CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“THE LAW OF WHAT CAN BE SAID”: THE ARCHIVE AND THEATRICAL PERFORMANCE IN THE TEREZÍN GHETTO

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One of the most famous definitions of “the archive” in twentieth-century scholarship was formulated by Michel Foucault: “The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events” (129). That is, every discipline operates according to rules that change over time and that define what statements are allowed to appear: what is and is not admissible evidence, what is and is not an acceptable conclusion to draw from that evidence. As historian Hayden White puts it, “Every discipline, I suppose, is … constituted by what it forbids its practitioners to do” (27).

How are the “laws of what can be said” manifesting themselves regarding the study of cultural activities by prisoners in the Nazi ghettos and camps? As Rebecca Rovit suggests, in disciplines such as historiography, cultural history, and Holocaust studies, “performing arts” and “concentration camp” are sometimes perceived as irreconcilable phenomena: “It defies our understanding to imagine concentration camp inmates singing, playing classical music, and dancing ... at the same time that cattle cars transported their fellow inmates toward Auschwitz. The grotesquerie of such events suggests frivolity and even sacrilege” (4).

1 Terezín, also known by its German name Theresienstadt, was founded by Habsburg emperor Joseph II as a fortress town in the late 1700s and is located approximately 40 miles northwest of Prague. After the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia, the part of the town within the walls of the “Large Fortress” served as a Jewish ghetto from November 24, 1941 until its liberation by Red Army troops on May 8 1945 (the Terezín “Small Fortress” served as a Gestapo prison).
This accusation of frivolity has been countered, and the cultural activities of the prisoners made worthy of scholarly attention, through their categorization as “spiritual resistance.” Such phrases, including variations such as “creative resistance,” “creative defiance,” and “triumph of the human spirit,” have been applied both critically and uncritically in a wide range of scholarship on art during the Holocaust. Rovit herself warns against “grasp[ing] onto the evocative, yet vague notion of a kind of ‘spiritual resistance,’” and the late Sybil H. Milton objected to “simplistic and vague identification of works with ‘spiritual resistance’” (9, 20). However, the continuing appeal of the label is clear: it pre-empts accusations of passivity, complicity or even collaboration. Thus, for those who believe that the prisoners’ artistic activities were valuable, the mere act of naming them resistance validates them.

This term, however, presents problems of its own. One, as Rovit and Milton both point out, is its vagueness. Many works on art during the Holocaust describe the prisoners’ activities and identify them as spiritual resistance, but leave untouched the question of how, specifically, they functioned as resistance. A more serious concern, however, is the possibility that the term may prevent some of the prisoners’ works from being included in the archive. What can be said about works that do not appear to be resistant? For example, those musical works from the World War II Jewish ghetto at Terezín that have been widely studied and performed tend to be those that contain an element of defiance and are thus easy to classify as resistant: Brundibár, where children defeat the black-moustached villain, The Emperor of Atlantis, where the tyrannical Emperor is forced to surrender to Death, and even Verdi’s Requiem, where the Day of Judgment is anticipated by the stirring lyrics “Nil inultum remanebit” (nothing will remain un-avenged). But what are scholars to do with works that provide evidence of other functions served by the prisoners’ art, such as the desire for temporary escape or the desire to give and experience pleasure? The invisibility of such statements in scholarship on art during the Holocaust, as opposed to their prevalence in collections

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of unpublished survivor testimony,\(^3\) begs the question: is the need to justify the prisoners’ art as resistance so powerful that the current “system that governs the appearance of statements” does not allow other statements to appear?

One way to address this invisibility is to try to craft a new definition of resistance, one simultaneously more specific (to avoid vagueness) and more inclusive (to acknowledge previously ignored functions of the prisoners’ art). However, I suggest that study of the prisoners’ artistic activities can be justified according to a different standard: the fact that the prisoners themselves believed that those activities had value. The reasons why the prisoners valued them can only be discovered through detailed examination of the content and context of the works, the ways the artistic activities might have affected them, and how exactly those effects were produced--questions that tend to be overlooked when the terms of discussion are defined by attempts to fit their activities to a particular definition of resistance.

