HOLOCAUST
More than sixty years after the end of World War II, a surprising find has given us new insight into the World War II Jewish ghetto at Terezín (in German, Theresienstadt): newly rediscovered theatrical works, written by the prisoners themselves. Eleven of these works, written by Czechoslovak and Austrian Jews, were recently published in a bilingual Czech-German edition by Akropolis press (www.akropolis.info/terezin). The revised and expanded English-language edition, Performing Captivity, Performing Escape: Cabarets and Plays from the Terezín/Theresienstadt Ghetto, will appear in English in 2011. The edition includes essays about the plays and extensive footnoting to explain historical features of the texts that refer to the ghetto itself and the prisoners’ prewar lives, but most interesting of all are the plays themselves: they reveal how, on the stages of the ghetto, the prisoners struggled to preserve aspects of normal prewar life—even in such an abnormal environment—and to represent the events and conditions of Terezín in a way that made their experiences more bearable.

Terezín played a prominent role in Nazi propaganda as a “model ghetto,” displayed to a visiting Commission of the International Red Cross in June 1944, to deceive the world about the true nature of the Final Solution. Although it is well known that “command performances” took place during this inspection—for example, the Commission viewed a concert and a performance of the children’s opera Brundibár—the cultural life of the ghetto did not emerge on Nazi orders. In fact, the vast majority of the cultural events in the ghetto were initiated by the prisoners, for the prisoners. Just weeks after the ghetto was founded, in December 1941, the Terezín daily orders reveal that the prisoners’ request to hold “friendship evenings,” gatherings where the prisoners performed songs and sketches for one another, was granted. As the cultural activities expanded, they were supported by a new branch of the so-called Jewish self-government, the Freizeitgestaltung—the Office for Leisure Time Activities.
Figure 8.1
The SS, although all the activities of the *Freizeitgestaltung* were ultimately under their control, rarely interfered with performances. As long as Terezin’s most important function continued—the transport of European Jews to the ghetto and then from the ghetto to the extermination and slave labor camps—and that function remained concealed from the prisoners to avoid a possible uprising, they had little interest in the day-to-day operations of the ghetto. Therefore the prisoners were allowed to establish the cultural life and other social institutions from their prewar lives as well. For example, the briefest sketch in the collection, a five-page comedy, satirizes one of the more unusual institutions in Terezín: the civil court, which dealt with private conflicts between ghetto residents. In June of 1944, the Nazis put many of these institutions on display for the visiting commission in order to create a convincing picture of Terezín as an “independent Jewish settlement.” The commission, however, was not told about the thousands of people who had been sent away in outgoing transports or the 33,000 prisoners who died in the ghetto itself. Of approximately 140,000 mostly Central European Jews who were transported to Terezín, only about 20,000 survived the ghetto and later concentration camps.

Some of the survivors who remained in Terezín until the end of the war managed to preserve plays they had written; in other cases, surviving authors or their friends reconstructed the texts immediately after the war. These preserved scripts began to come to light in the spring of 2006, when I was conducting my dissertation research on Czechoslovak survivor testimony about the cultural life of the Terezín ghetto. Although some were held in archives in Israel and the Czech Republic, survivors of the ghetto and their families helped me locate additional texts that were still in private collections. For example, a meeting with Zdeněk Prokeš, the son of Terezín survivors, led to a stunning discovery: his father, Dr. Felix Porges, had preserved an entire private collection of texts he and his wife, Elly Bernstein, had performed in the ghetto. Both his parents were bilingual, and in addition to staging their own Czech-language productions, they had performed in the German-language cabaret of Dr. Leo Strauss.

Works by Strauss have been published before in collections, such as Ulrike Migdal’s *Und die Musik spielt dazu* and Tania Golden, Alexander Wächter and Sergey Dreznin’s *Chansons und Satiren aus Theresienstadt*, but the verses and songs in Mr. Prokeš’s possession were previously unknown. Strauss and his wife (and fellow performer) Myra Strauss-Gruhenberg began participating actively in the cultural life
Figure 8.2
of the ghetto shortly after their deportation from Vienna in January 1942. In addition to writing and performing in their own cabarets, the Strauss-Ensemble and the Literarische Strauss-Brettl, they participated, often together, in staged readings of German-language plays. Strauss was also involved in the cabaret Carousel, run by famous German-Jewish actor Kurt Gerron. Perhaps the couple’s most important work in the ghetto, however, was their nostalgic recreation of works in the Viennese tradition, performed as a social service in the homes for the elderly and the sick. According to survivor testimony, these performances brought a few hours of desperately needed relief to the most miserable prisoners in Terezín.

