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The Terezín Memorial. A city – a museum and a distinctive site of memory[1]

Terezin. Miasto – muzeum i charakterystyczne miejsce pamięci

Abstract

This study analyses the history of the Terezín Memorial from its establishment in 1947 to the period shortly after the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia in 1989. The memorial was established on the site of the largest World War II concentration camp of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia and is the second most important Jewish memorial in the Czech lands after the Jewish Museum in Prague (the term is used in the sense attributed to it by Pierre Nora). At the same time, the text focuses on building the collective memory through museum exhibits and exhibitions as much as through the memoirs of surviving inmates. This study demonstrates that the totalitarian regime abused its power to manipulate memory, yet also that the minority created a parallel collective memory. The Terezín minority thus came to symbolise Jewish courage and suffering.
Key words: the Terezín Memorial, city, museum, memory

[1] The text is based on archival sources, especially the collection of the National Archive in Prague, which stores archival material from central offices. For this research, the State Office for Church Affairs (1949-1956) and the Church Department of the Ministry of Education and Culture (after 1956) were crucial. These institutions also controlled the Jewish religious community. Another important source was the Jewish minority press, especially the Jewish Bulletins (published from 1934 to 1993), informing about the religious, social and cultural activities of the Jewish minority. In addition, it used autobiographical sources, especially Jewish memoirs and correspondence, and iconographic sources (drawings of Terezín inmates, Terezín sepulchral monuments, period photographs). Also useful were period historiographic works, period documents (e.g. texts accompanying exhibitions, annual reports of institutions) and Jewish literature. The text attempts to follow the construction of the Terezín Memorial in the broadest socio-political and cultural contexts. Today, this approach is called discourse analysis.

Abstrakt

Niniejsze studium analizuje historię Miejsca Pamięci w Terezinie od jego założenia w 1947 r. do okresu tuż po aksamitnej rewolucji w Czechosłowacji w 1989 roku. Miejsce pamięci powstało na terenie na terenie największego obozu koncentracyjnego Protektoratu Czech i Moraw z okresu drugiej wojny światowej i jest drugim najważniejszym żydowskim miejscem pamięci na ziemiach czeskich po Muzeum Żydowskim w Pradze (termin ten jest używany w znaczeniu nadanym mu przez Pierre'a Norę). Jednocześnie tekst koncentruje się na budowaniu pamięci zbiorowej zarówno poprzez eksponaty muzealne i wystawy jak i wspomnienia ocalałych więźniów. Analiza pokazuje, że reżim totalitarny nadużywał swojej władzy do manipulowania pamięcią, ale także, że mniejszość stworzyła równoległą pamięć zbiorową. W ten sposób mniejszość terezińska stała się symbolem żydowskiej odwagi i cierpienia.
Słowa kluczowe: Miejsce Pamięci Terezín, miasto, muzeum, pamięć

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Introduction

The Terezín Memorial[2] is currently considered the second most important Jewish museum in the Czech lands.[3] Its history encapsulates the tragedy of the Jews during the Second World War, when a concentration camp was established in the fortress town of Terezín.[4] At the end of the Second World War, a typhus epidemic broke out there.

[2] Terezín is a fortress town founded in 1780-1790, located in the Ústí nad Labem region of the Litoměřice district on both sides of the Ohře River. During the Second World War, a Jewish ghetto was established in the Main Fortress. The Gestapo prison with its Jewish cell block was located in the Small Fortress. https://cs.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terezín.

[3] In terms of visitors, only the Jewish Museum in Prague can compete with the Terezín Memorial today. In 2019, the Museum was visited by 677,499 visitors, in 2020 during the COVID pandemic by 141,608 visitors, and in 2022 by 407,914 visitors. Annual Report of the Jewish Museum in Prague for 2022, p. 6. https:/c.jewishmuseum.cz/files/2022.vz,cz.pdf. In comparison, the Terezín Memorial was visited by 300,000 people in 2019, around 75,000 in 2020 and 2021, and 281,400 in 2023. www.idnes.cz/usti/zpravy/pamatnik-Terezín-penize-oteviraci-doba-zkraceni.

