

SEEING THROUGH THE CELLULOID "PARADISE": THE FÜHRER GIVES A CITY TO THE JEWS



Film and Reality, by Fritta/Fritz Taussig

SEEING THROUGH "PARADISE": ARTISTS AND THE TEREZÍN CONCENTRATION CAMP

An Exhibition organized by
The Massachusetts College of Art

Purpose of the Guide

This guide has been prepared to ensure that visitors to the exhibit understand that the propaganda film made by the Nazis at Terezín is a gross fabrication.

The exhibition's main goal is to contrast the image of a "paradise" promoted by the Nazis with the independent work of the prisoner-artists which documents the reality of life in the camp.

The film – like the officially ordered artwork – was part of the Nazis' scheme to deceive. It is a dangerous form of propaganda; one that needs to be examined and analyzed to understand the power of visual images and foster critical viewing.

Historical Background

Terezín (Theresienstadt) was an 18th century fortress town in Bohemia, Czechoslovakia, built

by Joseph II to commemorate his mother, Empress Maria Theresa. Located 60 kilometers (40 miles) north of Prague, Terezín was a town of about 7000 when the Germans annexed Czechoslovakia in 1939. In 1941 the Nazis decided to use it as an assembly and transit camp for Czech Jews before deportation to the death camps.

The idea to create a "privileged camp" was conceived by SS General Reinhard Heydrich and elaborated upon at the Wannsee Conference on January 20, 1942.

The Nazis promoted Terezín as a "model" camp where elderly Jews, decorated war heroes and prominent individuals would be sent to live and work in "comfortable circumstances" in a harmonious community. The entire camp became a propaganda scheme designed to deceive the Jews of the Reich into easier acquiescence to deportation and to fool the outside world about the true fate of the Jews.

Famous musicians, composers, poets, painters and scholars were imprisoned at Terezín. Some artists worked in the prison drawing studio where they were forced to create propaganda artwork, including maps, plans, posters promoting the productivity of the camp as well as booklets portraying Terezín as a "spa".

Some artists secretly obtained materials to create pictures to bear witness and protest their treatment and the dire conditions in the camp.

Terezín was operated like the ghettos of Eastern Europe; the population was forcibly enclosed within the walled fortress from which departure was punishable by death. Conditions at Terezín should never be compared with those of the extermination camps, such as Auschwitz; nevertheless, it was a grim place.

The barracks and buildings were used to house as many as 58,000 Jews. Disease, hunger and cold ravaged the prisoners; 140,000 Jews were sent to Terezín; 33,430 died there; 87,000 were shipped to death camps in the East.

The camp was liberated by the Soviet army May 7, 1945.

Creating Paradise Camp

At the end of 1943 a major beautification program was instituted to prepare for a visit by the Danish Red Cross, the Danish Foreign Minister and the International Red Cross on June 23, 1944.

The streets were repaired, living quarters spruced up, the town square was cultivated, a lawn was laid with paths for strollers, 1200 rose bushes planted, a music pavilion erected, a children's playground constructed.

Signs reading "grocery," "bakery," "to the playground," "library," "school," "laundry," "men's wear" were produced by the inmates in the drafting shop.

7500 able-bodied young men and women were shipped to Auschwitz to make space and substantiate the image of an old age ghetto. Workers who delivered the bread were given white gloves to wear.

"I remember I made one beautiful sign for them— To the Park— there was a park to which we were not allowed to go, but for the film we know it was open.

We know that the children had to say the commandant's name, 'Hello, Uncle Rahm' Everybody was laughing about it in the camp."



Etta Viet-Simon Japha spent three years at Terezín (interview with Sharon Rivo, April 7, 1985.)

The inmates were threatened with severe reprisals if they did not cooperate with the subterfuge and beautification program. The Red Cross Commission filed a favorable report.

The Film Production

In the summer of 1944, the Nazis ordered the production of a "documentary-style" film about Terezín. Kurt Gerron, the well known German actor and director, who was interned in the camp, was selected as the director. The production crew included Frantisek Zelenka, the Czech theatre-architect; Jo Spier, the Dutch cartoonist (who documented the making of the film by making 400 sketches during the shooting); and Hans Hofer as assistant director. The script was supervised by the Camp Commandant Karl Rahm.

The Czech newsreel unit Aktualita with Ivan Fric and Cenek Zahradnicek as cameramen provided the equipment and crew. Filming took place between August 16 and September 11, 1944.

Gerron was closely supervised by the Nazis on every scene, but he never saw any of the developed footage nor played any role in assembling the film.

Some scenes were actually staged for the film, e.g. a swimming pool sequence. Others were shot outside the walls of the camp, with narration falsely stating that the inmates were allowed to participate in activities, e.g. the garden sequence. Only positive images and activities were depicted, making the camp appear to be a wonderful place to live.

The film is an insidious fraud, not only because of the distortions it created but because of the reality that it did not reveal – the misery, the hunger, the overcrowding, the high death rate, and the transports leaving for the death camps in the East.

On September 28, massive transports to Auschwitz began, including nearly all of those who participated in the production – the crew, actors and extras. On October 28, Gerron was deported in the last transport. He was gassed on arrival.

Nazi Film Propaganda

Propaganda is defined in Webster's dictionary as the spreading of ideas, information, or rumors for the purpose of helping or injuring an institution, a cause or a person.

