermann, *The Art of Darkness*, 14.

⁴⁴ Thomson, Ruth, *Terezin: Voices from the Holocaust* (Somerville, Massachusetts: Candlewick Press, 2011), 11.

multiple purposes over time, housing political prisoners under Austrian rule and dangerous criminals under the interwar Czechoslovak Republic. It later became part of the concentration camp Theresienstadt during German occupation.⁴⁵

Nazi deception surrounding plans for Theresienstadt became evident in the camp's first days. The first transport to Theresienstadt arrived on November 24, 1941.⁴⁶ The group of 342 male "volunteers" composed the *Aufbaukommando I* (Construction Command). Officials ensured deportees before arrival that Theresienstadt offered paid work, proper accommodations, and open communication with family members outside the camp. However, the workers faced a starkly different reality upon their arrival. Housed in the *Sudetenkaserne* (Sudeten Barracks), the workers slept on bare floors and used overcoats as pillows and blankets. Furthermore, musicologist Joža Karas argues that "unfulfilled promises of weekend trips home made them the first actual prisoners of the ghetto."⁴⁷ The second transport of workers, *Aufbaukommando II*, arrived on December 4, 1941 to similar false promises. However, this transport included the thirty-two men who eventually comprised the ghetto's *Ältestenrat*. Initially led by Jakob Edelstein, the Council's membership included many individuals who worked previously in Prague's Jewish Community Bureau and traveled voluntarily.⁴⁸ Operating on the Nazis' false assertions of Theresienstadt, Jewish leader Jakob Edelstein ultimately acted as a puppet for Eichmann and advocated Jewish relocation to the ghetto. However, survivor Charlotte Opfermann argues that the *Ältestenrat* simply "hoped Theresienstadt and its inmates might be spared

⁴⁵ Lederer, *Ghetto Theresienstadt*, 2.

⁴⁶ Karas, *Music in Terezín*, 9.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

the transport to the dreaded East if and as long as they performed useful labor for the Wehrmacht and the German war effort.”⁴⁹

Following the arrival of the two *Aufbaukommando* units, the next wave of transports included large numbers of privileged and elderly German and Austrian Jews. Encouraged by Nazi propaganda and urged by Edelstein himself, the newest prisoners received instructions to bring all possessions to their destination, *Bad Theresien* (Spa Terezin).⁵⁰ Toting heavy trunks and armed with personal valuables, some unsuspecting newcomers requested “a room with windows facing the south” upon arrival.⁵¹ Some of the “resettlers” purchased a *Heimeinkaufsvertrag* (Home Purchase Agreement) assuring accommodations at *Bad Theresien*.⁵² Furthermore, elderly widowed Jews engaged in hasty marriages with younger spouses, as they believed these *Abtransport* marriages would ensure safety for their younger spouses through relocation to *Bad Theresien*.⁵³ Upon arrival, Theresienstadt’s newest residents immediately realized Nazi deception and encountered the bleak reality of their new surroundings. Following the first spate of transports, inmates experienced overcrowding and malnutrition. In his diary, survivor Gonda Redlich records a Dutch woman’s account of her voluntary relocation, “My son was with a Christian. He treated him well. I could have left the child with him and come by myself. But before the journey the Germans told us that the ghetto was very nice, the town fairly large, with playgrounds and gardens and we would be allowed to move up to 25 km outside the town. On the last night

⁴⁹ Opfermann, *The Art of Darkness*, 39.

⁵⁰ Rebecca Rovit, “Theresienstadt,” in *Theatrical Performance during the Holocaust: Texts Documents, and Memoirs*, eds. Rebecca Rovit and Alvin Goldfarb (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 169.

⁵¹ Lederer, *Ghetto Theresienstadt*, 39.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Opfermann, *The Art of Darkness*, 38.

before departure I decided to take the child with me.”⁵⁴ The calculated use of Edelstein to attract willing deportees ultimately foreshadowed the gross exploitation of prisoners that later occurred as part of the Nazis’ strategy to “prove that the extermination of the Jews was only a figment of Jewish *Greuelpropaganda*”⁵⁵ (atrocities propaganda).

Comprised of thirteen members, the *Ältestenrat* bore responsibility for day-to-day operations in Theresienstadt, albeit under Nazi orders. Led by Edelstein and his deputy, Otto Zucker, the Council included a chief of the Central Secretariat and departmental chairs of five departments: Financial Department, Economic Department, Internal Administration, Technical Department, and Health Department.⁵⁶ However, executions of prisoners in January 1942 quickly exposed Nazi authorities as the chief leadership within the camp. Much like the bureaucratic menagerie of the *Zentralamt*, the function of the *Ältestenrat* as a pawn of Nazi leadership played a key role in the deception of not only the prisoners, but also the outside world. With this understanding, the entire camp and its cultural activity were merely part of an elaborate Nazi deceptive scheme.

Formation of the *Freizeitgestaltung*

Cultural activity emerged in Theresienstadt as early as the arrival of the first transport of the *Aufbaukommando*. Communal singing of folk songs in the evenings after completion of daily work became a regular occurrence for the first residents of Theresienstadt.⁵⁷ As the workers of the *Aufbaukommandos* arrived “voluntarily,” the men

⁵⁴ Saul S. Friedman, *The Terezin Diary of Gonda Redlich*, trans. by Lawrence Kutler (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1992), 23.

⁵⁵ Kárný, “The Genocide of the Czech Jews,” 67.

⁵⁶ Lederer, *Ghetto Theresienstadt*, 20.

⁵⁷ Karas, *Music in Terezín*, 11.

avoided confiscation of their belongings. Due to these circumstances, members of the second *Aufbaukommando* successfully brought musical instruments into the camp.⁵⁸ Musicians Karel Fröhlich and Kurt Maier, who later became charter members of the *Freizeitgestaltung*, smuggled in a violin, viola, and accordion.

Conflicting accounts surround the first “official” musical concert presented in Theresienstadt. Rabbi Erich Weiner, who later presided over the *Freizeitgestaltung*, contends that the first concert occurred in the *Sudentenkaserne* on December 5, 1941.⁵⁹ He recalls, “The large transport of workers, AK 2, arrived the day before. The evening was improvised as a reunion celebration. It was not very difficult because the J-Transport brought a number of good musicians who had their instruments with them. This improvised evening was incredibly well received...Thus a few enthusiasts came together [and] decided to organize evening of entertainment on a larger scale.”⁶⁰

The program lists multiple performers including a flutist, violinist, accordionist, an assembled jazz orchestra, and a magician.⁶¹ As new transports continually arrived, participation in musical endeavors rapidly increased. However, musical activity became a concern for the Nazi authorities. Rabbi Weiner recalls, “This blossoming activity suffered its deathblow in December 1941, when the possession of musical instruments was forbidden.

⁵⁸ Karas, *Music in Terezín*, 11.

⁵⁹ Scholars cite multiple dates for the first official concert. Karas notes through correspondence with musician Kurt Maier that the concert likely occurred in the middle of December, as the program was hastily typed following the concert. However, Adler contends it occurred on December 28, 1941.

⁶⁰ Erich Weiner, “*Freizeitgestaltung* in Theresienstadt,” in *Theatrical Performance during the Holocaust: Texts, Documents, and Memoirs*, eds. Rebecca Rovit and Alvin Goldfarb (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 209.

⁶¹ Karas, *Music in Terezín*, 11.

The energetic organizers, however, did not allow themselves to be frightened away.⁶² Once Nazi leaders learned of continued musical performances, “they sanctioned these so-called *Kameradschaftsabende* (evenings of fellowship) and thus encouraged their rapid upsurge.”⁶³ With Theresienstadt’s function as a “model camp,” Nazi authorities welcomed the opportunity to capitalize on the camp’s active cultural life.

The arrival of opera singer Hedda Grab-Kernmayr on a December 17, 1941 transport ushered in a new phase of cultural life in Theresienstadt. Her talents and organizational skills helped assure the success of the *Kameradschaftsabende*. Born in Prague on August 6, 1899, Kernmayr had extensive experience on German and Czechoslovak opera stages.⁶⁴ Furthermore, Rabbi Weiner and Fredy Hirsch, director of the Central Administration, asked Kernmayr for assistance with the organization of cultural activities. “This, together with the previously permitted *Kameradschaftsabende*,” Karas writes, “was in reality the beginning of the highly organized *Freizeitgestaltung*.”⁶⁵

In February 1942, Fredy Hirsch’s division appointed Rabbi Weiner as head of the newly formed *Freizeitgestaltung*. Composed of many departments, the *Freizeitgestaltung* included cabaret; German and Czech theater; a music division subdivided into instrumental; popular; and vocal sections; library; scheduling; programming; and sports.⁶⁶ In his personal reports, Weiner details his experience: “The leisure time activity and its tasks drew me completely under its spell. I saw progressive spiritual deterioration; I saw the brutalization of the ghetto inmates...In the beginning of March, then I moved into the office of the

⁶² Weiner, “*Freizeitgestaltung* in Theresienstadt,” 210.

⁶³ Karas, *Music in Terezín*, 12.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 13.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 16.

buildings' management, where I first struggled...A folder and a pencil were generously provided me by the building management and it now meant: Organize leisure time activity."⁶⁷ While Weiner likely believed his efforts offered comfort and solace for many prisoners, he remained unaware of the calculated Nazi exploitation of the organization and its members in the coming months.