[4] The decision to establish it was made in October 1941 (Blodig 2001: 57; Krejčová 1991: 158). Terezín subsequently became a transfer station for the transports of Jews from the Protectorate and other areas to Poland. 141,000 people of 53 nationalities were brought to Terezín; in June 1942 alone, 14 transports arrived from Berlin, ten from Munich and the first transports from Vienna (Blodig 2001: 59). However, most of the prisoners were Jews from the Protectorate (75,000). The first transport of 342 young men arrived here on 24 November 1941 (Blodig 2001: 58). However, in the last days of the war, another 15,000 prisoners from the liquidated concentration camps were brought to Terezín (Blodig 2001: 66). Terezín was headed by the SS commandant's office, which was subordinate in political matters to the Main Reich Security Office in Berlin (Krejčová 1997: 9). The Jewish Council of Elders was subordinate to the SS Command. The Jewish Council of Elders organized life in the Ghetto, although it is impossible to speak of self-government in the true sense of the word (Krejčová 1991: 160). This institution was also a cover-up maneuver by the Nazis, who claimed that the Jews had been given "their own city"

The situation was critical because there was a shortage of manpower to treat the sick, and a lack of other support staff and transportation.[5] After the epidemic was contained and the liberated prisoners were continuously repatriated, the question arose as to what would become of the former concentration camp. For the Jewish minority, however, it had already become the most important site of memory. The fact that Terezín already began to function as a place of Jewish memory after the Second World War is convincingly demonstrated by the concern of Jewish representatives for Terezín, backed by the community, including efforts to reconstruct Terezín's history through the printing of memoirs in the Jewish press, the writing of scholarly texts, and the modification of the cemetery and other key sites in the Terezín Ghetto, as well as holding local memorial services and commemorating the anniversaries of the founding and liberation of the ghetto. At the same time, it began to function as a both a symbol of the dehumanization of society and a symbol of the struggle for human dignity. "For us, the Terezín Ghetto became a symbol of all those places that always pose that tormenting and unanswerable question to human conscience: how was this absurd barbarity, this inhumanity, possible in the 20th century…?" asked Zwi Batscha, a delegate of Palestine Jews and Olomouc native, at a youth festival in Prague in 1947 (Batscha 2002: 136-137). Ultimately, it was decided to transform Terezín into a distinctive museum. The official understanding of Terezín at the time is best explained by the speech given by engineer František Fuchs at the General Meeting of the Association for the Maintenance of the National Cemetery in Terezín, in which the Council of Jewish Religious Communities was represented as the top minority body. As its representative, Fuchs emphasized the joint Czech and Jewish suffering at Terezín and the common struggle of prisoners for freedom, democracy and progress (Valná hromada 1947: 108).

(Pěkný 2001: 345-348; Kryl 1999: 52). Nevertheless, a peculiar culture emerged in Terezín (Krejčová 1991: 159). By Terezín culture we mean the sum total of cultural events and artistic work of prisoners of the Terezín concentration camp. This activity was partially permitted and partially conducted in secret (Pěkný 2001: 346). The cultural activity in the Terezín ghetto from 1942 to 1945 is generally assessed as an expression of collective resistance (Pěkný 2001: 574, 632). Top artists, musicians, actors, opera singers, and theatre artists were active in Terezín (Šormová 1973). Verdi's *Requiem*, Smetana's opera *The Bartered Bride* and Hans Krasa's children's opera *Brundibár* were all performed there. The most important literary work produced in Terezín is considered to be a collection of texts written by Terezín children and youth (Pěkný 2001: 625-633). At the end of the war, the Red Army arrived in Terezín on 8 May 1945. The Red Army, together with the Czech Help Initiative, took steps to end the typhus epidemic (Blodig 2001: 64-65). Only 5,614 former Protectorate Jews returned home from Terezín (Krejčová and Svobodová 1998: 7). However, several thousand Protectorate Jews were transported directly to Lodz and Minsk, without stopping in Terezín (Blodig 2001: 57; Krejčová 1991: 158).