Although common features may emerge in an examination of what the prisoners valued across different art forms and in different ghettos and camps, the most interesting answers to these questions can be found not by attempting to address all “prisoner art” during “the Holocaust” but through careful analysis of individual works within the particular circumstances of their creation.\(^4\) Judging by survivor statements regarding the specific art form and site to be addressed in this chapter, theatrical performance in the World War II Jewish ghetto at Terezín, the fact that many prisoners considered Terezín theatre to have value is beyond debate.\(^5\) But in order to

\(^3\) See, for example, the survivor testimony collected by the Terezín Memorial beginning in the 1960s, or the transcriptions of interviews conducted by Anna Hyndráková and Anna Lorencočvá for the Jewish Museum in Prague after 1989.


\(^5\) Numerous statements to this effect can be found in the collections of testimony mentioned above as well as in works published over a span of more than fifty years, ranging from a 1948 collection of reminiscences in honor of young Terezín director Gustav Schorsch to autobiographies published by survivors Jan Fischer, Zenka Ehrlich-Fantlová and František Miška in 1998, 2001 and 2002 respectively.
determine more specifically why and how it was so valuable to them, it is first necessary to look more closely at the specific features of both the site and the art form.

Regarding the site, although Terezín was certainly not the only Nazi institution where cultural activity took place, the specific conditions in which Terezín theatre arose gave it a particular character and enabled it to have exceptionally wide-spread effects among the prisoners. Most importantly, theatres in Terezín, unlike the orchestras of Auschwitz, did not play in the face of almost certain death. Terezín was a ghetto, not an extermination camp. Although thousands died there of “natural” causes such as hunger and disease, there were no gas chambers; prisoners were not confronted with the horror of mechanized mass murder. Based on what they knew, those who were young and healthy could reasonably hope to survive the war. Thus Terezín theatre did not function for the prisoners as a last gesture in defiance of death but rather as a way for them to make what they expected to be temporary imprisonment more bearable.

Secondly, theatre in Terezín did not have to be conducted in secrecy; it was allowed and even encouraged by the Nazi commanders of the ghetto. From the first official approval of Kamaradschaftabende [friendship evenings], casual variety show-type performances initiated by the prisoners for their own entertainment, to the founding of the Freizeitgestaltung [Office of Leisure Time Activities] as a branch of the ghetto’s Jewish Self-Government to organize, oversee and support theatre and other cultural activities, to the order to perform for the visiting

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6 Perhaps the best-known examples outside of Terezín are the orchestras at Auschwitz and the cabaret at Westerbork. For examinations of cultural activities in a wide range of Nazi institutions, see for example S. Gilbert, Music, Theatrical Performance, and Bořivoj Srba, “Divadlo za mřížemi” [Theater Behind Bars], Divadelní revue 1, 1995, 9-23.

7 With few exceptions, survivors emphasize the fact that they did not know about the death camps. Even Terezín leaders who received news of the gas chambers in Auschwitz apparently did not share the information with the prisoners for fear that it would cause panic and despair. See, for example, the case of rabbi Dr. Leo Baeck in Ruth Bondy, Elder of the Jews: Jakob Edelstein of Theresienstadt, trans. Evelyn Abel, New York: Grove Press, 1989, 374.

8 Official approval was granted in the Terezín “Daily Orders” on December 28, 1941. See the archives of the Jewish Museum of Prague, inventory number 101588/19.

9 A report on the Freizeitgestaltung written in Terezín by Rabbi Erich Weiner has been anthologized in Ulrike Migdal, Und die Musik spielt dazu: Chansons und Satiren aus dem KZ Theresienstadt, [And the Music Plays On: Chansons and
commission of the International Red Cross in the summer of 1944, performance played an official role in the life of the ghetto. Given this status, theatrical performance could take place on a wide scale.

Thirdly, although there were specific examples of “command performances” ordered by the Nazis, theatre in Terezín was for the most part organized on the prisoners’ own initiative. Thus, in spite of a certain degree of censorship and self-censorship, the works performed can be considered largely the result of their own expressive choices. Even on the occasion of the visit of the International Red Cross commission in June of 1944, delegates were taken to performances of works which had long been in the prisoners’ repertoire, such as Verdi’s *Requiem* and the children’s opera *Brundibár*.

In addition to considering the specific conditions of Terezín, it is necessary to examine the particular nature of theatre as an art form in order to try to explain just how it created the effects that survivors say were so valuable to them. One of the fundamental qualities of theatre is its ability to offer both actors and audience forms of experience that they cannot have in their “real” lives outside the theatre. In the case of Terezín I will argue that, although the prisoners had little control over the ghetto environment, theatre functioned as a site where they could exert control over their own experience. They exercised this control in ways that can be divided into two separate but somewhat overlapping categories: by representing and reinterpreting the “reality” of the ghetto, and by creating experiences for themselves which had little to do with that reality.