THE FÜHRER GIVES A CITY TO THE JEWS represents an unusual form of propaganda because most of the scenes were staged for the camera and bore little or no resemblance to the reality of life in the camp. The participants were forced to collude while they were incarcerated by their Nazi captors. The actual scenes recorded by the camera and developed onto celluloid are a gross distortion.

It is important to note that almost all extant film footage of Jews in Germany or the countries occupied by the Nazis after September 1939 was taken by Nazi-controlled film agencies.

With the exception of a few independent amateur reels, Nazi footage of Jews and Jewish life during this period was taken by the Nazis specifically for propaganda purposes.

Commonly, negative stereotypes of Jews are depicted; cameras highlight Jews with hooked noses and slovenly appearance, money grabbing activities, lice-ridden homes and bizarre ritual practices.

What makes THE FÜHRER GIVES A CITY TO THE JEWS so unusual is that it is the only Nazi-produced film depicting Jews in a positive light. But there is something peculiar about this positiveness: the images the film

creates mirror the positive attributes of Aryans in Nazi ideology and propaganda – Jews appear as good-looking, robust, healthy, athletic, pure, natural, cultured and hard-working.

What makes this film so dangerous is that it was made for the express purpose of concealing the true character, not just of Terezín, but of all concentration camps. The misinformation it conveys has the potential of being used to deny that the Holocaust and the "Final Solution" – the destruction of six million Jews – ever happened.



Exploring and Comprehending the Film

In looking at any form of visual images, whether paintings, photographs, posters, film or videotape, educators find it useful to employ a number of distinct stages to explore the impact and message of the material. Three integrated and graduated stages employed are *description*, *analysis* and *interpretation*.

Description

Look at the images carefully and describe them exactly as they are seen. (Be careful not to interpret or make judgments at this stage.)

- What adjectives and phrases immediately come to mind?
- Describe the physical appearance (buildings, parks) and the characteristics of the population shown in this "paradise."

- Describe the work for men and women.
- Describe the activities for children.

Analysis

Examine how the producers have designed the impact of the images.

- What does the camera emphasize? What is omitted?
- What mood is created by the narration, sound track, lighting?
- What is the cumulative impact of the sequences?

Interpretation

Consider the message which has been conveyed by the visual and verbal information in the film. Apply the historical information you have gained about this period.

Who is sending the message? For whom is the message intended? What is the purpose of the message?

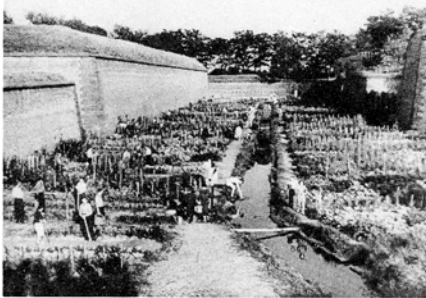
- How do images of Jews in this film compare with those in other Nazi films and media?
- Are there any indications that some scenes are staged?
- Why do you think the Nazis attributed Aryan traits to the Jews in the "paradise" ghetto?
- What effect will this film have if shown fifty years from now with no survivors alive to bear witness?
- How can one refute "revisionists" who maintain that this film documents the "true" story of what happened in the concentration camps?



Suggested Activities

"There were gardens, and we worked in them, but they were only to feed the SS. You could be deported for taking one potato."

Helga Weissová Hosková spent 2 1/2 years at Terezín (interview with Johanna Branson, October 1989.)



- This photograph is a blowup of a frame taken directly from the film. Describe, analyze and interpret this visual.
- Examine the drawing **Film and Reality** by Fritta featured on the cover of this guide. Compare this drawing with the film. How can you decide which to believe?
- In September 1990, after the capture of Kuwait, the Iraqi government released a video of Saddam Hussein holding young children on his lap while meeting with British citizens. Are there any similarities between the illusions created by the footage in **THE FÜHRER GIVES A CITY TO THE JEWS** and the visual images created by Hussein's government? How can you recognize images staged for the camera?
- Design a filmstrip or video using visual material, poetry, testimonies or writings which will provide an accurate view of life in Terezín.

The Massachusetts College of Art

is part of the State College system, and offers professional training at the undergraduate and graduate levels for artists, designers and educators.

621 Huntington Avenue,
Boston, MA 02115-5882
(617) 232-1555 ext 484 or 550

Facing History and Ourselves

provides training and resources to educators who want to use the study of the Holocaust to engage their students in critical thinking about how the lessons of history inform their moral choices today.

25 Kennard Road,
Brookline, MA 02146.
(617) 232-1595

The National Center for Jewish Film

is an archive, research facility and distribution center devoted to the gathering and preserving of film materials relevant to the Jewish experience.

Brandeis University,
Lown Building, Room 102,
Waltham, MA 02254-9110
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THE FÜHRER GIVES A CITY TO THE JEWS (*DER FÜHRER SCHENKT DEN JUDEN EINE STADT*)

Restored sequences and fragments,
23 minutes, black and white, sound,
German with English subtitles.
16mm film or VHS video

Educators interested in piloting the use of the film should contact the National Center for Jewish Film.

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Fritta Drawing, Courtesy of the State Jewish Museum, Prague, Czechoslovakia

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The
National Center
for
Jewish Film

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