[5] *Situační zpráva o Terezíně*, *Situational report on Terezín*, 21. 5. 1945, Národní archiv Praha [Prague National Archives], Ústav marxismu leninismu ÚV KSČ [Institute of Marxism Leninism of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia], Fond 88 (Václav Vacek), carton number 27, pp. 1-3.

The emergence of a distinctive museum and the division in memory

Already in May 1947, the Terezín Cemetery (also known as the "National Cemetery") began to be restored under the care of the Provincial National Committee in Prague, which was also the caretaker of the Jewish Cemetery (Vg. 1947: 136). At the same time, construction on the Memorial to National Suffering began in the Small Fortress, a prison for Czech resistance fighters during the war (Munk 1998: 331). A ghetto exhibition was installed in the cell for Jewish prisoners. Paintings by graphic artist and cartoonist Bedřich Fritta (1906 Višňová – 1944 Auschwitz), one of the Terezín painters, were placed on the temple curtains, along with photographs of the Protectorate's anti-Jewish regulations and photographs of the transports of Jews to Terezín and the extermination camps. The curtains of the temple also displayed statistics on the number of Jews before the war and statistics on the number of people who died in individual towns and their surroundings. The Jews' participation in the resistance was also mapped in both the Slovak National Uprising (1944) and in the Czechoslovak army on the Eastern Front (Soukupová 2016: 458-459). Already at this time, however, mainstream propaganda primarily emphasized the importance of the Small Fortress and not the Terezín Ghetto (Dubenský 1946: unpaginated). This mainstream disinterest was counterbalanced by the Jewish Museum in Prague, which commemorated the Terezín concentration camp with exhibitions of other Terezín painters: in 1946, Otto Ungar (1901 Husovice – 1945 Bleikenhaim near Weimar), a high school professor at the Jewish Gymnasium in Brno (Terezínské ghetto 1946: 109), a year later, Dr Karel Fleischmann (1897 Klatovy – 1944 Auschwitz) (Posmrtná výstava 1947: 95), and in 1951, František Mořice Nágl (1889 Kostelní Myslová – 1944 Auschwitz) (Výstava obrazů 1951: 56). In June 1948, during a memorial service at the Terezín crematorium, Chief Rabbi Gustav Sicher (1880 Klatovy – 1960 Prague), who managed to leave for Palestine in December 1939, probably spoke for the first time about Terezín culture as an extraordinary phenomenon. During his speech, Sicher referred to the concentration camp as a tomb of the living and a city of the dead (Sicher 1948: 301). The fact that Czech society remembered Terezín as a camp where both Czechs and Jews suffered and died together contributed to the division of memory in the Czech lands into majority (Czech) and minority (Jewish) perspectives. Moreover, as a memorial site, Terezín was only second to Lidice (the Czech village exterminated by the Nazis on 10 June 1942), even though mainstream memory tried to link the two places (Vzpomínáme 1951: 285). Also painful for the Jewish minority was the loss of one of Terezín's places of memory: the Ohře River Memorial (1952), which commemorated the disposal of the ashes of the prisoners who died in 1944. This area was given to the Czechoslovak army (Ústřední organizace židů 1968: 1). Thus, from the second half of the 1950s onwards, Jewish commemorators gathered in the Jewish cemetery near the crematorium. In September 1955, thanks to a minority initiative, a monument to the martyrs of the Terezín Ghetto was unveiled (Odhalení pomníku 1955: 1). From December 1956 to the summer of 1957,

they also had the opportunity to see the *Terezín – ghetto* exhibition in Prague's Maisel Synagogue, prepared by Jewish institutions (Terezín – ghetto 1957: 4). On 8 December 1956, a cultural evening was held at the Prague Jewish Town Hall to commemorate the establishment of the Terezín Ghetto. The main speaker was the regional rabbi of the Moravian-Silesian communities, Richard Feder (1875 Václavice – 1970 Brno), who presented Terezín exclusively as the work of German Nazism ("Germanic depravity"), which did not hesitate to use Terezín as a model Jewish town for its propaganda. At the same time, however, Feder characterized Terezín as a town with its own culture, thanks to the Jewish self-government, to which Czech Jews had developed a loving relationship. Feder strictly rejected criticism of the quality of Jewish culture (Feder 1957: 7-9; Soukupová 2016: 482-484).