To analyze how this was possible, it is necessary to consider the nature of both “reality” and “experience.” According to the theory of social constructionism, reality itself is not an objective fact but rather a common understanding of the world, an understanding that is socially constructed. People form a notion of “reality” based on their perceptions of the world around them, and when they interact, they share their respective perceptions of reality. If these perceptions are closely enough related, their common understanding of reality becomes reinforced to the point where it appears to be objective. This social consensus regarding

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“what is really going on” determines people’s actions, whether the shared perception of reality is objectively “true” or not. In a similar way, individuals’ and groups’ “experience” is not just a set of events that happen to them, but is determined by the specific ways in which they intersect with socially constructed reality and especially by their perception of what their interaction with that reality means. As Teresa de Laurentis defines it, “experience” is the process by which “one places oneself or is placed in social reality” (159). This tension between “placing oneself” and “being placed” means that experience, like reality, is also to a large degree socially constructed, especially since one’s relationship to events and their meaning is often formulated in the process of creating narratives to communicate them to each other. In fact, experience continues to be constructed long after the original event has passed. As we receive new information about a past event, remember or forget particular aspects of it, and recount it in different ways for different audiences over time, the meaning of the event evolves and thus our experience of it changes.

But experience is not only generated by the intersection of humans with their social reality. For example, within the theater, experience is generated based on a socially constructed non-reality that exists within but separate from social reality. Because actors and audience participate together in “social contracts” that must be fulfilled for theatre to exist—the consensus that what is happening on stage is not “real,” and the agreement to “suspend disbelief” and accept it as if it were true—they share in the construction of an event that, even though all know it is not “real,” can be exceptionally vivid because it is experienced, and can later be recalled and re-experienced, collectively. Exploiting this socially-reinforcing aspect of theater, Terezín prisoners could stage interpretations of ghetto events that everyone knew were not “true,” that is, that could not be reconciled with the “social reality” of the ghetto, but yet could affect their social perceptions of that reality. They could also construct forms of experience that had little in common with their present “reality” by bringing into the

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13 For example, in Terezín, various “realities” supported by Nazi disinformation efforts were constructed around the outgoing transports: they were going to a work camp, “to the east,” or simply into the unknown. Clues received by the prisoners regarding the actual events at Auschwitz conflicted so radically with what they thought was possible that it could not be incorporated into their notions of reality. Therefore people continued to base their decisions on the socially accepted reality, sometimes volunteering for transports in an attempt to join loved ones who had already been “sent east” or in hopes that the conditions would be better than in Terezín.
ghetto elements of their common pre-war past and by creating projections of a hoped-for post-war future.

Second Czech Cabaret

To engage more closely with the question of why Terezín theatre was valued by the prisoners, let us turn to the performance text *II. Český kabaret* [Second Czech Cabaret], written by Dr. Felix Porges, Vítěslav “Pídla” Horpatzky and Pavel Weisskopf and performed by the authors and seven additional cast members in the spring or summer of 1944. This text is full of elements that might be excluded from a discourse driven by the notion of spiritual resistance, since it is often difficult to interpret them as defiance. However, it is exactly these elements that provide the most interesting clues about how performance helped the prisoners deal with the conditions of their captivity.

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14 Two versions of this text are extant, both entitled *Second Czech Cabaret*. The later version (according to events mentioned in the text, written in May or June 1944) on which my analysis is based is in the possession of Mrs. Hana Lojínová (formerly Hanka Ledererová) who danced in the cabaret. An earlier version (as an April Fool’s Day joke indicates, written in early April 1944) is in the possession of Mr. Zdeněk Prokeš, son of two Terezín cast members: JUDr. Felix Porges (co-author and performer) and Elly Bernstein (singer and dancer). I am grateful to Mrs. Lojínová for sharing with me the later version, and to the Prokeš family and Mr. Pavel Stránský for permission to quote from the cabaret.

15 Dr. Felix Porges (after the war, Prokeš), born February 15, 1913, died January 15, 1982, was a doctor of law. He was transported from Prague to Terezín on December 4, 1941. He and his fellow cabaret performer Elly Bernstein (born September 7, 1917, died January 29, 1975), met in Terezín and were married there on December 26, 1943. Both remained in the ghetto until it was liberated by the Red Army on May 8, 1945. They are survived by three sons.