Much like the function of the *Ältestenrat*, the *Freizeitgestaltung* offered a projection of self-governance and limited benefits for its members while ultimately functioning on behalf of the Nazis' interests. Echoing this assertion, Jascha Nemtsov writes, "Dadurch hatten die Organisatoren und Künstler die Illusion, den Inhalt der Veranstaltungen selbst gestalten zu können, ohne zu ahnen, daß sie auf diese Weise Marionetten der NS-Lagerleitung wurden...Im Szenario eines riesigen Potemkinschen Dorfes sollten die kulturellen Veranstaltungen eine besondere Rolle spielen."⁶⁸ ("Thus the organizers and artists had the illusion that they alone could create the contents of their performances without knowing that in doing so they became string puppets for the NS camp authorities...The cultural events were to play a special role within the setting of an enormous Potemkin village.") Further detailing Theresienstadt's existence as a *Presentierlager*, John Eckhard argues that ultimately, cultural activity within the camp functioned as part of the Nazi plan aimed at the "systematische Ausrottung des europäischen Judentums."⁶⁹ ("systematic extermination of European Jews.") Cultural activity in Theresienstadt became a centerpiece of Nazi propaganda during the Red Cross visit in 1944. After initiating a beautification campaign

⁶⁷ Weiner, "*Freizeitgestaltung* in Theresienstadt," 211.

⁶⁸ Jascha Nemtsov and Beate Schröder-Nauenburg, "Musik im Inferno des Nazi-Terrors: Jüdische Kompositisten im Dritten Reich," *Acta Musicologica* 70, no. 1 (1998): 25.

⁶⁹ John Eckhard, "Musik und Konzentrationslager: Eine Annäherung," *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 48, no. 1 (1991): 18-19.

prior to the delegation's arrival, camp authorities stage-managed performances of *Brundibár* and Verdi's *Requiem* for the visitors. These events depict the ultimate co-option of the *Freizeitgestaltung*'s activities.

The *Freizeitgestaltung* offered welcome diversions to its members. Moreover, performers and audiences alike enjoyed an opportunity for escapism. Robert Laux asserts, "Die Freizeitgestaltung wollte Mut, Heiterkeit und Abwechslung in das Leben des Ghettos bringen."⁷⁰ ("The *Freizeitgestaltung* wanted to usher courage, amusement, and diversion into Ghetto life.") The Jewish administration worked exhaustively to create artistic programs for the enjoyment of inmates. Department Head Fredy Hirsch writes, "We wanted to give them a reasonably lovely place to call home in the midst of misery piled upon misery."⁷¹ However, not all prisoners welcomed these activities. Survivor Charlotte Opfermann recalls, "Many of us were much too hungry, too weak and too dispirited to participate in these distractions which were at times frivolous. Most of us did not see any reason to engage in frivolity."⁷² Other survivors fail to reiterate Opfermann's sentiment. In contrast, one prisoner offers her memory of a performance, noting the temporary joy many encountered, "Das erste Konzert, welchem ich beiwohnen konnte, fand auf einem Dachboden statt. Es ist für mich unvergeßlich. Es war ein verhältnismäßig großer Raum, wo drei Stühle für das Trio, Violine, Viola, Cello, standen. Sonst war kein Stuhl da und alle Zuhörer standen mäuschenstill, um diesen Klängen zu lauschen...Diese wenigen Stunden geistiger Nahrung bewirkten bei vielen, daß sie Hunger und Elend vergaßen und

⁷⁰ Robert Laux, "Hans Krásas Kinderoper Brundibár: Notwendigkeit und Missbrauch," in *Das (Musik-) Theater in Exil und Diktatur: Vorträge und Gespräche des Salzburger Symposions 2003, Wort und Musik* no. 58, ed. Peter Csobádi (Anif/Salzburg: Mueller-Speiser: 2005), 481.

⁷¹ Brenner, *The Girls of Room 28*, 11.

⁷² Opfermann, *The Art of Darkness*, 58.

sehnsüchtig auf ein weiteres Konzert, einen Vortrag oder ein Theaterstück warteten."⁷³

("The first concert I attended took place in an attic. It was unforgettable for me. It was a comparatively big room where the seats for the trio, violin, viola, and cello stood. Otherwise there were no chairs and the listeners stood quiet as mice in order to hear the music...These few hours of spiritual nourishment caused many to forget their hunger and misery and they waited longingly for an additional concert, lecture, or play.") Fellow survivor Zdeněk Lederer echoes this assertion and argues that cultural activities played a positive role in the camp, "To the older prisoners it was a source of consolation, helping them to forget the dreary present...To the younger prisoners, art was an inspiration, a source of strength and courage."⁷⁴ Also an inmate in Theresienstadt, Gonda Redlich offers a profoundly different view in his diary: "So many contrasts in life here. In the yard, a cabaret with singers, and in the house the old and sick are dying. Great contrasts. The young are full of desire to have a full life and the old [are left] without place and without rest."⁷⁵ However, musicians and writers alike enjoyed the opportunity for creative output. Victor Ullmann, who composed multiple works during his internment, writes, "...it must be emphasized that Theresienstadt has served to *enhance*, not to impede, my musical activities, that by no means did we sit weeping on the banks of the waters of Babylon, and that our endeavor with respect to Arts was commensurate with our will to live."⁷⁶

The Theresienstadt performances of *Brundibár* illustrate the ultimately duplicitous nature of cultural activities under the *Freizeitgestaltung*. While many surviving cast members describe feelings of "strength and courage" recalling their performances, there is

⁷³ Eckhard, "Musik und Konzentrationslager: Eine Annäherung," 20.

⁷⁴ Lederer, *Ghetto Theresienstadt*, 125.

⁷⁵ Friedman, *Diary of Gonda Redlich*, 58.

⁷⁶ Cited in Karas, *Music in Terezin*, 173.

no mention of resistance in their testimonies. Lederer offers the common assertion that art within Theresienstadt became a “weapon of spiritual and intellectual resistance.”⁷⁷

However, Lederer was not a member of the cast of *Brundibár* and inserts the trope of human redemption into his description of Theresienstadt’s cultural activity. Opfermann argues vehemently against Lederer’s assertion, stating, “the myth is perpetuated further by some well-intentioned survivors, former inmates, suffering from failing or selective memory.”⁷⁸

While the two Prague performances of *Brundibár* clearly exhibit elements of a clandestine artistic community resisting German prohibitions, the performances in Theresienstadt possess an entirely contrasting nature. Multiple actors’ testimonies assert that the performances functioned as a diversion and temporarily brought joy into their lives. In this instance, music operated as self-affirmation and a reminder of “essential humanity and the existence of a better world outside the camp.”⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Lederer, *Ghetto Theresienstadt*, 125.

⁷⁸ Opfermann, *The Art of Darkness*, 58.

⁷⁹ Joseph J. Moreno, “Orpheus in Hell” in *Music and Manipulation: On the Social Uses and Social Control of Music*, eds. Steven Brown & Urik Volgsten, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), 280.

CHAPTER TWO

“The applause was incredible...there was a storm of applause, and the audience wanted to hear the song again and again until they almost had to throw us out. We made the most of this moment of freedom.”⁸⁰ Ela Weissberger

The Origins and Premiere of *Brundibár*

Born in Prague to a German-speaking mother, Hans Krása became internationally known for his musical compositions. Prior to his internment in Theresienstadt, Krása’s orchestral and chamber works were performed in Paris, Boston, Berlin, and other major cities. A major figure in Prague musical life, Krása briefly studied with French composer Albert Roussel in Paris and later served as vocal coach under Austrian composer and conductor Alexander Zemlinsky at the Prague New German Opera.⁸¹ His first collaboration with avant-garde playwright Adolf Hoffmeister resulted in *Anna’s Song*, an excerpt of incidental music that became widely popular in Czechoslovakia. Krása’s opera *Betrothal of a Dream* (based on Dostoyevsky’s *Uncle’s Dream*) won the Czech State Prize and premiered in 1932 with George Szell conducting.⁸² Krása and Hoffmeister reunited through the Club of Czech-German Theater Workers, originally founded in December 1935.⁸³ Following this meeting, they jointly decided to write *Brundibár*. Motivated by the Association for Music Education’s competition notice in the contemporary music magazine *Rhythmus*, the pair planned to submit the opera for the grand prize of 5,000 crowns in 1938.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Brenner, *The Girls of Room 28*, 138.

⁸¹ Robert Rollin, “New Music from Terezín, 1941-1945,” *The South African Music Teacher*, no. 137 (2001): 12.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Karas, *Music in Terezín*, 77.

⁸⁴ Brenner, *The Girls of Room 28*, 137.

In the absence of Germany's *Kuturbund* organizations, Czech Jewish musicians met clandestinely. Musicians and artists in Prague secretly gathered at Hagibor, an orphanage for boys. Moritz Freudenfeld, promoted musical activities for the children and mounted multiple productions at the orphanage including three children's operas: *The Fat Great-grandfather*, *Robbers and Detectives*, and *We're Building a City*. In the absence of printed music, Moritz's son, Rudolf Freudenfeld, arranged chants and choruses for the children's performances.⁸⁵ In July 1941, a group of artists and musicians gathered at Hagibor to celebrate Moritz Freudenfeld's fiftieth birthday. The group included Hans Krása, pianist Gideon Klein, poet Emil A. Saudek, conductor Rafael Schächter, and František Zelenka, former stage director of the National Theater. At this meeting, Rafael Schächter noted that although written three years earlier, Krása's *Brundibár* remained unperformed. The group decided that day to produce the premiere of the opera utilizing the boys of the orphanage.⁸⁶ With Rudolf Freudenfeld acting as his assistant, Schächter began music rehearsals immediately. However, Freudenfeld took over the position after Schächter went with the first transport to Theresienstadt on November 24, 1941.⁸⁷ Zelenka directed the opera and also functioned as stage manager and set designer, erecting a set encompassing the entire stage. This feat was somewhat dangerous, as the set could not be quickly dismantled in the event of any unannounced visit by Nazi authorities. Luckily, this occurred only once and the director successfully offered a distraction.⁸⁸

The plot of *Brundibár* centers on two children, Aninka and Pepíček, and their quest to aid their sick mother. After the doctor prescribes milk for the mother, the two children

⁸⁵ Karas, *Music in Terezín*, 79.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 80.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

realize they have no money and thus cannot buy any milk. Suddenly the organ grinder, Brundibár, appears playing on the street corner. The children begin to sing with him and Brundibár responds angrily, chasing them away. Three animals—a sparrow, a dog, and a cat—appear to help the two siblings earn money. The animals, along with other children from the neighborhood, sing a lullaby and bystanders immediately reward them. Without warning, Brundibár sneaks among the children and steals their money. The children and three animals chase the evil organ grinder and retrieve the stolen money. In the closing scene, the entire company gathers and sings a victory song proclaiming their triumph over the evil Brundibár.