A similar situation emerged in Poland after the Second World War, when Polish political prisoners, for whom Auschwitz was originally established, began to create a "Polish National Museum" to bear witness to the genocide of the Polish nation (Steinbacher 2004: 26). The main focus was thus on the entrance gate, Block 11 and the Death Wall at Auschwitz I (Lachendro 2007: 51), not on Auschwitz II (Birkenau) (K., K. 1948: 27). At present, the fate of non-Jewish Polish prisoners at Oświęcim is considered to have been a threat to life, but not necessarily a death sentence (Bartoszewski 1998: 190). In official narratives, Oświęcim is the largest Jewish and Polish cemetery (Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, Oleksy 2008: 10).

Jewish survivors and Terezín. Memories of the concentration camp: lived history

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, there also appeared memoirs of prominent figures who were imprisoned in the Terezín concentration camp in the period of the Protectorate. These memoirs, too, subsequently contributed to the construction of a collective Jewish memory of Terezín. Anna Auředníčková (1873 Prague – 1957 Prague), herself an active Catholic but prominent Jewish supporter and widow of Leopold Hilsner's defense attorney in the Hilsner Affair (1899),[6] released her memoirs *Tři léta v Terezíně* [Three years in Terezín] as early as 1945 (published by Alois Hynek in Prague). In it, she characterized Terezín as "a concentration camp, albeit a mild concentration camp compared to so many other places where there was no hope of return", as "an exile" or "a city of linden trees and (Nazi) lies", "a city of exile" (Auředníčková 1945: 7; 19; 85). Although Auředníčková devoted considerable space to the educational work in which she herself had been involved as a lecturer at Terezín and to the many remarkable personalities she had met there, her picture of the concentration camp was not only very malleable but also highly critical. "In Terezín, everyone had to fend for themselves. There was no reliance on others", she stated

[6] The Hilsner Affair revived medieval superstitions of ritual murder in the public mind.

(Auředníčková 1945: 74). In July 1945, Irma Semecká, a former Terezín educator, expressed herself even more harshly about Terezín in her work *Terezínské torso* [The Terezín torso]: "Terezin. A microcosm of the world. The world in a nutshell. The world in a matchbox. We're just packed in tighter, that's all. A corrupt rotten system from top to bottom. Divided by class and property like everywhere else. Here, geniuses die in attics and cellars no matter what the weather. Here they eat chlorine-burnt husks. Here people with manicured hands live in spacious apartments, clean, satiated, satisfied with themselves" (Semecká 1946: 83). On the other hand, in his book *Židovská tragédie. Dějství poslední* [The Jewish tragedy. The final act], Kolín Rabbi Richard Feder (1875 Václavice, Benešov district – 1970 Brno), who lived through Terezín as a clergyman, recalled the autumn of 1945 and the optimism of Terezín, in particular the religious conditions there, the care of the children and the prisoners' efforts to live a normal life (Feder 1947: 44; 67; 59-62; 52-53). In *Ghetto našich dnů* [Ghetto of our days], the communist and anti-Zionist Mirek Tůma (1921 Prague – 1989 New Jersey) merely glossed over Terezín's culture while recalling its moral significance (Tůma 1946: 26). All first-hand testimonies, however, shared a common theme: all the prisoners recalled an idealized home to which they wanted to return after the war. This was best expressed in a succinct form by the lawyer, practical philosopher, psychologist and (from 1943) head of the Terezín library Emil Utitz (1883 Roztoky – 1956 Jena) in his work *Psychologie života v terezínském koncentračním táboře* [The psychology of life in the Terezín concentration camp] (1947): "The closed gate of paradise will open once again, and in the meantime, there is emptiness. It sounds strange, but it is literally true. Although they all knew that their former possessions had been sold and stolen, scattered in all directions, they still thought they would find everything again as they had left it. They did not see that they would have to return to a substantially different and changed world, that even in the most favorable cases, hard times awaited them, full of worries" (Utitz 1947: 22; quotation 24). Even for Utitz, though, Terezín was also "a society brought together by force, united in hatred of the oppressors and in the hope of liberation", held together only by excellent self-government. At the same time, however, he pointed out that the prisoners still saw Terezín as home in a way: "… for all of them it was a Czech town, only 60 km away from their beloved capital" (Utitz 1947: 49). Then, at the end of the war, in the courtyard of the house in Terezín where he was imprisoned, Emil Utitz met the former owner of the house, who had come to inspect his property expropriated during the war. This meeting showed how Czech society had been infiltrated by anti-Semitism during the Protectorate and that not everyone would be sympathetic to the idea of a concentration camp as a museum: "He asked about the extent of the losses and the number of those who remained alive. He did not like the answer, he was very astonished and demanded an explanation. 'I have always considered the Germans to be an extremely thorough nation, why didn't they clean it all out already?'" (Utitz 1947: 66).