16 Vítěslav Horpatzky (sometimes spelled Horpaczký or Horpatsky), born February 11, 1904, was transported from Prague to Terezín on December 4, 1941. He was transported from Terezín to Auschwitz on October 28, 1944 and subsequently perished.

17 Pavel Weisskopf, born June 7, 1906, was transported from Prague to Terezín on December 4, 1941. He was transported from Terezín to Auschwitz on September 28, 1944 and subsequently perished.

18 Although the cabaret text itself did not come to light until the summer of 2005, scholars were aware of its existence based on a fellow prisoner’s notes for an article on Terezín cabaret. See Josef Taussig, “O terezínských kabarettech” [On Terezín Cabarets] in: *Terezínské Studie a Dokumenty 2001*, ed. Miroslav Kárný, Jaroslova Milotová and Eva Lorencová, Praha: Academia, 2001, 310-46, at p. 331-34.
The structure of the cabaret provides an ideal milieu in which the performers can both confront and escape from the reality of the ghetto: in all but the first and last few scenes, they address the audience from the post-war future. After a brief introduction and an opening song that ends with the couplet, “In conclusion we want to say / Nothing less and nothing more: / Let a happy-end indeed / Happen to all” (2), the performers symbolically produce that happy ending. Porges (F.P.) and Horpatzky (P.H.) enter in front of a backdrop representing Wenceslas Square in the centre of Prague with newspapers in their hands, and immediately separate themselves and the audience from the Terezín present:

P.H. (reading): New maximum prices: pork 13 crowns 45 hellers, white bread 25 hellers. You know, dear colleague, such things weren’t even to be read in Terezín, there the most-read section was the lost and found. Do you remember? (3)

Once Horpatzky has literally put the ghetto in the past tense, most of the numbers in the cabaret are set in an unspecified future time when the duo and their friends from Terezín have returned to Prague and are not only surviving but thriving. An even greater separation in time takes place in the third-to-last number (hereafter called the “park sketch”), set so far in the future that a man who notices the yellow star on “retiree” Horpatzky’s coat does not even know what it means.

Re-writing the reality of the ghetto

Once this separation from the Terezín present has been established, how does the cabaret intersect with the reality of the ghetto? The particular structure the performers have created, that of looking back upon Terezín as a past experience, gives them extraordinary power over its interpretation. If experience is a construct, by restaging Terezín they are re-constructing their experiences and enabling them to mean something different. Again, the question of whether that interpretation is “true” or not is irrelevant. Those acts of reconstruction, even if they did not change material conditions in Terezín, had potentially real effects upon the prisoners. Employing different theatrical techniques, the performers engaged with everyday material and psychological hardships and with the most extraordinary and traumatic events in the history of the ghetto.

19 The reference to price controls may reflect the hope of many young Czech Jews that a socialist or even communist government would run Czechoslovakia after the war.
A constant preoccupation in Terezín was hunger. This preoccupation is reflected in the cabaret through the performers’ frequent discussions of food in the post-Terezín future they inhabit, and the way they “remember” their hunger in Terezín. For example, in the first dialogue set in the “future,” Porges refers to both:

F.P.: ... But listen, how everything has changed since then, it’s hardly to be believed, most of all the people. For example that peculiar fellow, what was his name, yes, that Federer, how he scrambled for an extra helping of food\(^\text{20}\) there, even though there was only barley, now of course he only goes to Šroubek’s\(^\text{21}\) and when they only have 48 dishes on the menu he loses his temper because they don’t have that 49th dish, just the one he has a taste for. (3)

In this passage, Federer’s hunger is made a thing of the past; he can now afford to be choosy at the most exclusive establishments. This theme recurs again and again in the cabaret, with the duo visiting or planning to visit various expensive restaurants that would have been well-known to those familiar with pre-war Prague and ordering the richest food, the best cognac and the finest cigarettes. Thus, while the performers allow their audience to imagine the pleasure of post-war indulgence, they also “look back” on present-day hardships in a humorous light.

Another physical hardship in Terezín was extreme overcrowding. This resulted in the shortage not only of food but of water, which had far-reaching effects on sanitation in the ghetto. Ordinary hygiene activities like bathing were regulated with a ticket system, and prisoners sometimes waited up to two months for their turn (Adler 97). This shortage is satirized in a dialogue where Porges and Horpatzky “look back” at the administration of cultural activities in Terezín:

P.H.: ... Those doormen in the theatre were so helpful.
F.P.: Yes, but once they threw you out, I remember that.

