



# **THERESIENSTADT**

**SPIRITUAL RESISTANCE  
AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

# NO ONE CAN IMPRISON THE SOUL.

Spiritual resistance refers to attempts by individuals to maintain humanity and dignity in the face of efforts to degrade them. During the Holocaust, countless Jews—whether in ghettos, concentration camps, or in hiding—engaged in resistance by refusing to allow their spirit to be broken even under profoundly dehumanizing circumstances. Cultural and educational activities, secret archives, and clandestine religious observances—such acts reaffirmed a Jewish sense of community, history, and civilization in the face of physical and spiritual annihilation. The “camp-ghetto” of Theresienstadt, located about 35 miles northwest of the Czech city of Prague, offered perhaps the most favorable environment for spiritual resistance in the Nazi camp system.

**COVER** Drawing made in 1943 as a birthday gift for Edgar Krasa. *U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Edgar and Hana Krasa*

**RIGHT** Map of Theresienstadt, from an original document (1942–1945), that was mounted in an album assembled by a survivor. *U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Henry Kabn*

**UPPER RIGHT** A large group of Dutch Jews who have just arrived in Theresienstadt. January, 1944. *U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Ivan Vojtech Fric*

**BACK** Child’s watercolor painted ca. 1943 showing Jews celebrating Hanukkah. *U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, gift of Michael Gruenbaum and Marietta Emont*

**THERESIENSTADT WAS A FACILITY UNLIKE ANY OTHER** in Nazi Germany's network of ghettos and camps. Even the difficulty in classifying it points to its distinctive place in the orbit of incarceration. Neither a typical ghetto nor strictly a concentration camp, Theresienstadt served as a transit and forced labor camp, as well as a longer-term detention facility for Jewish men, women, and children from across western and central Europe. As a propaganda showcase for the Nazis, Theresienstadt also served as part of a calculated plan of deception.

The historic, walled garrison town of Theresienstadt (known in Czech as Terezín) was named after 18th century Austrian Empress Maria Theresa. As part of the escalation of the "Final Solution," in early October 1941 the German SS and police decided to convert Theresienstadt into a transit camp for Jews en route to ghettos and killing centers in occupied eastern Europe. On November 24, 1941, the first 1,000 Jewish prisoners arrived. Most Jews imprisoned at Theresienstadt came from prewar Czechoslovakia, Germany, and Austria, though later in the war Jews were also brought there from Denmark and Hungary.

At peak capacity in September 1942, the camp-ghetto held about 60,000 prisoners crammed into an area approximately five by eight city blocks. The SS and police began deporting Jews from Theresienstadt on January 9, 1942. Until autumn 1944, prisoners were deported from Theresienstadt to ghettos—notably in Riga, Warsaw, Lodz, Minsk, and





Bialystok—or directly to killing centers in the east, including Auschwitz and Treblinka. Lack of food and medicine, grossly inadequate housing, and overcrowding caused a death rate in Theresienstadt comparable to that in the Dachau and Buchenwald concentration camps. In 1942, deaths accelerated so dramatically that the Germans built a crematorium capable of handling about 200 bodies a day.

More than 141,000 people were imprisoned in Theresienstadt during its three-and-a-half-year existence. Only 15 percent of them would survive the war. The Germans deported approximately 88,300 inmates from Theresienstadt to ghettos and killing centers. Nearly 33,500 other “residents” of Theresienstadt died there due to disease, starvation, or exposure, and another 1,500 died shortly after liberation in May 1945.

**THERESIENSTADT SERVED AN IMPORTANT PROPAGANDA FUNCTION** within Greater Germany. The publicly stated purpose for the deportation of Jews was “resettlement to the East,” where they were to perform forced labor. Since it seemed implausible that elderly Jews could do manual labor, the Nazis used Theresienstadt in part to hide the nature of the deportations. In Nazi propaganda, Theresienstadt was described as a “spa town” where elderly German Jews could “retire” in safety. Theresienstadt was also used to imprison disabled or highly decorated veterans of World War I, as well as prominent Jewish artists and intellectuals whose fame might have provoked inquiries into their whereabouts or treatment.

**TO MAINTAIN THE ILLUSION** of their being in a “model ghetto,” Jews in Theresienstadt wore civilian clothes (with Star of David badges). Also, unlike in regular concentration camps, the incarcerated residents lived under a Jewish administration similar to those imposed in ghettos in eastern Europe. Though subordinate to the Germans for implementing orders and making selections for deportations, the Jewish Council in Theresienstadt coordinated housing, electricity, water, police, judicial, and postal services. It also organized labor detachments, including workshops for carpentry, leather goods, and tailoring. The council assigned women to work in the kitchen, clean barracks, or serve as nurses. Other prisoners worked on construction projects or in the nearby Kladno mines, under direct SS and police supervision.

Perhaps most famously, the Jewish Council organized educational activities, cultural events, and religious celebrations. Since the SS cared little for what went on inside Theresienstadt as long as it did not involve subversion or sabotage, the council had significant autonomy in organizing such events. The uniqueness of Theresienstadt’s cultural life stemmed from its thousands of interned professional and amateur artists. Their concerts, theatrical performances, artworks, literary readings, and above all the composition of musical works represent an outpouring of culture unparalleled anywhere else in the Nazi camp system. Prisoners maintained a lending library of 60,000 volumes. In addition, more than 2,300 lectures (more than one for each day of the camp-ghetto’s existence) were organized on topics ranging from art to medicine.

Theresienstadt was the only Nazi camp in which Jewish religious life was practiced more or less undisturbed, beginning with the celebration of the first night of Hanukkah in December 1941. Another spiritual legacy of Theresienstadt was the attention given to the welfare and education of child prisoners. Fifteen thousand children passed through Theresienstadt. They painted pictures, wrote poetry, and otherwise tried to maintain a vestige of normal life. Approximately 90 percent of those children eventually perished in killing centers.

Paradoxically, the relative freedom of Jewish cultural expression within Theresienstadt also served to reinforce its propaganda value for the Nazis. In June 1944, succumbing to public pressure following the deportation of about 470 Jews from



Denmark to Theresienstadt, the Germans permitted two delegates from the International Red Cross and one from the Danish Red Cross to visit the camp-ghetto. They were accompanied by Theresienstadt commandant SS First Lieutenant Karl Rahm and the senior Nazi Security Police official in the occupied Czech lands, as well as SS officers from Berlin.

**ELABORATE MEASURES WERE TAKEN** beforehand to disguise conditions and to portray an atmosphere of normality. Prisoners were forced to plant gardens and renovate barracks. As part of the preparations, within three days in May, SS authorities deported 7,503 people from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz to alleviate overcrowding. One of the major elements of the Nazi propaganda strategy for the Red Cross visit was a performance of Verdi's *Requiem*, delivered under duress by Jewish prisoners who had been organized into a choir by Czech Jewish inmate Rafael Schächter. The prisoners also treated the visiting delegation to a soccer game in the camp square complete with staged cheering crowds, and a performance of the children's opera *Brundibár* in a community hall built for the occasion. It was all a ruse. Once the visit was over, the Germans resumed deportations from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz, including Schächter and most of his chorus. These deportations did not end until October 1944 as the tide of the war turned increasingly in the Allies' favor. The Red Cross visit epitomized the stark irony of Theresienstadt—the relative freedoms that made life more bearable for the tens of thousands of people imprisoned there also lent credence to a larger Nazi cover-up of genocide.