Terezín in the "Golden Sixties": the rise of public interest in the Holocaust, the scientific treatment of the history of the concentration camp and the construction of the museum

The "Golden Sixties" saw Terezín become internationally known. As Czech society took a greater interest, so did professional historians and Terezín was turned into a distinctive museum. In the summer of 1960, American rabbis came here,[7] followed two years later by a delegation from the Association of Persecutees of the Nazi Regime from West Berlin (Antifašisté 1962: 6) and in May 1964 by representatives of the Jewish Religious Community in Vienna (Návštěvy ze zahraničí 1964: 5). In 1963, a delegation from the Israeli embassy in Prague took part in the September Terezín commemoration.[8] The traveling exhibition of drawings of the murdered Terezín children, *Motýli zde nežijí* [Butterflies don't live here], achieved a worldwide renown. It was first presented from November 1956 to February 1957 in Paris (Z pražského Státního židovského musea 1958: 3).[9]

The topic of Terezín also made its way into the film *Motýli zde nežijí* [Butterflies don't live here] (Motýli 1960: 11) and the film *Transport!* based on the memoirs of writer Arnošt Lustig (1926 Prague – 2011 Prague) (Film 1961: 10). Another feature of this period was the unquestioning assertion of the narrative of Terezín's extraordinary cultural performance (Feder 1957: 7-9; Popper 1960: 10).

In addition to memoirs – such as, e.g., the one by Leo Holzer (1902 Kobersdorf – 1987), a former Terezín firefighter (Holzer 1960: 9), the first Czech scientific book on Terezín was written between 1960 and 1962: *Město za mřížemi* [A city behind bars] by Karel Lagus, J.D. (1903 – 1979) and Josef Polák (1905 – 1965). This book represented the official Czech view of Terezín. On the other hand, the work *Theresienstadt 1941-1945. Der Anlitz einer Zwangsgemeinschaft. Geschichte, Soziologie, Psychologie Terezín 1941-1945* [Terezín 1941-1945: The face of a forced community] by Hans Günther Adler (1910 Prague – 1988 London), a former Terezín prisoner, explaining Terezín culture as a Nazi-sanctioned pacification strategy of people condemned to death, was rejected (Adler 1955). Adler also questioned the exercise of Terezin's self-government. According to Emil Utitz, Adler shifted the blame from the perpetrator to the victim (Utitz 1956: 449). Life in the Terezín Ghetto is also outlined in Táňa Kulišová's *Malá*

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7 Národní archiv Praha [Prague National Archives], Ministerstvo školství [Ministry of Education], 47/VIII, carton no. 58.

8 Národní archiv Praha [National Archives Prague], Ministerstvo školství [Ministry of Education], 47/VIII, carton no. 58, dated Prague, 20 October 1963.