\(^{20}\) The Czech word used in the cabaret, náchšup (also spelled nášup), is derived from the German word Nachschub, “extra portion.”

\(^{21}\) U Šroubků was a large, elegant and popular restaurant inside the Grand Hotel Šroubek on Wenceslas Square. The hotel still exists and has been renamed Hotel Evropa.
P.H.: Well, you have to say it right in front of all these people; you are a scandalmonger. It happened that time when they played Smetana’s *Vltava*, I wanted to go to there on my bath ticket. Horpatzky’s attempts to gain admission to the performance using his bath ticket rather than a concert ticket actually emphasize the shortage of both. The joke is comically ambiguous regarding his motivation: is he so desperate to bathe that he will settle for even symbolic proximity to water, or does he want so much to attend a cultural event that he will attempt to use any kind of ticket to gain admission?

The cabaret contains numerous additional examples of jokes regarding the physical hardships of the ghetto. Those dealing with psychological hardships are just as common; judging by the extent to which the cabaret occupies itself with these questions, it was clearly an issue of concern to the prisoners. In the performers’ hands it also became a rich source for comedy.

One of the most disturbing things for prisoners to deal with was, for many, the sudden change in social status. Those who were used to wealth and power had in many cases been stripped of both and were confronted by a radical shift in the social order. Importance was now based on different standards: those who could obtain or provide access to food and protection from outgoing transports were considered the “royalty” of the ghetto. Porges and Horpatzky get a great deal of comic mileage out of one of these groups: the Terezín cooks. For example, the joke quoted above about Federer continues:

F.P.: All the same he had to wait a long time before his most longed-for desire was met, in Terezín it wasn’t fulfilled, not until now.
P.H.: What wish?
F.P.: To finally get to know one of the female cooks. But now it just doesn’t have the same appeal as before. (3)

Also unsettling was the new “ethical reality” in Terezín. Although violent crime among the prisoners was by all accounts almost nonexistent, many jokes in the cabaret are based on frustrations with issues such as nepotism and other forms of favouritism, and with minor crimes such as bribery and theft, widespread in the desperate circumstances of the ghetto. Terezín was not without its own moral code. For example, stealing from German supplies was not considered wrong, stealing from common

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22 “*Vltava***” (the name of longest river in the Czech lands, known in German as the Moldau) is perhaps the best-known work in Czech composer Bedřich Smetana’s cycle of symphonic poems entitled *Má vlast* [My Homeland].
property such coal heaps was frowned upon but human, but “stealing from a roommate, from the personal belongings of a ghetto inmate, was disgraceful” (Bondy 304). But those who did not have access to German stores or common property through their employment as cooks, baggage inspectors, etc., or who did not receive extra rations for filling important positions in the ghetto administration occasionally took matters into their own hands. In an anecdote from the “park sketch,” set even farther in the future than the rest of the cabaret, the character of the “retiree,” played by Horpatzky, tries to explain the trials of ghetto life to a much younger “gentleman” played by Porges:

P.H.: ... That person was hungry, he wasn’t the manager of any provisions office, he didn’t have an uncle as one of the eldest and he wasn’t even just a community elder,\(^{23}\) so he went somewhere [to ask for food], there they didn’t give him anything, so he just took it, and that was the releasing of the inhibitions. Do you understand that now? (11)

Although such blatant stealing was clearly wrong by pre-war standards, and even condemned by ghetto standards if the food belonged to a fellow prisoner, the sketch reveals a certain amount of sympathy for the person who could not obtain a larger portion in a “legal” manner.

This self-critical approach could have benefited the prisoners by allowing them to express, in a comic way, the tension between their own behaviour in the ghetto and their pre-war moral standards. Since this behaviour was represented not as the new order of things but as part of the abnormal “reality” of Terezín which would end as soon as they were liberated, the prisoners could reassure themselves that basic moral values had not been forgotten but had merely been put “on hold” in the crisis situation of the ghetto.

As the above examples demonstrate, Terezín cabaret was a place where prisoners could express and relieve their fears and frustrations by converting them into comedy. Although the jokes obviously had no impact on material conditions in the ghetto and minimal if any impact on people’s behaviour outside of the theatre, I argue that the ability to reconstruct a negative experience by turning it into a source of laughter provided the prisoners with moments of desperately needed psychological relief.