The first performance of *Brundibár* in Prague bore little resemblance to the later performances in Theresienstadt in terms of the way it thematizes resistance to evil forces. In the winter of 1942-43, the opera premiered to approximately 150 people in the dining hall of Hagibor.⁸⁹ Absent from the premiere, Hans Krása had already been deported to Theresienstadt in August and knew nothing of the performances.⁹⁰ However, the debut was such an accomplishment that Krása's fiancée, Erna Grünfeld, sent news of the successful premiere to Theresienstadt.⁹¹ Three musicians, pianist Löffelholz, violinist Berkovič, and drummer Kaufman, played in lieu of an orchestra, all sharing a single piano score with the conductor.⁹² Zelenka's creative set included posters of a dog, cat and sparrow hanging from a fence built across the stage. Each depiction of the animals contained a large hole instead of a head, which allowed the actors to stand directly behind the posters as they performed

⁸⁹ Nemtsov, "Musik im Inferno des Nazi-Terrors," 28.

⁹⁰ Laux, "Hans Krásas Kinderoper *Brundibár*," 477.

⁹¹ Karas, *Music in Terezín*, 81.

⁹² Joža Karas, "Operatic Performances in Terezín: Krása's *Brundibár*," in *Theatrical Performance during the Holocaust*, eds. Rebecca Rovit and Alvin Goldfarb, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press: 1999), 193.

their roles. Further increasing feelings of solidarity among those present, Zelenka inscribed *Volte 62541* (Vote 62541) on a set piece. Intended as a joke, the number represented the Jewish telephone code in the community.⁹³ This action, in addition to the risk of detection borne by Zelenka due to his impressive but relatively immobile set design, distinctly flouted German prohibitions placed upon the Jewish community. Furthermore, the very fact that the audience of 150 people assembled secretly for the performance defines it as an act of defiance. The opera played at least one more time before all those involved in the Prague premiere were forced on transports to Theresienstadt.

On July 7, 1944, the last transport of children from Hagibor arrived in Theresienstadt, along with their director Moritz Freudenfeld and his son, Rudolf.⁹⁴ Rafael Schächter welcomed them to Theresienstadt and honored them with a performance of Smetana's *The Bartered Bride*.⁹⁵ Rudolf Freudenfeld recalls their arrival:

As news spread through town that the head of the orphanage had arrived, the streets near the “sluice” were lined with children. My father passed through the crowd, happy to be among his children again. And they welcomed him the way you greet someone you hold most dear—with childlike love amidst all that misery. That evening, Rafík [the children’s nickname for Rafael Schächter] arranged for a concert performance in our honor, in one of our attics, of *The Bartered Bride*, with a piano instead of an orchestra. After the performance, I proudly pulled out the score for

⁹³ Karás, *Music in Terezín*, 80.

⁹⁴ Brenner, *The Girls of Room 28*, 103.

⁹⁵ Adler, *Theresienstadt, 1941-1945*, 593.

Brundibár, and we decided then and there that I should begin rehearsing with the children.⁹⁶

Almost immediately, Schächter and Freudenfeld organized auditions for all roles in the attic of Boy's Home 417, a children's barrack in Theresienstadt.⁹⁷ As news of the *Brundibár* production spread throughout the camp, many children could hardly contain their excitement. Ela Weissberger, a survivor of Theresienstadt, distinctly recalls her audition, "There were three of us from our room—Flaška, Maria Mühlstein, and me. And we had to stand in a row and each had to sing up and down the scale, la la la. When my turn came I shook with fright at the thought that I wouldn't sing well enough. But then Rudi Freudenfeld said to me, 'You'll play a cat.'—a cat in a children's opera? That was something extraordinary!"⁹⁸ Ela's roommate, Maria Mühlstein, received the role of the sparrow and her brother, Piňt'a, was Pepíček. An additional leading role, Aninka, went to Greta Hofmeister. Already active in Theresienstadt's music circles, Hofmeister had previously performed in *The Bartered Bride* and Verdi's *Requiem*.

While members of the cast were thrilled with the role assignments, being left out of the production aroused feelings of jealousy and disappointment. Among others, Eva Landa recalls in an interview, "I remember feeling very hurt because I didn't get the role of the schoolgirl who throws her book in the air. I wanted very much to play it. But another girl, Hana Vohrýsková, was chosen."⁹⁹ While this statement appears somewhat trivial at face value, Eva's disgruntlement shows a child's commonplace reaction to dissatisfaction. Eva's

⁹⁶ Brenner, *The Girls of Room 28*, 103.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 104.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 106.

statement serves as evidence that although children in Theresienstadt faced difficult conditions, they nonetheless still experienced emotions commonly associated with childhood.

The role of Brundibár went to Honza Treichlinger, an orphan from Plzeň who personally requested the part. Rudolf Freudenfeld recalls his “chance” encounter with Honza in a washroom, “He had virtually begged for the role...He came up beside me, pretending to wash his hands, and casually remarked, ‘I’ve heard that you’re looking for children for your opera. Can I come too?’”¹⁰⁰ Honza went on to play the role in all Theresienstadt performances, and became a camp “celebrity.”¹⁰¹ Freudenfeld and Schächter cast two sets of understudies for all main roles from the chorus. Rafael, six-year-old son of Prague pianist Alice Herz-Sommer, substituted as the sparrow.¹⁰² However, Honza’s performance as Brundibár readily stood out in the production. In an article on *Brundibár*, Freudenfeld describes the indelible expression made by Honza:

Brundibár is a negative hero...Honza, quite instinctively, made the character of Brundibár so human that, although he played a wicked character, he became the darling of the audience. He learned to twitch the whiskers which stuck under his nose. He twitched them so well, and at just the right time, that tension relaxed in the auditorium, and often we could hear the children releasing their bated breath...What might he have become? An actor or engineer? How he could have humanized his own

¹⁰⁰ Brenner, *The Girls of Room 28*, 104.

¹⁰¹ Karas, “Operatic Performances in Terezín,” 194.

¹⁰² Hanelore Brenner lists Stephan Sommer as Alice Herz-Sommer’s son.

life as he had his role! That he was rather short was fateful to him.¹⁰³ He was fourteen years old. He went to Auschwitz with the old and the small children and directly into the gas chamber.¹⁰⁴

Held in the hot, stuffy attic of Boy's Home L 417, rehearsals were led by Schächter and Freudenfeld most evenings. The children adored Freudenfeld, whom they termed Bastík, and the world "suddenly seemed to revolve around nothing but rehearsals."¹⁰⁵ Indeed, the production became an alternate reality for many children. Freudenfeld routinely arrived to rehearsals covered in sweat after working each day in a stone quarry in Litoměřice. Rafael Schächter normally rehearsed the soloists and the chorus. The pair's dedication to the production became immediately evident. In a single evening, Schächter conducted the entire opera and then supervised his protégé, Freudenfeld, as the latter conducted the entire opera again.¹⁰⁶ In addition to instructing the children, the two men were also saddled with the uneasy task of controlling them. Writing under the pseudonym *ini* for the boys' secret magazine *Vedem* (We lead), Rudolf Laub, a fifteen-year-old member of the describes the chaos of rehearsals:

Have any of you ever been a director and had to deal with fifty strapping boys and charming girls who are convinced that the more noise and fun during the rehearsals, the better? No, it's not easy, and I take my hat off to Rudi Freudenfeld, because throughout the rehearsals he got angry only a few times, and then calmed down

¹⁰³ Honza was likely excluded from transports to the East due to his height.

¹⁰⁴ Karas, "Operatic Performances in Terezín," 194.

¹⁰⁵ Brenner, *The Girls of Room 28*, 105.

¹⁰⁶ Karas, "Operatic Performances in Terezín," 194.

again immediately. I would not have had that patience, and I doubt whether anybody else would have either.

But some sort of aura held us together, the feeling that “when it’s finished, it’ll be super.” We made progress, we got a better rehearsal room, and interest grew.

Everybody began to look forward to rehearsals, and would tell his acquaintances with a certain pride, “We’re rehearsing a children’s opera.”¹⁰⁷

Laub’s description echoes similar feelings described by surviving cast members. Robert Laux further notes that *Brundibár* offered its cast members a sense of communal belonging.¹⁰⁸ Indeed, the production provided the children the semblance of family, in addition to creating feelings of pride and satisfaction with each successful performance.

Hans Krása observed rehearsals and reorchestrated the opera for available musical personnel in the camp. His new score included a virtuoso ensemble with violinist Karel Fröhlich, cellist Fredy Mark, pianist Gideon Klein, clarinetist Fritz Weiss, and others. The score also required three additional violins, cello, guitar, accordion, percussion, guitar, and bass.¹⁰⁹ Zelenka reprised his role of set designer, and created an impressive set built from materials found within the camp. “Er war ein Zauberer,” Robert Laux writes, “Aus Abfällen, aus Lumpen und altem Karton, einem kaputten Regenschirm und ähnlichen Dingen schuf er Kulissen und Kostüme, die kein Theater beschämt hätten.”¹¹⁰ (“He was a magician. With trash, tatters and old cardboard, a broken umbrella and similar materials he created scenery and costumes of which no theater would have been ashamed.”) As director, Zelenka strove

¹⁰⁷ Marie Rút Křížková, Kurt Jiří Kotouč, and Zdeněk Ornet, eds., *We Are Children Just the Same: Vedem, the Secret Magazine by the Boys of Terezín*, trans. by R. Elizabeth Womak (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1994), 154-155.

¹⁰⁸ Laux, “Hans Krása’s Kinderoper *Brundibár*,” 480.

