THE HOLOCAU ON STAGE

Lisa Peschel has uncovered a series of plays performed by inmates of a Jewish ghetto near Nazi-occupied Prague. Here she reveals how these dramas helped the prisoners come to terms with the horror of their everyday lives

Children perform an opera called *Brundibár* in the Theresienstadt ghetto. The Jewish inmates' plays "provide a startling window into their experience of life, their hopes and fears," says Lisa Peschel

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"*You want to go home? Fools! The home you left is in the past, buried in the abyss of time! There's a different world out there, beyond these walls! Do you hear? A different world!*"

In the stirring ending to the historical drama *The Smoke of Home*, set in the Thirty Years' War, Casselius, one of the main protagonists, shatters the illusions of his fellow prisoners: there will be no return to the peace and plenty of their prewar lives.

These lines take on new meaning when we consider that they were written in a Second World War ghetto 40 miles north-west of Prague called Theresienstadt. Years before the end of the war, the play's young Czech-Jewish authors explored a question that few of their own fellow prisoners could bear to face: if they survived, what kind of world would they return to?

The Smoke of Home was just one of many plays written in Theresienstadt, and theatre was just one of several art forms that thrived in the ghetto. Because the Nazis did not expect any of the prisoners to survive they had little reason to censor the cultural life. Fortunately thousands did survive, and they preserved works even by artists who perished. Dozens of musical compositions and hundreds of children's drawings, for example, have been exhibited and performed. Scholars believed, however, that most theatrical works created in the ghetto had been lost. In 2004–05, however, during my interviews with survivors about their experience of the cultural life, several previously unknown scripts came to light.

The authors of *The Smoke of Home*: Jiří Stein (top), who perished during the war, and Zdeněk Eliáš, who survived

The Smoke of Home was uncovered as a result of an interview I conducted with survivor Jiří Franěk. As we discussed the cultural life of the camp, he remembered a play written by two friends and described the plot in vivid detail. One author, Jiří Stein, perished after being deported to Auschwitz, but the other, Zdeněk Eliáš, survived and eventually emigrated to the US. Jiří Franěk urged me to contact Zdeněk's widow Kate, who kept it in a safe with his other important papers after he died – despite the fact that he had described the play to her as simply "a youthful endeavour".

Additional scripts came to light after I attended a lecture

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Theresienstadt: the 'model' camp

In 1944, the Jewish ghetto was the scene of a Nazi propaganda stunt

November 1941 saw the Nazis establishing a Jewish ghetto in Theresienstadt, a historic fortress town 40 miles north-west of Prague. Theresienstadt's main function was as a transit camp, where the Jews of central Europe could be gathered before they were sent "to the east". As the SS officers of the ghetto knew but the prisoners did not, most of the outgoing transports went to Auschwitz.

Extreme overcrowding led to shortages of water and the spread of infectious diseases, and housing and the food supply were woefully inadequate. Although the mortality rate was high, there were no gas chambers; the prisoners were spared the horror of mechanised mass murder. The Nazis also left most of the administrative work to the Jewish leaders, which enabled them to establish features of 'normal life' in the ghetto.

In 1944 Theresienstadt played perhaps its most unusual role. After renovating a carefully prepared route through the ghetto, the Nazis allowed members of the Red Cross to visit in an attempt to convince them that reports of gas chambers were anti-German propaganda. The stunt worked; in his subsequent report the Swiss representative, Maurice Rossel, expressed surprise that the visit had taken so long to arrange when there seemed to be nothing to hide.

In the autumn of 1944, mass transports began that sent two-thirds of the ghetto's population to Auschwitz. Those who remained in the ghetto were liberated on 8 May 1945.

In all, 140,000 people were deported to Theresienstadt, where 34,000 of them died. Of the 87,000 deported to the east, only about 3,600 survived.

This postage stamp from 1943 masks the horrors of the Czech town's Jewish ghetto

Inmates watch Kurt Gerron's cabaret *Carousel* in Theresienstadt. Gerron, a celebrated Jewish film director, was incarcerated at Theresienstadt before dying at Auschwitz

on Czech-language theatre by political prisoners in several camps. During the post-show Q&A, one audience member, Zdeněk Prokeš, expressed his surprise that theatre in the camps was so widespread, although he knew about Theresienstadt because his parents had a cabaret there. Prokeš eventually gave me access to his father's entire collection of scripts.

Cabaret in the ghetto

But how were the prisoners able to preserve their creations? Almost all the labour in the ghetto, including administrative work, was carried out by the prisoners themselves. For example, Zdeněk's father Felix Porges (after the war he changed his name to the less Jewish-sounding Prokeš) supervised the delivery and distribution of provisions in the ghetto. He worked in an office supplied with typewriters, paper and even carbon paper, which he used to create multiple copies of cabaret scripts for his actors.

In a diary written in the ghetto, prisoner Philip Manes described the work of the young author Georg Kafka, a distant relative of Franz Kafka, and how his employment provided him with access to writing materials: "During the day he worked in the files of the central archives of the ghetto […] and at night, when his duties allowed (when outgoing transport lists were being prepared, sometimes the typists worked all night, for several nights in a row), he sat at the typewriter, transcribing his creations."