The hardships described above, although they could at times be life-threatening, can be classified in relative terms as part of the prisoners’

\(^{23}\) The title “elder” was given to prisoners in leadership positions in the ghetto. The so-called Jewish self-government was named the Ältestenrat, the “Council of Elders.”
daily life; they were ongoing to such an extent that they could be incorporated in the “social reality” of the ghetto. But other events, those associated with the trauma of leaving Terezín and of confrontation with the unknown, created a rupture in the rhythms of ghetto life. The cabaret portrays even these events, confronting the greater threat with a more aggressive re-writing of their meaning. However, their aggression takes an unusual form: the symbolic claiming of agency during events over which they had no control.

For example, on November 11, 1943, due to suspicions that the Council of Elders had manipulated population records in order to cover evidence of escapes, Nazi commandant Anton Burger ordered a census of the ghetto. Almost 40,000 people were forced to stand in formation the entire day on a field outside the ghetto walls, not sure if they were to be counted or killed. How is this event portrayed in the cabaret? After another performer sings a well-known folk song, “Na těch panských lukách” [On the Lord’s Meadows], about finding a golden ducat and trying to decide how to spend it, the two comedians banter:

P.H.: You’re in a good mood. But did you know that in Terezín we also had a lord’s meadow?
F.P.: I didn’t know about that.
P.H.: It was called Bauschowitz Hollow. There was a great meeting there, a kind of beautiful mass action.
F.P.: Aha, I know, there was that All-Sokol rally.24 (4)

Through this exchange the census, which according to survivor testimony was a terrifying experience, is robbed of its dangerous qualities. First of all, by calling it a “beautiful mass action” and an “all-Sokol rally,” the performers take the event out of the realm of the incomprehensible and place it within a frame of reference that all Czech Jews would have been familiar with. But the comparison also de-emphasizes the prisoners’ own suffering and powerlessness; participation in a Sokol rally would have

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24 The gymnastics and fitness association Sokol [Falcon], established during the Czech movement for national emancipation in the late 1800s, performs mass displays of choreographed exercises. The first Sokol chapter was founded in Prague in 1861. The first rally, where members of various chapters, including those founded by Czech emigres in other countries, performed together, occurred in 1882. Rallies were suspended during World Wars I and II and Sokol itself ceased to exist after the Communists came to power in Czechoslovakia in 1948. It was renewed after 1990. The most recent all-Sokol rally took place in Prague in the summer of 2006.
been pleasant and above all voluntary. By reinterpreting the census as Sokol rally, the performers symbolically reconstruct the experience of the census, retroactively placing it within the prisoners’ control.

More terrifying than the one-time event of the census was the prospect of transport. Although, according to most prisoner testimony, the exact nature of the outgoing transports was unknown until the very end of the war, they were a constant source of anxiety, “hanging over our heads like swords of Damocles” (Fantlová 235). In the space of the cabaret, such an extraordinary threat required confrontation by an even more aggressive weapon, one that falls even further outside the usual notions of spiritual resistance: trivialization. In the “park sketch” Horpatzky’s “retiree” describes a long search for the hypothetical prisoner Josef Novák that ends in the news that he has left the ghetto:

P.H.: ... that Josef Novák ... left by transport.
F.P.: You mean maybe by train or by car.
P.H.: No, transport.
F.P.: What is that for a means of transportation?
P.H.: Transport, that was a magic word. Children weren’t afraid there 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 kind and obedient; it’s not surprising, since only selected people were allowed to leave by such a transport. (15)

Not only do the authors minimize the threat of transports, which divided families and sent people off into an unknown from which few returned, by portraying them as something to scare children, but they compare them with other threats the prisoners knew to be imaginary: the bogey-man and witches. And in the final reversal, by making inclusion in the transports a reward to be competed for rather than a punishment to be avoided at all costs, they impose an unusual form of symbolic control over a process in which all the prisoners were ultimately helpless: they claim, even for children, the agency of action based on desire, rather than portraying them as passive victims of the selection process.

By transforming hardship into pleasure, the strange into the familiar, and victimization into mastery, the cabaret reconstructed the experience of ghetto life. Even though the reconstruction was temporary, the experience that took place within the theatre may have had long-lasting effects even outside of it. Perhaps by incorporating the unfamiliar new “reality” within their own frameworks of meaning, by divesting events of their power to terrify, even by taking symbolic ownership of acts that were forced upon them, prisoners protected themselves from becoming paralyzed by fear,
helplessness and hopelessness, emotions that contributed to the all-too-real phenomena of insanity and suicide in the ghetto.