¹⁰⁹ Karas, “Operatic Performances in Terezín,” 194.

¹¹⁰ Laux, “Hans Krása’s Kinderoper *Brundibár*,” 479.

to maintain a positive, uplifting atmosphere for the children away from their turbulent day-to-day life in the camp.¹¹¹

Theresienstadt Performances

Brundibar premiered in Theresienstadt on September 23, 1943 in the *Magedeburg* Barracks (See Figure 1).¹¹² As the audience entered the room, it became immediately apparent that the 100 seats would not accommodate everyone crowding the room and outside the door. Due to the excitement generated within the camp, the premiere drew over 300 inmates hoping to see the first performance.¹¹³ Cast members anxiously awaited their entrance in a side room, where they donned their costumes and applied makeup. Ela Weissberger, who played the Cat, remembers feeling “electrified” as Zelenka drew whiskers on her face with chalk.¹¹⁴ She further recalls, “When the people filed into the auditorium, we were all seized with stage fright. But when the first beat of the music sounded, we quickly got over it and forgot entirely where we were.”¹¹⁵ This statement illustrates the feelings of escapism the stage afforded the children. Fellow cast member Rudolf Laub, writing as *ini*, wrote in *Vedem*:

...the premiere came off splendidly. We arrived an hour and a half before curtain, and when we saw each other in our makeup, which we thought terrible, we began to cut up as usual, till Rudi had to come and settle us down. But as soon as the audience started filing in, our little souls were slowly but surely overcome by stage fright...But

¹¹¹ Laux, “Hans Krásas Kinderoper *Brundibár*,” 480.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 484.

¹¹³ Brenner, *The Girls of Room 28*, 134.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹¹⁵ Susan Goldman Rubin with Ela Weissberger, *The Cat with the Yellow Star: Coming of Age in Terezin* (New York: Holiday House, 2006), 23.

as soon as the first bars of music sounded, we forgot our fear and went to it.

Everything went well...And when we had finished and the hall was filled with thunderous applause, we were all happy and content, for man is a creature eager for fame. And in all of us there was some satisfaction at having done a thing well.¹¹⁶

The performance profoundly affected the audience as well. “Natürlich diente diese Oper auch der Unterhaltung,” Robert Laux posits, “Das Publikum vergaß für eine halbe Stunde den Hunger, die schwere Arbeit, die schändliche Unterbringung in Massenquartiers, und es vergaß für kurze Zeit die Transporte.”¹¹⁷ (“The opera naturally served as entertainment. For a half hour, the audience forgot their hunger, difficult work, shameful accommodations in the camp, and for a short time, the transports.”) The finale especially appealed to the audience. “As the opera drew to its close and we sang the victory march, ‘Brundibár is Defeated,’ there was—each time—thunderous applause.”¹¹⁸ The audience wanted to hear the finale again and again, and the children had to be forced off the stage.¹¹⁹

Due to its popularity, tickets to *Brundibár* were incredibly difficult to obtain. Tickets to most *Freizeitgestaltung* concerts normally cost 5 *Ghettokronen* (ghetto crowns, Theresienstadt’s currency), making attendance impossible for many inmates. With the shortage of tickets, the special privileges allotted to those within the hierarchy of the *Freizeitgestaltung* became increasingly evident. Performers and workers in the organization often received first preference in ticket dispersal, which ultimately excluded numerous inmates.¹²⁰ Rabbi Weiner, head of the *Freizeitgestaltung*, notes that inmates without tickets

¹¹⁶ Křížková, et al., *Vedem*, 156.

¹¹⁷ Laux, “Hans Krásas Kinderoper *Brundibár*,” 480.

¹¹⁸ Rubin with Weissberger, *The Cat with the Yellow Star*, 25.

¹¹⁹ Brenner, *The Girls of Room 28*, 138.

¹²⁰ Adler, *Theresienstadt, 1941-1945*, 589.

routinely attempted to force their way into performances, eventually forcing the organization to enlist a security force.¹²¹ Once tickets became required for all concerts in Theresienstadt, Weiner writes, “This did not lessen the crowd, but it helped us to assess who had the right to attend the performance and who did not.”¹²² With the enforcement of admission based on the camp’s social stratification, a “cultural elite” emerged. Attendance of the opera came to be viewed as a “status symbol” among inmates.¹²³ Moreover, Weiner’s statement inherently implies that some inmates had no “right” to attend the production.

While *Brundibár* routinely serves as symbol of the cultural activities in Theresienstadt, Charlotte Opfermann criticizes this generalization. “While this opera was performed more than fifty times in the camp,” she argues, “—in the Czech language, never in German—...I NEVER attended any of the performances, nor did any of the German speaking child prisoners I knew.”¹²⁴ Opfermann’s memoir, *The Art of Darkness*, presents an extremely critical view of the *Freizeitgestaltung*, and she raises a valid issue in her dispute. Written and performed in Czech, the opera remained unintelligible to inmates unable to speak the language. In her memoir, survivor Ruth Klüger notes that German and Czech children were housed separately in Theresienstadt, further creating a language and cultural divide.¹²⁵ Opfermann further alleges that Czech “host” inmates held “intense animosity” towards the German-Jewish prisoners and that an “otherness” existed on the basis of prisoners’ varying countries of origin.¹²⁶ Klüger echoes this sentiment, “The Czechs in L410 looked down on us

¹²¹ Weiner, “*Freizeitgestaltung* in Theresienstadt,” 215.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 219.

¹²³ Karas, *Music in Terezin*, 88.

¹²⁴ Opfermann, *The Art of Darkness*, 80.

¹²⁵ Klüger, Ruth, *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered* (New York: Feminist Press at CUNY, 2001), 74.

¹²⁶ Opfermann, *The Art of Darkness*, 43.

because we spoke the enemy's language. Besides, they were really the elite, because they were in their own country, and many Czechs had connections to the outside, which we didn't have."¹²⁷ These statements reflect similar criticisms of other stratified social groupings in the camp, namely the *Ältestenrat* and *Freizeitgestaltung*, and their representation as Theresienstadt's elite. Music, in particular, helped reinforce the camp's hierarchy. Asserting music's ability to mark social boundaries, Peter J. Martin argues that "...participation in sets of activities organized around music can create or reinforce a sense of being a particular kind of person, of belonging to a particular group, and by extension may lead to the designation, definition, and possible denigration of 'others.'"¹²⁸ The routine exclusion of certain social groupings created clear boundaries among inmates in Theresienstadt.

Written before the war, the writers of *Brundibár* could not have imagined what their opera eventually came to symbolize. However, Hannelore Brenner argues that "although their motivation for this final joint effort was the competition, their underlying desire was to resist the political turmoil with the only weapon they had—art."¹²⁹ Clarifying their intentions, librettist Adolf Hoffmeister states that the opera grew out of a conception of "a kind of Brechtian didactic play."¹³⁰ Writing in a 1943 report prior to the arrival of the children from Hagibor, Krása details the difficulty he encountered writing the libretto. "The usual dramatic, human conflicts—erotic, political, and such—could not be used, of course. Neither the librettist nor I was partial to fairy tales. But all the same the author managed to

¹²⁷ Klüger, *Still Alive*, 78.

¹²⁸ Peter J. Martin, "Music, Identity, and Social Control" in *Music and Manipulation: On the Social Uses and Social Control of Music*, eds. Steven Brown and Urik Volgsten (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), 59.

¹²⁹ Brenner, *The Girls of Room 28*, 138.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 136.

create a text that has a childlike (but not childish) gaiety about it and that dramatizes a real-life occurrence, in which the effectiveness of collective strength in the struggle against evil is compellingly presented.”¹³¹ Krása clearly acknowledges avoiding political themes in the libretto, which ostensibly invalidates Brenner’s claim that the plot functioned as a form of political allegory. However, the opera clearly took on varying meanings reflecting the current political climate for the audience and performers in the Prague and Theresienstadt performances.

Following *Brundibár*’s successful premiere, performances occurred weekly. Dr. Kurt Singer, a musicologist from Berlin, offered a glowing review completely removed from its social context before his death in Theresienstadt in January 1944:

Brundibár shows how a short opera of today should look and sound, how it can unite the highest in artistic taste with originality of concept, and modern character with viable tunes...We have also a Czech national coloration (at which Krása is a master), a clever balance of scenic effects between the orchestra pit and the stage, an orchestra used with taste and economy and a singing line which is never obscured or smothered by the instruments...Whether it be cast in a large or small form, whether it be a song or symphony, chorus or opera, there can be no higher praise for a work of art.¹³²

While Singer came away from the performance with analytical, sophisticated ideas of the opera, *Brundibár* remained a fun, enriching experience for the children. Detailing the

¹³¹ Brenner, *The Girls of Room 28*, 137.

¹³² Karas, “Operatic Performances in Terezín,” 195.

children's regular hijinks, Rudolph Laub offers a glimpse of their alternate reality in Theresienstadt:

Now, in further performances, we've all got the singing down to a routine and can concentrate on making sure there's a lot of fun. There have been unforeseen occurrences, though. One performance was suddenly interrupted by a terrified scream from twenty girls' throats. After anxious inquiry, we discovered that a bench holding twenty singers had tumbled over. But often things happen on stage that the audience doesn't even notice, while we backstage are doubled over with laughter. *Brundibár* will soon disappear from the thoughts of those who watched it in Terezin, but for us actors it will remain one of the few beautiful memories we have of that place.¹³³

As performances in Theresienstadt continued, members of the *Freizeitgestaltung* and its performers possessed no knowledge of the pending manipulation of their activities as part of a calculated Nazi propaganda campaign. Under these circumstances, all performances, including *Brundibár*, eventually served as vehicles to further the Nazi agendas in the fictional *Jüdische Siedlungsgebiet* (Jewish Settlement).