Porges remained in Theresienstadt until the ghetto was liberated, and thus was simply able to take his collection home. Kafka might also have remained in the ghetto, but when his own mother's name appeared on an outgoing transport list, he voluntarily joined her. Both of them perished. He must have entrusted his play *The Death of Orpheus* to a friend before his deportation, however, for the manuscript was preserved in the archives of the Jewish Museum in Prague.

During my interviews with survivors they had described certain plays at great length, but when the scripts themselves started to come to light they were a revelation. They provide a startling window into the prisoners' real-time experience of life in the ghetto – not only as a record of the events of daily life, as reflected in the jokes in the cabarets, but as an expression of their hopes and fears in the ghetto and for life beyond Theresienstadt.

Some of the plays are deeply philosophical. *The Smoke of Home* engages with the question of the prisoners' postwar fate. *The Death of Orpheus* deals with similarly weighty themes. Set in the remote mountains where Orpheus has retreated in despair after losing Eurydice forever, Georg Kafka's script explores the nature of love and death and the role of the artist in a society facing its final days. Some of Orpheus's lines may be more chilling to us than to Kafka's Theresienstadt audiences, since we know that Kafka's position in the central archives may have made him privy to information about the true destination of the outgoing transports:

"Do you know what love is? It is this very silence.
Concealing from the ones we love the knowledge
Of all the horror meant for us alone."

But perhaps the most striking feature of these scripts is that, aside from these few more serious works, almost all of them are comedies. In fact, comedy was so prevalent in the ghetto that I believe it provided the prisoners

ABOVE: **A souvenir poster promoting a cabaret.** RIGHT: **A man wears the yellow star of David in the Theresienstadt ghetto in the early 1940s**

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with something they desperately needed. By rewriting their experiences in a comic vein, they converted their constant anxieties about life in the ghetto into a source of laughter rather than a source of frustration, or even terror.

One of the scripts preserved in the Prokeš collection is a 'mock' radio show that recreates the broadcast format of prewar radio station Prague 1. Porges and his fellow authors satirise life in the ghetto through news reports, commentary on a football match, and a children's story hour. Here's how the story, based on the tale of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, converts the inadequate food supply of the ghetto into comedy:

"*[T]iny little cakes and pastries were baked, tiny little dumplings and sometimes even tiny little pieces of meat. All the food was prepared in such a way so that it would not make anyone sick from overeating. You know, dear children, dwarfs have little tiny stomachs, so it was enough for them.*"

Two and a half years later, Porges and his fellow artists took on some of the prisoner's greatest fears in a new cabaret called *Laugh with Us*. For example, in a scene set on a park bench in the postwar future, Vítězsláv Horpatzky plays a pensioner, a survivor of Theresienstadt, who has never gotten around to taking the yellow star off his coat. Porges plays a young man who, curious about the star, has been asking him questions about the 'good old days' in the ghetto. As the scene begins, the pensioner is describing a long search for a prisoner named Josef Novák that ends in the news that he has left the ghetto:

"*Horpatzky: …that Josef Novák, that name you must certainly still remember, left by transport.*

One Theresienstadt 'radio show' satirised life in the ghetto through news reports, commentary on a football match and even a children's story hour

Porges: You mean maybe by train or by car.
Horpatzky: No, transport.
Porges: What is that for a means of transportation?
Horpatzky: Transport, that was a magic word. Children there weren't afraid of the bogey-man or witches, there they simply said, 'a transport is going', and you should have seen it, how that shook each of them, how all were immediately well-behaved and obedient; it's not surprising, since only selected people were allowed to leave on such a transport."

As survivor HG Adler wrote: "Fear of deportations made fear of death seem insignificant or even replaced it." In this remarkable exchange, however, first the authors minimise the threat of transports by portraying them as a way to frighten children. Then, in the final reversal, they made inclusion in the transports a reward rather than a catastrophe to be avoided at all costs. This sudden shift in perspective, even though entirely fictional, may have helped the prisoners gain some relief from their anxiety about the transports through laughter.

Seven decades after they wrote their plays in the direst of circumstances, the Theresienstadt prisoners' remarkable works will soon return to stages around the world. As part of the project 'Performing the Jewish Archive', funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Theresienstadt plays are to be staged in Britain, America, the Czech Republic, South Africa and Australia in 2016 and 2017 (alongside newly discovered works by other Jewish artists in concentration camps, exile and in emigration).

The UK festival in June 2016 will take place in York and Leeds and will feature events ranging from *Harlequin in the Ghetto*, a play based on fragments of a preserved commedia dell'arte script, to Theresienstadt musical compositions played by the internationally renowned Nash Ensemble. What better opportunity to watch these remarkable works brought to life again? H

Lisa Peschel is lecturer in theatre at the University of York, and editor of *Performing Captivity, Performing Escape: Cabarets and Plays from the Terezín/Theresienstadt Ghetto* (Seagull, 2014)

DISCOVER MORE

WEBSITE

▶ Find out more about **Performing the Jewish Archive** – a project working to uncover and perform lost works – at *ptja.leeds.ac.uk/*

THEATRICAL PERFORMANCE

▶ To watch a performance of one of the **Theresienstadt plays**, go to *york.ac.uk/tftv/media/play-thesmokeofhome/*