**Creating a “reality” outside the ghetto**

Terezín theatre may have created similar protective effects through techniques that exploit another potential of theatre: the ability to provide experiences that cannot be had in “reality.” Perhaps the most obvious was inherent in the very structure of the performance. By projecting actors and audience into the post-Terezín future, the cabaret provided them with a way to experience a fervently desired outcome: their own survival. It also created additional, more specific effects through its manipulation of time. By bringing the cultural forms of the past into the ghetto and by projecting their survival even after the war, the cabaret allowed the prisoners to enjoy previous pleasures and look forward to a future worth surviving for.

The very existence of the cabaret brought a specific Czech cultural form from the past, well-known to the prisoners from the interwar period, into the ghetto: the Second Czech Cabaret is very clearly modeled on the tremendously popular Liberated Theatre of Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich. This resemblance comes through especially prominently in the duo’s comic misunderstandings based on acoustically equivalent Czech phrases and in jokes based on Czech surnames that have a literal meaning. For example, as Horpatzky’s character concludes his description of Terezín at the end of the “park sketch,” both techniques are combined when Horpatzky mistakes Porges’s introduction, “I am Nevečerel,” for the name’s literal meaning “I have not eaten” (here translated, in an attempt to preserve the joke, as “I am Hungry”):

P.H.: ... Allow me to introduce myself. I am Vyktálenej.
F.P.: I’m pleased to meet you, I am Hungry.
P.H.: Me too, let’s go somewhere for dinner.
F.P.: I already ate, but I’m Hungry.
P.H.: Well, if I’m hungry too, let’s go.
F.P.: But you don’t understand me, I’ve already eaten.
P.H.: So are you hungry, or have you already eaten?

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25 Taussig mentions Porges and Horpatzky’s cabaret as one of three Czech cabarets in Terezin that “knew and admired the Liberated Theater.”
26 For example, in their 1933 play Osel a stín [The Donkey and the Shadow], Voskovec and Werich “Greekified” the Czech surnames Nejezchleba (literally, “do not eat bread”) and Skočdopole (literally, “jump into the field”) to comic effect as “Nejezchleboš” and “Skočdopolis.”
27 This name in Czech means “sly.”
F.P.: I already ate, but I’m Hungry.
P.H.: Listen, it looks to me like you would have fit right into that crazy-house. (18)

The sheer silliness of the jokes and the recollection of past enjoyment may have provided the prisoners with an experience uncommon in their daily lives in the ghetto: a moment of fun. In addition, the audience’s pleasure in this familiar form of wordplay may have been intensified by a carefully concealed element of defiance: the Liberated Theatre took a strong stand against fascism, satirizing Hitler’s rise to power and right-wing elements in the Czechoslovak government. The cabaret also brought music from pre-war Czech culture into “the future.” Except for a few songs written by Porges and his collaborator Pavel Stránský in the ghetto itself, the performers sing works which would have been pleasurably familiar to the members of the audience: folk songs, popular songs, and opera arias by Czech composers. Interestingly, all three of the pre-war musical interludes in the cabaret are connected with nostalgia regarding experiences in Terezín. In one, the Terezín singer himself has survived and is performing the same favourite folk songs after the war. In the second, a performance of opera arias is introduced by the duo’s fond recollections of the Terezín premiere of Bedřich Smetana’s opera *The Bartered Bride*: 29

P.H.: ... [T]hose were still beautiful and touching moments, when for the first time in a long time we again heard *The Bartered Bride*.
F.P.: You’re right, that was some kind of spiritual escape attempt, I would call it....

In the third, the duo watch as Terezín singer Karel Berman, portrayed in “the future” as a member of the Czechoslovak National Opera, performs

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28 Pavel Stránský was transported from Prague to Terezín on December 4, 1941 and from Terezín to Auschwitz on December 18, 1943, but is still named in the spring 1944 scripts as co-author of the song lyrics. Stránský survived and now lives in Prague; he has two sons and four grandchildren.
29 This work, commonly referred to as the “Czech national opera,” was directed by Terezín prisoner Rafael Schächter. The premiere took place in late November 1942 and it was performed approximately thirty-five times (Karas 24).
30 The word used for “escape attempt” here is the German *Fluchtversuch*, a term that would have been familiar to the prisoners due to the Nazis’ intensive efforts to prevent such attempts. For example, Adler quotes from documents that had to be signed by each *Zimmerältester* [room elder] in the prisoners’ quarters to confirm that any absences had been explained and that there was no reason for *Fluchtverdacht* [suspicion of an escape attempt] (317).
favourite pre-war songs by Czech composers. Not only do these performances allow the audience to re-experience past sources of pleasure; by anticipating enjoying them after the war, they implicitly predict the survival of Czech culture and thus the failure of the German drive toward both military and cultural domination.