Stadtverschönerung

On Friday, June 23, 1944, a delegation from the International Red Cross arrived in Theresienstadt. It was greeted by camp authorities and Paul Eppstein, Edelstein's successor as Head Elder. Dr. Maurice Rossel, one of the Red Cross delegates, recalls Eppstein's

¹³³ Křížková, et al., *Vedem*, 156.

welcome: “You will be visiting a provincial town.”¹³⁴ Indeed, Nazi authorities exploited the Potemkin village as part of their ruse to fool the Red Cross delegates. Similar to the *Ältestenrat*’s forced cooperation with Nazi leadership, the *Freizeitgestaltung* played a crucial role in the farce and presented various concerts as ordered by camp administration.¹³⁵ In reality, this event highlighted the duplicitous nature of the *Freizeitgestaltung*. While offering inmates an outlet for cultural activity, the organization’s sponsored events helped reassure the delegation that prisoners received adequate treatment and thereby resulted in Theresienstadt’s continued function as a Potemkin village. In this instance, the performance of *Brundibár* for the delegation clearly served as propaganda. In part due to their successful performance, the children were assured prolonged internment and possible transport to the East.

In contrast to its premiere in Theresienstadt, the Nazi-ordered performance of *Brundibár* created considerable anxiety among the children. The cast moved the production into Sokolovna Hall, which housed an orchestra pit, dressing rooms, and a stage. Rudolf Freudenfeld recalls that the performance was first presented at the behest of Nazi authorities for the Red Cross delegation:

The auditorium was completely empty this time around, and the choir and orchestra were ready. Then the whole SS gang entered at the balcony level. They remained standing, did not remove their caps, and the camp commandant gave his usual order: Get cracking!

¹³⁴ Brenner, *The Girls of Room 28*, 224.

¹³⁵ This statement does not suggest Jewish complicity in Theresienstadt. It merely addresses the coercive relationship between Jewish and camp authorities, and the efforts undertaken by the *Ältestenrat* to save as many inmates possible from transports to the East. Further research on this topic lies outside the scope of this study.

After a few scenes I turned around. They were all sitting now, not a man budged, and the caps had been set aside. When the opera was over, they made no move to leave.

Even these unfeeling cynics had been touched for a moment by this sweet music.

Maybe these criminals even had children at home—who knows?¹³⁶

Weissberger, who played the Cat in all performances, also recalls this moment.

She notes that Hans Günther, Adolf Eichmann, Commandant Karl Rahm, and other high-ranking Nazis from Berlin attended the performance. She recalls, “There is a beautiful Lullaby in the opera and when it came...the Nazis took their hats off and sat down. Probably they had children our age and they felt a little sorry for us.”¹³⁷ Freudenfeld recalls the ensuing chaos following the Nazis’ order that the opera was to be performed the next day for the delegation: “The order came that same evening: *Brundibár* had to be performed. But, the troupe was told, the stage was too dark, not cheerful enough for the children. By morning an entire city would have to be visible behind the wooden fence. All the necessary materials—canvas and paints and so forth—were to be distributed at once. We worked all night. Zelenka supervised a crew of assistants, and by morning the backdrop was finished and in place. A whole section of town, including a school—the future!”¹³⁸

The beautification campaign affected all inmates in Theresienstadt. Following the arrival of 466 Danish inmates, the Danish King requested an inspection due to concerns for the newest inmates’ welfare.¹³⁹ Following the *Verschönerung*, Theresienstadt resembled an idyllic village with parks, playgrounds, a café, and tree-lined streets. Immediately before the

¹³⁶ Brenner, *The Girls of Room 28*, 220-221.

¹³⁷ “Interview with Holocaust Survivor Ela Stein Weissberger,” The Ripple Project, last modified January 14, 2013. <http://www.therippleproject.com/2011/interview-with-holocaust-survivor-ela-stein-weissberger/.htm>

¹³⁸ Brenner, *The Girls of Room 28*, 221.

¹³⁹ Thomson, *Terezin*, 46.

Red Cross delegation arrived, 7,500 inmates were transported East to lessen the appearance of overcrowding. Gonda Redlich, Head of the Youth Welfare Department, captures the quintessence of Theresienstadt in his diary entry on November 27, 1943: “Beautify and decorate the city. A bitter mockery underlies these words. They forbid washing clothes during the day. It is only permitted at night and now it is winter. It’s forbidden to make beds after 9 a. m. Forbidden, permitted, forbidden, permitted...They want to fix the cinema.”¹⁴⁰ The Nazis succeeded in their ruse. Following Rossel’s departure, he wrote the following in his report, “This Jewish town is truly astounding. In view of the fact that these people come from many different places, speak different languages, arrive from different stations in life and with different degrees of wealth, it was necessary to establish a unity, spirit of community among these Jews. That was very difficult. The Theresienstadt ghetto is a Communist society, led by a ‘Stalinist’ of great merit: EPPSTEIN.”¹⁴¹

Following the successful *Stadtverschönerung* ruse, life in Theresienstadt immediately reverted to previous conditions. However, Nazi Propaganda Minister, Joseph Goebbels, ordered the production of a propaganda film featuring Theresienstadt.¹⁴² On August 29, 1944, inmate Otto Pollak noted in his diary, “A cultural documentary is being filmed this afternoon in a hollow on the road to Litoměřice—an open-air cabaret that accommodates an audience of about 2,000. About sixty swimmers of both sexes are to be filmed at the SS swimming pool outside the ghetto. Dita Sachs from the Nurses’ Home, slender, about five foot nine, blond, blue-eyed, was excluded, along with two other blond girls...Gerron, who

¹⁴⁰ Friedman, *Diary of Terezin*, 136.

¹⁴¹ Brenner, *The Girls of Room 28*, 227.

¹⁴² Karas, *Music in Terezin*, 136.

enjoys making inappropriate jokes about Jews, is directing.”¹⁴³ Pollak refers to fellow inmate Kurt Geron, a Jewish actor featured in multiple cabaret productions and UFA films who ultimately produced and directed *Der Führer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt*. Stein-Weissberg recalls, “We were afraid of Kurt Geron. The Germans were constantly circling around him. We didn’t know whether he was in cahoots with them or not. There was a lot of tension in the air.”¹⁴⁴ Camp authorities employed cameramen from *Actualia*, news organization in Prague, and nearly thirty thousand prisoners comprised the cast.¹⁴⁵ Eva Herrmann, a child survivor of Theresienstadt, recalls, “In a village near Traviče, where they had set up a stage, I watched them film a scene that didn’t come out right and saw Rahm, the camp commandant—I think it was Rahm—slap Zelenka, the architect and famed set designer from the Prague National Theater. And that started me thinking: Oh my, something’s not right here. The whole thing is really just one huge sham...Suddenly it became clear to me that they were looking for particular types, Jewish types, and SS *Scharführer* Haindl pointed at me—I had black curly hair. And at that moment I know I didn’t want to have any part in this hoax, made myself scarce, and mingled in with the crowd.”¹⁴⁶

Fragments of the unreleased *Der Führer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt* survive today. The film opens with the following statement: “A few fragments of this insidious film survive, reconstructed here to provide an historical document. The film purports to depict daily life

¹⁴³ Karas, *Music in Terezin*, 233.

¹⁴⁴ Brenner, *The Girls of Room 28*, 234.

¹⁴⁵ Karas, *Music in Terezin*, 136. Karas further notes that cast included mostly “unwilling actors.” Furthermore, he suggests that Nazi authorities had attempted a propaganda film two years prior, but the result was too “amateurish and phony” so that the project was completely abandoned.

¹⁴⁶ Brenner, *Girls in Room 28*, 233.

in the camp. Eyewitnesses attest to the fact that many scenes are staged and others grossly distort the reality—the misery, hunger, overcrowding, and death.”¹⁴⁷ Capitalizing on the camp’s cultural activity, the film opens with a scene from a concert featuring choir and orchestra. Paired with a rousing, upbeat soundtrack, scenes ostensibly portray daily life in Theresienstadt.

Cultural activity functions as a centerpiece of *Der Führer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt*. Featuring scenes from the prisoners’ purported daily lives, the film depicts an idyllic town. Capturing a performance of *Brundibár*, the camera initially focuses on the ensemble of costumed children on stage and then pans across the audience, showing each attendee thoughtfully engaged in the performance. Following the actors’ curtain call, the audience erupts in fervent applause and the stage curtains dramatically close. Music plays a prominent role in the film, evidenced by a soundtrack featuring solely Jewish composers and musicians.¹⁴⁸ The camp’s popular Ghetto Swingers, regular performers in the *Kaffeehaus*, appear interspersed throughout the film playing “American” arrangements composed especially for this occasion.¹⁴⁹ Although edited and synchronized with music in March 1945, the project remained uncompleted. Karas accurately sums up the project’s fate: “The great hoax of the German Propaganda Ministry found its way only to a few storage closets in Prague and in Israel.”¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ *Der Führer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt*, (Waltham, MA: National Center for Jewish Film, 2005), DVD.

¹⁴⁸ David Bloch, “Meanings: Musical Symbols in Terezin,” *India International Centre Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (Spring 2006): 114.

¹⁴⁹ Karas, *Music in Terezin*, 137.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.

Following the conclusion of the film's shooting, transports to Auschwitz immediately resumed. On September 23, 1944, transport lists were issued following that evening's *Kol nidre* service. The ghetto's population quickly dwindled, leaving approximately 11,000 inmates who remained until the camp's liberation.¹⁵¹ The 18,402 prisoners sent on transports included most of the artists and musicians active in the *Freizeitgestaltung* and the entire *Ältestenrat*.¹⁵² Unbeknownst to Theresienstadt inmates, camp authorities executed Camp Leader Paul Eppstein in the Small Fortress on September 24.¹⁵³ Survivor Jana Renee Friesová recalls, "The Jewish Council's artificially built structure had collapsed. Cooks, men, doctors, wardens, and our wonderful caregivers—all had gone. There were only sick people and even more hunger. The ghetto finally became a desolate place, just as the Germans had planned."¹⁵⁴

Fireflies

Despite the absence of the *Freizeitgestaltung*'s leaders and the ghetto's small population, cultural activities resumed. Alice Herz-Sommer, who served as rehearsal pianist for *Brundibár*, presented an all Chopin recital on February 7, 1945.¹⁵⁵ Additional recitals included piano works of Beethoven, Schubert, and Schumann. However, Adolf Eichmann ordered yet another *Verschönerung* in Theresienstadt on March 5, 1945. Brenner argues, "What was the point? Did this herald the end of the war? All signs pointed in that

¹⁵¹ Brenner, *The Girls of Room 28*, 257. Karas suggests 18,500 prisoners were sent on transports. Neither author provides a source for these numbers.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 248.