9 On 16 March 1957, the Brno House of Arts presented an exhibition Children's Drawing in Terezín 1942-1945 (Zprávy z obcí 1957: 11). Two years later, the State Jewish Museum published *Dětské kresby na zastávce k smrti. Terezín 1941-1945* [Children's Drawings on the Way to Death. Terezín 1941-1944]. The collection was edited by art historian Hana Volavková (1904 Jaroměř – 1985 Prague) (Volavková 1959).

pevnost Terezín. Národní hřbitov – ghetto [The Little Fortress of Terezín. National Cemetery – Ghetto] from 1964.

Terezín itself, however, was also to undergo modifications. In 1963, it was finally decided that the Terezín crematorium and Jewish cemetery would be incorporated into the Terezín National Memorial.[10] Two years later, an exhibition was opened in the Small Fortress (Heitlingerová 2007: 63-64). The work of Terezín painters was conceived by the authors of the exhibition, Jiří Hás and Karel Lagus, as a form of resistance (Iltis 1965: 7). Jewish self-consciousness was growing. In 1966, the Jewish representation first publicly voiced its criticism of the prioritization of the National Cemetery over the Terezín Ghetto, and a year later, its criticism of the seizure of the Ohře River memorial site by the Czechoslovak army (Soukupová 2016: 414-416).

In the mid-1960s, both Richard Feder and Karel Lagus proposed transforming one of the buildings of the Terezín concentration camp into its authentic form (Aby ani v budoucnu 1966: 4). The idea of transforming the museum into an institution of anti-fascist education in Europe was born in 1968 (Heitlinger 1968: 4). The site by the Ohře River began to be redeveloped in 1969. At the same time, a dignified memorial for the Terezín victims was discussed (Co se děje 1969: 2). Three years later in September, the Jewish and Russian cemeteries were opened.[11]

"Normalization": Soviet manipulation of Terezín

However, further promising developments were halted by "normalization" (1969-1989), which was marked by, among others, attacks on the State of Israel, but also on the Jewish religion and Jews who died during the war (Soukupová 2016: 506-509). Attacks even extended to the Terezin diary of Egon Redlich (1916 Olomouc – 1944 Auschwitz), a Zionist and head of child and youth care in Terezin (Kryl 1995). Found in 1967, the diary was attacked to scandalize Israel as a Zionist state serving US imperialists. Jiří Bohatka, a normalization ideologue, documented in 1974 that Terezin Zionists collaborated with the Nazis (Bohatka 1974: 20). Beginning in the mid-1970s, the Jewish community distanced itself from the mainstream conception of Terezín by at least holding its own commemorations at the memorial on the banks of the Ohře River (Soukupová 2016: 419).

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[10] Národní archiv Praha [National Archives in Prague], Ministerstvo školství [Ministry of Education], 47/VII, Řádný sjezd židovské náboženské společnosti v Čechách se konal dne 24. XI. 1963 v Praze [The regular congress of the Jewish Religious Society in Bohemia was held on 24.XI.1963 in Prague], 2.

[11] Národní archiv Praha [National Archives in Prague], Ministerstvo školství [Ministry of Education], Státní úřad pro věci církevní [State Office for Religious Affairs], Židovská náboženská obec [Jewish Religious Community, study material], 1986, 1989: 5. Cf. also Chládková 2005: 16, 17. Also see Tryzna 1972: 1.

Conclusion

After the Second World War, Terezín already became the most important place of Jewish memory. This confirmed the thesis of French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs that collective memory must be spatially anchored (Halbwachs 2009: 200). Nevertheless, after numerous problems, the Ghetto Museum was not opened until after the "Velvet Revolution" (1989), in October 1991 (Pěkný 2001: 604). Thus, Terezín can be used to convincingly document the otherness of the Jewish experience of the memory of the Second World War and the power of memory manipulation (Le Goff 2007). While the Jewish minority sought to include the Terezín concentration camp in Czech history, mainstream propaganda focused on highlighting the significance of the Small Fortress. Thus, a new stage in the history of the Terezín Museum did not open until the Velvet Revolution (1989). However, even today the situation is not idyllic; parts of the former ghetto face complete destruction, as they have fallen into ruin.

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