Indulgence in the pleasure of pre-war forms, I argue, cannot be dismissed as a trivial exercise in escapism or entertainment. Perhaps these cultural forms served as a way to re-establish continuity in the face of radical dislocation: by bringing them into the ghetto, the prisoners could ameliorate the traumatic break in their lives caused by their deportation and imprisonment. In addition, by using these familiar forms to project that continuity into the future, a future that very much resembled their past, the prisoners represented the consequences of their years in Terezín as so insignificant that they have barely caused a ripple in the smooth flow of their pre-into post-war lives. By demoting Terezín to the status of a bizarre incident, a “crazy-house,” a temporary and somewhat surreal detour in the trajectory of the real lives to which they would return, they symbolically bridged the gap between their past and future. By selecting certain ghetto experiences as ones they might remember fondly, they wove even Terezín itself into a unified narrative projecting their own survival.

The end of the cabaret

The final two numbers of the show, like the first two, take place in the prisoners’ here and now. Porges symbolically returns from the future represented in the “park sketch” to the present by opening the penultimate dialogue with a reference to the place and time of the cabaret itself: “Well I’ll tell you, Pidla, today’s cabaret went really well” (14). In the closing couplet, the ghetto is presented not as a memory but as a joke:

That’s all, already that place
belongs to history
what more should we say?
It passed without disaster,
we’ll say, the devil took it,
each judge for himself.
Why hardly anyone will believe it,

31 Karel Berman was born on April 14, 1919. He was deported to Terezín on March 6, 1943 and from Terezín to Auschwitz on September 28, 1944. He survived and in the year 1953 fulfilled the prediction of the cabaret by becoming a member of the opera of the National Theater in Prague. He died August 11, 1995.
that a person could live like that at all,
When, afterwards, in 100 years
the whole world will read about it
they will only laugh. (14)

But before the longed-for future could arrive, the Terezín present
would have to come to an end. This end is even represented, quite
telegraphically, in the “park sketch.” When Porges’s character asks
Horpatzky as the “retiree” why he didn’t escape from the ghetto, he replies
simply “That wasn’t necessary, it was dissolved” (18). Ultimately the
ghetto was dissolved, but the couplet’s prediction was not fulfilled: it did
not “pass without disaster.” In September of 1944, mass transports from
Terezín began that sent over 18,000 people, including Pidla Horpatzky, to
Auschwitz, and the vast majority to their deaths. In April of 1945, just
weeks before the ghetto was liberated by the Red Army on May 8,
prisoners from the death marches, starved, ill, and with horrific stories of
their experiences, began to arrive at Terezín. As singer Hedda Grab related
in her post-war testimony: “... Now we recognized the reality, and from
this day forward all singing, playing and distracting ourselves stopped. We
just didn’t feel like singing anymore” (qtd. in Adler 594).

Considering the fate of most of the Terezín prisoners, it is possible to
understand why words like “pleasure” and “escapism” can seem so
hopelessly trivial, and how questions such as “ought one to have produced
art in the dire circumstances of the Holocaust?” can be posed (Rovit 9).
Yet attempting to look at Terezín and Terezín culture from the pre-
Auschwitz vantage point of the prisoners is, I argue, not only of great
scholarly value but an ethical imperative. We do the survivors, and those
who did not survive, a great injustice if our laws of what can be said,
shaped by the horror of what happened to the prisoners deported “to the
east,” close down inquiry into the ways in which they experienced
Terezín, and into the ways they employed theatre in their attempts to
represent, interpret, and shape that experience. If an examination of those
attempts reveals evidence of functions that do not match our notions of
“spiritual resistance,” then perhaps it is not the prisoners’ actions but
rather our definition of that term, or rather the archival systems that
require the prisoners’ actions to be validated by that term in order for
statements about them to appear, that must be called into question.
Works Cited


Porges, Felix, Vítěslav Horpatzky and Pavel Weisskopf. *II. český kabaret* [Second Czech Cabaret]. Unpublished manuscript, 1944 (?).