¹⁵⁴ Thomson, *Terezin: Voices from the Holocaust*, 56.

¹⁵⁵ Karas, *Music in Terezin*, 149.

direction.”¹⁵⁶ However, Brenner’s historical account of Theresienstadt fails to take account of cultural activities following *Brundibár*’s performance. Indeed, camp authorities hoped to present cultural performances akin to *Brundibár* and Verdi’s *Requiem* for the Red Cross visitors. Although the diminished population prevented the presentation of large works, the authorities recognized the effectiveness of children’s presentations. Commandant Rahm reportedly exclaimed, “Ich brauche eine Kinderoper!” (“I need a children’s opera!”) and placed Hanuš Thien, an inmate, in charge of the project.¹⁵⁷ After ruling out Humperdinck’s *Hänsel und Gretel* due to its difficulty, Thien recalled hearing rumors of Vlasta Šchönová’s Theresienstadt productions of *Broučci* (*Fireflies*), a famous Czech fairytale that solely featured children.

Written by Jan Karafiát, a Czech Protestant minister, *Fireflies* became a centerpiece of Czech children’s literature. Much like *Brundibár*, the story promotes social and moral values for children. Kamila Rosenbaum, *Brundibár*’s choreographer, often read the book aloud while working in a children’s home as early as 1943. Šchönová dramatized the story while Rosenbaum offered choreography. *Fireflies* was reportedly presented twenty-eight times prior to the mass transports in October 1944.¹⁵⁸ Šchönová writes in memoirs that Czech folksongs arranged by Karel Švenk accompanied the play, although she later disputed this fact in an interview.¹⁵⁹

A new version of *Fireflies* premiered in Sokolovna Hall on March 20, 1945. Following Nazi orders, Robert Brock wrote music to accompany the play within three

¹⁵⁶ Brenner, *The Girls of Room 28*, 268.

¹⁵⁷ Karas, *Music in Terezin*, 151.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

days.¹⁶⁰ The orchestra comprised approximately thirty musicians and the composer accomplished a daring feat. The overture featured the Czech national anthem within contrapuntal middle voices, in addition to other Czech folksongs. Karas writes, “When the children plunged into the song *Příjde jaro přijde, zase bude jáj* (*Spring will come soon, May will be here again*), only a few eyes in the audience remained dry, because the song represented for the people the coming end of their horrible oppression. How right they were!”¹⁶¹ A commission from the Red Cross observed the play, which received about fifteen performances. The last performance did not occur, as a transport arrived in Theresienstadt in April with cars full of corpses and others perilously close to death. Inmates attempted to save as many of the new arrivals possible. Thien himself aided the operation. April also marked the camp’s final major cultural offering. On April 10, Thien’s abridged version of Offenbach’s *The Tales of Hoffmann* premiered in the camp, followed by a lecture a week later by Hans Epstein. However, Eichmann’s final *Stadtverschönerung* failed to prolong the inevitable. The Germans fled the camp May 5, leaving behind roughly 100 child survivors who were liberated three days later.

The absence of information regarding the performances of *Fireflies* in major scholarship on cultural activities in Theresienstadt illustrates the troublesome tendency to ignore or marginalize information that fails to support a “consoling story” or redemptive rhetoric. Elements of the *Fireflies* performances more accurately support arguments of resistance applied to *Brundibár*. The “disguised” inclusion of the Czech national anthem in the overture, in addition to a bevy of treasured Czech folk songs, arguably offered some feelings of resistance or a heightened sense of National identity among inmates. However,

¹⁶⁰ Karas, *Music in Terezin*, 152.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 153.

due to the lack of research surrounding these performances, no extant sources include survivor testimony of this final Theresienstadt performance. These omissions in detailed histories of Theresienstadt's cultural activity not only necessitate additional research surrounding these performances, but additionally depict the troublesome exclusion of information that fails to support the generally accepted use of *Brundibár* as a symbol of all cultural activity in the camp.

Brundibár's filmed propaganda performance bears little resemblance to its humble premiere in Hagibor. Zelenka's simple poster boards and makeshift sets at Hagibor were replaced with impressive scenery and costumes in Theresienstadt. Moreover, the clandestine, resistance-fueled premiere in Prague served as an act of defiance in the wake of Nazi-imposed restrictions. In contrast, the production in Theresienstadt simply furthered Nazi agenda. The exclusion of the non-Czech speaking inmate population, in addition to the elitist practices of the *Freizeitgestaltung*, illustrate the fallible syndecdochic practice of promoting *Brundibár* as a representation of resistance in Theresienstadt.

CHAPTER THREE

“Most of the children who acted in *Brundibár* did not survive. So it must be said that for them, *Brundibár* was the last source of great joy in their lives.”¹⁶² —Jiří Kotouč

Afterlife of *Brundibár*

On May 3, 1945, the Nazis turned over control of Theresienstadt to the International Red Cross.¹⁶³ Out of 10,632 children sent to Theresienstadt, only 4,096 reportedly survived.¹⁶⁴ And of the thousands of children sent from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz, a mere 100 survived—none above fourteen years of age.¹⁶⁵ On May 6, 1946, Ela Weissberger, who played the Cat in *Brundibár*, found herself on Wenceslas Square in Prague celebrating the war’s end. Amid a throng of celebrators, Weissberger heard the familiar strain of *Brundibár*’s finale. Shocked to discover Rudi Freudenfeld, *Brundibár*’s musical director whistling the familiar tune, Weissberger joyfully reunited with her former mentor. Freudenfeld immediately embraced Weissberger, greeting one of Theresienstadt’s few child survivors with her camp nickname, Kitty-Cat.¹⁶⁶ This unlikely encounter spurred by Krása’s music foreshadows the perpetuating role of *Brundibár* in the lives of survivors and its powerful manifestation in Holocaust memorialization.

Although little information exists regarding *Brundibár*’s immediate postwar status, musicologist Joža Karas details his pivotal role in the resurrection of the opera, along with an in-depth study of Theresienstadt’s musical community in *Music of Terezin, 1941-1944*,

¹⁶² Brenner, *The Girls of Room 28*, 140.

¹⁶³ Rubin with Weissberger, *Cat with the Yellow Star*, 28.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 36.

¹⁶⁵ Chaim Potok, foreward to *...I Never Saw Another Butterfly...: Children’s Drawings and Poems from Terezin Concentration Camp, 1942-1944*, ed. Hana Volavková (New York: Schocken Books, 1993), xxi.

¹⁶⁶ Rubin with Weissberger, *Cat with the Yellow Star*, 21.

now in its second edition. Karas obtained the full orchestral score and piano reduction of *Brundibár* in 1970 from Professor Eliška Kleinová, a Theresienstadt survivor and sister of pianist Gideon Klein.¹⁶⁷ CBS introduced music from Krása's opera to the American public in September 1971, with a ten-minute news segment featuring music of Theresienstadt. Under the direction of Karas, a children's chorus from Connecticut's Hartt School of Music presented portions of the opera in Czech for the broadcast. Immediately aware of the language barrier imposed by Krása's native Czech, Karas authored an English translation of *Brundibár* to make it "more attractive and usable."¹⁶⁸ On April 8, 1975, Karas conducted the American premiere of *Brundibár* in West Hartford, Connecticut. Two years later, the Canadian premiere featured Karas's English translation.¹⁶⁹ Following both North American premieres, Karas championed the first recording of *Brundibár* strictly adhering to the Theresienstadt score. After years of research and conducting the first post-war productions of *Brundibár*, Karas found great meaning in his work. He writes that "every new presentation of *Brundibár* is a monument to the memory of the wretched youngsters who were spreading a little joy and hope in the midst of the most tragic era in the history of mankind."¹⁷⁰ Unlike other historians, Karas reveals a contextualized understanding of the opera's role within the camp.

While Karas's productions of *Brundibár* reflected his desire to bring the historically unique opera to audiences throughout the world, other entities used the opera to fulfill self-serving objectives. Instituted in Germany, the *Brundibár* Project became a popular Holocaust pedagogical program in the 1990s. Produced under *Jeunesses Musicales*

¹⁶⁷ Karas, *Music in Terezín*, xvii.

¹⁶⁸ Karas, "Operatic Performances in Terezín," 199.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 199-200.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 200.

