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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 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.

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.
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.

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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 Kahn
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
PREPARED BY THE UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM
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