Deutschland, an international youth cultural organization, the project spurred considerable debate surrounding the memorialization of the Holocaust. The timing of the project unfortunately fell on the heels of the *Historikerstreit* (Historians' Debate) and *Brundibár* only further fueled arguments of "appropriate" Holocaust representation. Writing in 2000, Rovit notes that the project "belongs to what may be a national obsession: how to come to terms with the Holocaust and transmit the memory for future generations."¹⁷¹ Rovit further suggests that a non-verbal "project-as-memorial" would diffuse the "war of words" incited by Jürgen Habermas and fellow debaters. In this instance, only certain facets of *Brundibár* and its history received adequate recognition. Subjected to Germany's then-current needs for Holocaust memorialization, the project became a seemingly malleable conduit for the encouragement of ideals completely divorced from *Brundibár's* history. Moreover, Rovit suggests that the opera played a crucial role in Germany's struggle to absolve its citizens of collective guilt and its effect on subsequent generations:

The government's commitment to build a memorial seems rooted in an urgency not only to exonerate Germany of an onerous past, but to effect remembrance in those generations whose consciences are clear vis-à-vis the Third Reich. It is perhaps fitting, then, that young Germans of the *Brundibár* project—in Berlin and elsewhere—are using theatrical performance and the Holocaust to re-enact an opera which was performed during the Holocaust by young Jews. Issues of memory and morality link Berlin's empty space with the re-enactment by youth groups of *Brundibár*...The *Brundibár* experiment would ideally use the actual music and story performed during the Holocaust to provoke reflection among the participants and

¹⁷¹ Rovit, "The Brundibár Project," 65.

audiences about the victims who once sang and watched the original production. At the same time, it could promote empathy by celebrating solidarity and the life spirit that co-existed with eastern-bound transports to Auschwitz from Terezín.¹⁷²

The 1999 Berlin premiere of *Brundibár* wove quotations from Krasá and a surviving cast member into a musical “memorial” overture. The cast featured children from East and West Berlin, in efforts to appear “multi-cultural.”¹⁷³ Director Mattias Diem failed to emphasize the opera’s role in the Holocaust and instead focused on combating Germany’s neo-Nazism, stating, “In these times of skinheads and military boots, we were able to teach the kids a lot about power, violence, and ideology.”¹⁷⁴ Similar to the Brundibár Project’s resulting “music-as-memorial” to satisfy Germany’s need of absolution, Diem’s comment marginalizes the role of *Brundibár* in the Holocaust and instead focuses on Germany’s current social injustice.

While the Brundibár Project became a popular pedagogical tool, performances of the opera emerged all over Germany. In 1999, one hundred and thirty performances of *Brundibár* were produced by over seven hundred organizations.¹⁷⁵ The popularity of *Brundibár* as a pedagogical vehicle continues today worldwide. The Ripple Project, an independent media group in the United States, created *Brundibár: Beyond Imagination*, an annual summer theater program that appears to parallel the scope and operation of *Jeunesses Musicales Deutschland’s* Brundibár Project. The Ripple Project’s most recent information details an “upcoming” program at Yad Vashem in 2011.¹⁷⁶ The performance features an unlikely element: the cast consists of descendants of Theresienstadt’s child

¹⁷² Rovit, “The Brundibár Project,” 114.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 115.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 112.

¹⁷⁶ Following multiple attempts to contact the organization, I received no response. It is unclear whether the documentary project has been abandoned.

survivors paired with second-generation descendants of African genocide.¹⁷⁷ The three-week summer program offers rehearsals and workshops led by scholars and survivors in writing, art, and theater and culminates in a large-scale performance of *Brundibár*. The Ripple Project also plans to produce a documentary capturing the entire rehearsal and performance process. The group aims to reach “a broad, multigenerational audience throughout the world to share a relevant and meaningful message of understanding, responsibility and tolerance for generations to come.”¹⁷⁸

Extending beyond the musical sphere, the story debuted in children’s literature in 2003. Retold by Tony Kushner and illustrated by Maurice Sendak, *Brundibár* offers a vivid recounting of Pepicek’s and Aninku’s triumph over the evil organ grinder. Sendak offers vivid depictions of Jewish elements throughout the book and haphazardly inserts Theresienstadt-related texts in the background. Born to Jewish Polish immigrants in Brooklyn, Sendak recalls, “My childhood was thinking about the kids over there [in Europe]. My burden is living for those who didn’t.”¹⁷⁹ Among the many textual and pictorial Holocaust allusions, the reader encounters “*Arbeit macht frei*” inscribed on a nearly camouflaged banner. Although multiple characters wear stars of David, the symbols are conspicuously absent from Pepicek’s and Aninku’s clothing (See Figure 2). U. C. Knoepfmacher argues, “As Christian Czechs, Pepicek and Aninku can be more plausibly cast as triumphalist leaders of a fantastic child-crusade against *Brundibár* than the original

¹⁷⁷ *Brundibár: Beyond Imagination*, The Ripple Project, last modified January 30, 2013, <http://www.therippleproject.com/projects/brundibar.htm>

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Samantha Critchell, “Maurice Sendak Illustrates Kids’ Tale with Holocaust Past,” *J. The Jewish News Weekly of Northern California*, March 26, 2004, <http://www.jweekly.com/article/full/22128/maurice-sendak-illustrates-kids-tale-with-holocaust-past/index.html>.

Jewish child performers who found themselves confined behind barbed wire in a concentration camp.”¹⁸⁰ In this instance, the book contrasts greatly with the work’s original reception in Prague and Theresienstadt. While neither Krasá nor Hofmeister clarified the siblings’ religion, the countless performances of all-Jewish casts and survivors’ documented comfort with the relatable characters certainly implied the children’s Jewishness. Furthermore, actors in performances presented throughout the world today routinely wear yellow stars (See Figure 3).

Maurice Sendak openly “regarded *Brundibár* as a reassuring closure for lifelong personal and cultural traumas inflicted by the Holocaust.”¹⁸¹ While Sendak’s sentiment indisputably confirms his attempt to redeem the Holocaust through a children’s book, he notes struggling with the constant presence of the Holocaust in his childhood home. He recalls, “My parents didn’t filter the stories they told us. I got sent home from school for telling some of the same stories my father told me because my teacher said they were vile.”¹⁸² Dominick LaCapra notes the inherent issues regarding memory and the Holocaust and argues, “One particularly dubious phenomenon is the nostalgic, sentimental turn to a partly fictionalized past that is conveyed in congenially ingratiating, safely conventionalized narrative form.”¹⁸³ Representing the main characters as Christians may appeal to the American religious majority, but utterly neglects historical circumstances. Sendak achieves his quest for “lifelong personal and cultural traumas” by offering a narrative that deviates from its historical past.

¹⁸⁰ U. C. Knoepfelmacher, “The Hansel and Gretel Syndrome: Survivorship Fantasies and Parental Desertion,” *Children’s Literature* 33 (2005): 178.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 173.

¹⁸² Critchell, “Maurice Sendak Illustrates Kids’ Holocaust Tale.”

¹⁸³ Dominick LaCapra, *History and Memory After Auschwitz* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 8.

In 2006, Kushner collaborated with Sendak on a new production of *Brundibár* in New York. Kushner authored an updated English translation based on Hofmeister's libretto and Sendak, along with Kris Stone, designed the production (See Figure 4). In addition, Kushner wrote a companion piece to *Brundibár*, *But the Giraffe*, that "gently colors in the historical context" of the children's opera.¹⁸⁴ *But the Giraffe* offers a fictionalized account of a young girl smuggling the score of *Brundibár* into Theresienstadt. Chris Isherwood praises the production and, much like Sendak, places a redemptive spin on the performance: "But as the unlikely survival of this opera suggests, the joy and beauty that music and art express can outlast evil even when they cannot defeat it."¹⁸⁵

***Brundibár* in Holocaust Representation**

The ubiquitous trope of redemption found in current Holocaust representation and its cultural manifestations closely corresponds to the inaccurate claims of resistance in Theresienstadt's performances of *Brundibár*. Not a single member of *Brundibár*'s cast or creative team suggests or implies any notion of resistance in their memoirs or testimonies. However, this fact remains largely ignored as scholars, particularly Edelman and Goldfarb, clearly overlook or fail to consult survivor testimony in favor of perpetuating these "consoling stories." That the majority of child actors in *Brundibár* died in Auschwitz only further aids the propagated synecdoche employing children in representation of Holocaust victims. Anderson argues that the focus on child victimhood results in an "unimaginable emotional response from broad segments of the population but also systematically skew[s]

¹⁸⁴ Christopher Isherwood, "Tony Kushner and Maurice Sendak adapt *Brundibar*, a Czech Children's Opera," *New York Times*, May 9, 2006, <http://www.newyorktimes.com/>.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

and efface[s] crucial aspects of the historical event.”¹⁸⁶ While trauma requires subsequent processing after the fact, American society chooses to re-process the trauma of the Holocaust in self-serving ways. LaCapra notes the need for continuous examination of the modes of processing: “In traumatic memory the past is not simply history as over and done with. It lives on experientially and haunts or possesses the self or community (in the case of shared traumatic events) and must be worked through in order for it to be remembered with some degree of conscious control and critical perspective that enables survival, and, in the best of circumstances, ethical and political agency in the present.”¹⁸⁷ In the case of *Brundibár*, the “conscious control” to which LaCapra refers becomes embodied through the banal tropes of “spiritual resistance” and “survival of the human spirit.”

Multiple sources cite the use of allegory in Theresienstadt’s productions of *Brundibár* as a form of resistance. Robert Rollin inaccurately argues, “Though *Brundibár* clearly represents Hitler, the SS tolerated the performance since the allusion is so subtle, and since they filmed portions of the piece for the propaganda film about Terezin.”¹⁸⁸ Rebecca Rovit claims that surviving production photos depict the character *Brundibár* “wearing a Hitler mustache.”¹⁸⁹ However, these photos (See Figure 5) show Honza Treichlinger wearing a large, full mustache—certainly not the small, trimmed mustache associated with Hitler. In contrast, Maurice Sendak clearly depicts *Brundibár* as Hitler in his children’s book (See Figure 6). This easily discernible image appears throughout the book alongside other symbols of Nazism and Theresienstadt.

¹⁸⁶ Anderson, “Child Victim,” 19.

¹⁸⁷ Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, and Critical Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 56.

¹⁸⁸ Rollin, “New Music from Terezin, 1941-1945,” 12.

¹⁸⁹ Rovit, “The *Brundibár* Project,” 111.

Creating the illusion of a production teeming with resistance, these perhaps well-intentioned scholars depart from historical fact. Goldfarb asserts that *Brundibár* served as an “allegorical attack on Hitler’s Europe.”¹⁹⁰ Direct quotes from Krása in Chapter Two detailing his artistic intentions for the children’s opera and purposeful avoidance of political themes contradict Goldfarb’s argument. Rollin’s illogical assertion that the SS overlooked a defamatory allusion to Hitler in pursuit of propaganda shows a lack of clear understanding of the various bureaucratic hierarchies within Theresienstadt and the indisputable fact that the SS ultimately controlled cultural activity via the *Freizeitgestaltung*. Karas claims the opera acquired a political connotation aided by a textual alteration. He argues that “the poet Emil A. Saudek altered the very last few lines of the opera to express the universal feeling of resistance and the ultimate belief in justice. While the original said, ‘He who loves so much his mother and father and his native land is our friend and he can play with us,’ Saudek’s version read: ‘He who loves justice and will abide by it, and who is not afraid, is our friend and can play with us.’ What can one add to that?”¹⁹¹ However, Rudi Freudenberg writes in the publication *Terezínská škola* that the text was “originally played and sung by orphans. Some of the children were unable to grasp even the ‘motherland’ ...that’s why we have changed and strengthened without the author’s leave, who was already abroad, the conclusion by E. A. Saudek...”¹⁹² Blanka Červinková, editor of the recently released piano vocal score, questions the source of the altered text. “[I]f the author of the variant was E. A.

¹⁹⁰ Goldfarb, “Theatrical Activities in Nazi Concentration Camps,” 10.

¹⁹¹ Karas, *Music in Terezin*, 88.

¹⁹² Cited in Krása, *Brundibár*, 6.

Saudek,” she writes, “the text must have been written before the war since Saudek was not in the Terezín ghetto.”¹⁹³

In clear contrast with *Brundibár*, Viktor Ullman’s opera, *The Emperor of Atlantis* or *Der Tod dankt ab*, presented an easily discernible allegory of Hitler and, as a result, the authorities in Theresienstadt immediately banned it. Ullmann and his collaborators were subsequently sent to their deaths in Auschwitz. As the SS spared no tolerance for Ullmann and his blatant depiction of Hitler in *The Emperor of Atlantis*, no indication exists that other works within Theresienstadt failed to come under equally intense scrutiny. Largely immune to routine SS observation, cabaret presentations in Theresienstadt employed allegory and satire. However, this practice remained unique to these performances and went generally undetected by camp authorities.

The numerous references in Holocaust scholarship to “spiritual resistance” closely relate to Eric Santner’s concept of narrative fetishism. Santner defines this idea as “the construction and deployment of a narrative consciously or unconsciously designed to expunge the traces of the trauma in the first place...[It] is the way an inability or refusal to mourn employs traumatic events; it is a strategy of undoing, in fantasy, the need for mourning by simulating a condition of intactness, typically by situating the site and origin of loss elsewhere.”¹⁹⁴ While Goldfarb promotes the notion of spiritual resistance, his following argument wholly embodies narrative fetishism:

To understand Terezin and the grotesqueness of the experiment of a “model ghetto” one has to understand both Schopenhauer and Wagner. The Nazis, somewhere in the back of their minds, had a constant vision of the *Götterdämmerung*. Terezin, despite

¹⁹³ Krása, *Brundibár*, 6.

¹⁹⁴ Cited in LaCapra, *History and Memory After Auschwitz*, 23.

the cynicism with which it had been conceived, was an escape passage from the burning Valhalla: Wotan's guilt was ever present and the Jewish artists knew it. With both phenomenal insight and imagination they used the reality of the German guilt as a means—and here comes the miracle—not only to survive and keep some semblance of sanity, but to grow in universality. Only in that sense was art in Terezin an act of revolution.¹⁹⁵

Goldfarb inexplicably finds redemption of Jewish suffering through “growth in universality” while previously regarding cultural activity in Theresienstadt as “vital acts of resistance.” Goldfarb's contradictory claims resemble *Brundibár's* myriad cultural manifestations. Sendak and Kushner alter their storybook's retelling to suit middle class America, while the *Brundibár* Project in Germany served multiple purposes in the tense political climate and post-war struggle with collective guilt. Primo Levi writes, “For the purpose of defense, reality can be distorted not only in memory but in the very act of its taking place.”¹⁹⁶ Shirli Gilbert echoes this assertion and relates this notion to “unsophisticated narratives best represented by the term spiritual resistance and often closely related to the subject of music.”¹⁹⁷

Brundibár and its multi-faceted past offer an ideal vehicle for retrospective redemption of the Holocaust. Child victims, the prominent role of music, and the opera's powerful role in the lives of the Theresienstadt cast members combine to form an emotionally stirring Holocaust experience. However, these elements present a history solely unique to a single concentration camp. Gilbert argues that the common focus on

¹⁹⁵ Goldfarb, “Theatrical Activities in Concentration Camps,” 18.

¹⁹⁶ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 33.

¹⁹⁷ Gilbert, *Music in the Holocaust*, 2.

“music not only redeems the victims from total dehumanization, but is also framed in such away as to impart affirmative meaning to representations of life during the Holocaust. In other words, music not only affords the victims a certain retrospective moral victory, but also restores *for us* a certain measure of closure and meaning to the events.”¹⁹⁸ While Kramar correctly argues that “those who weren’t there cannot possibly understand,” a contextualized historical reconstruction offers much insight to *Brundibár*’s role in Theresienstadt.¹⁹⁹ Simplifying prisoners’ experiences and opting to focus on emotionally charged elements only perpetuates a biased narrative of cultural activity in Theresienstadt.

The exploitation of *Brundibár* in Holocaust representation ultimately attempts to redeem a sympathetic public confronted with the horrors perpetrated by the Nazis. LaCapra rejects the “idea of any full recovery, redemption, or use of the Holocaust...for spiritual uplift or as proof of the essential dignity of the human being and the ability of the human spirit to endure all hardship and emerge on a higher level of spirituality.”²⁰⁰ In place of these artificial narratives, current scholarship must emphasize authentic survivor experiences and refrain from imposing current cultural norms on Holocaust. The pervasive arguments of resistance in *Brundibár* overshadow the individual experiences of performers in Prague and Theresienstadt. Rovit poses a crucial question, “We have the hindsight to know what happened to inmates destined for Auschwitz. But may we not also try to understand the complexity of human beings?”²⁰¹ Taking her suggestion one step further, scholars must understand the totality of individual experience in Theresienstadt in order to fully grasp *Brundibár*’s role and signification in the camp. Whether *Brundibár* and other

¹⁹⁸ Gilbert, *Music in the Holocaust*, 5.

¹⁹⁹ Rovit, *Theatrical Performance in the Holocaust*, 181.

²⁰⁰ LaCapra, *History in Transit*, 157.

²⁰¹ Rovit, “The Brundibár Project,” 117.

cultural activity in Theresienstadt encouraged inmate survival or simply offered an opportunity for escapism, survivor Ela Weissberger makes one element of her stay in Theresienstadt unmistakably clear—"Music! Music was life!"²⁰² The common use of synecdoche in Holocaust representation often relies on a singular, unique inmate experience in pursuit of an uplifting, redemptive narrative representing the Holocaust in its totality. Regarding the focus on children in Theresienstadt, Mark Anderson emphasizes that "the persecuted child turns the Holocaust into a moving and accessible story with religious and mythic associations...This is the source of the Holocaust's power as *narrative*—for novelists, playwrights, filmmakers, and, of course, politicians. But it is also the source of its potential exploitation."²⁰³ First exploited via Nazi co-option in Theresienstadt, *Brundibár* survives through a legacy of manipulation in manifold misrepresentations in German and American culture and society.

²⁰² Brenner, *The Girls of Room 28*, 134.

²⁰³ Anderson, "Child Victim," 3.



Figure 1. *Brundibár* Poster from Theresienstadt²⁰⁴

²⁰⁴Karas, *Music in Terezin*, 76.



Figure 2. Sendak's depiction of Pepicek and Aninku²⁰⁵

²⁰⁵ Tony Kushner with Maurice Sendak, *Brundibár*, (New York: Michael Di Capua Books/Hyperion Books for Children, 2003).



Figure 3. Photograph from a French production of *Brundibár*²⁰⁶

²⁰⁶ Centre Segal Performing Arts, Arts de la scène, last modified April 9, 2013, <http://www.segalcentre.org/newsroom/news-archive/may-15-2012-en/>.



Figure 4. Kushner/Sendak New York Production²⁰⁷

²⁰⁷ Christopher Isherwood, "Tony Kushner and Maurice Sendak adapt *Brundibar*, a Czech Children's Opera," *New York Times*, May 9, 2006, <http://www.newyorktimes.com/>.



Figure 5. *Brundibár* cast in Theresienstadt²⁰⁸

²⁰⁸ Karas, “Operatic Performances in Terezin,” 197.



Figure 6. Sendak's Depiction of Brundibár²⁰⁹

²⁰⁹Kushner with Sendak, *Brundibár*.

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VITA

Catherine Greer received a BM with Distinction from the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, NY. After making her professional debut with the Ohio Light Opera in 2005, she joined the Knoxville Opera Studio and completed a MM in Voice Performance and Pedagogy at the University of Tennessee. An accomplished soprano, Catherine has performed various roles in opera and musical theater and can be heard in the role of Madame Delphine in Romberg's *Maytime*, recorded with the Ohio Light Opera and released by Albany Records. Her concert work includes soprano soloist in works by Mozart, Rutter, Bernstein, Dubois, Warren, Allegri, and Vaughn Williams. An avid recitalist, Catherine has featured German Lieder, songs of WWII, and music of the Holocaust in previous performances. She serves as staff singer at Temple Beth El and the Episcopal Church of the Ascension in Knoxville, TN.

Catherine began German language study at the Eastman School of Music under Rheinild Steingröver and continued her studies at the University of Tennessee while completing her MM degree. She began graduate studies in German at the Universität Stuttgart, where she spent a year as an exchange student. Catherine served as a Graduate Teaching Assistant at the University of Tennessee and taught undergraduate courses in Voice and German. Catherine recently received a fellowship from the Center for Jewish History for participation in an archival and research seminar in May 2013. Her research focuses on the role of music in the Holocaust, German-Jewish studies, and Holocaust representation. She plans to pursue a PhD in Musicology and offers lecture recitals on music and the Holocaust.