The Czech-language works in the Porges collection are also cabaret-style texts, but based on specifically Czech rather than Viennese models. According to a surviving co-author of the Radio Program, several young men who lived together in the same barracks contributed scenes to the program in order to “celebrate” a year of working together in the ghetto. Modeled on radio broadcasts from prewar Czechoslovakia, the program includes a wide range of satirical scenes: international news, programs of agricultural advice, fitness and exercise programs, a “children’s hour” in the form of an ironic fable about the ghetto based on the story of Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, and an account of an international soccer game, in imitation of famous Jewish sports commentator Josef Laufer.

A second full-length text, the Second Czech Cabaret, was based closely on the prewar style of the renowned Czech comic duo Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich. The text was preserved in two separate versions: one by Dr. Porges, and another by Hana Lojínová, née Ledererová, who received it from Porges in Terezín for her role as a dancer in the show. The cabaret contains vital clues not only about living conditions in Terezín, but also about how prisoners used performance to manipulate their own experience of those conditions. For example, the performers ironically minimized dangerous occurrences by recalling them as pleasant events in which they participated voluntarily; in one darkly comic scene they represented transports leaving Terezín, one of the most feared aspects of life in the ghetto, as a privilege for which the prisoners competed. They also projected their own recovery from the traumatic experience of life in the ghetto by staging future moments of nostalgia for Terezín: the cabaret is set several years in the future, when Porges and Horpatzky and their friends have returned to Prague and are able to look back from a safe distance at their years
in the ghetto. Thus, the wish expressed in the opening song, “Let a happy-end indeed / Happen to all,” was fulfilled symbolically upon the stage: the actors performed their own survival.

Another Czech-language work, the play Prince Bettliegend, written by Josef Lustig, was also closely based on the work of Voskovec and Werich. No complete version of the play has been discovered, but the song lyrics by František Kowanitz, set to beloved melodies by Voskovec and Werich’s composer, Jaroslav Ježek, but tailored to the ghetto, have been published before in Czech-language works on the ghetto, for example in Ludmila Vrkočová’s Rekviem sami sobě. In the new edition, survivor testimony has enabled at least a partial reconstruction of the plot. For example, one survivor explained that, in the ghetto, the term bettliegend indicated a person who was officially designated as ill and therefore did not have to work—and, more importantly, was also exempt from outgoing transports. Terezín doctors would sometimes assign this designation even to a healthy prisoner in order to protect a friend or family member, or in return for a bribe. The authors of Prince Bettliegend, as survivors recall, satirized this kind of favoritism and many other aspects of ghetto life, from the bedbugs and fleas that plagued the prisoners to the jumbled German-Czech jargon of the ghetto.

Another Czech-language text, Smoke of Home, presents a much more devastating picture of the prisoners’ fate. The manuscript of this historical drama by Zdeněk Eliáš and Jiří Stein, about four imprisoned soldiers during the Thirty Years’ War, was discovered in the spring of 2006, after my interview with the late professor, Dr. Jiří Franěk. Based on his description, I contacted Zdeněk Eliáš’s widow in the U.S., Kate Elias, who found the manuscript among her late husband’s papers. In the play, the prisoners share their longing for home and their dreams of life after the war, but those hopes are cruelly dashed when, at the very moment they learn that the war has ended, they also discover that their homes have been completely destroyed by the battling armies. Surviving friends of the authors agree that the play was never performed in the ghetto; the Terezín public needed hope above all else, and the ending of Smoke of Home was too dismal for the prisoners to bear.

Puppet plays have also been preserved, written for, and sometimes written by, the youngest prisoners of Terezín. For example, a German-language puppet play, The Treasure, by Arthur Engländer, who was deported to Terezín with his wife and daughter in January 1942, has been preserved in the archives of the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memo-
Figure 8.3
Engländer was a Zionist who spent several years in Palestine but who returned with his family to Prague in the 1930s. In Engländer’s puppet play, the children, Liese and Wendelin, and the clown, Kasperle, travel to Africa in search of a treasure, live with an Arabic-speaking tribe, and return to Europe with a discovery that saves even the poorest from hunger: the potato.

A Czech-language puppet play, *Looking for a Monster*, was written by Hanuš Hachenburg and has been preserved in the Terezín Memorial. Hachenburg, only 13 years old when he was deported to Terezín, was a frequent contributor to the weekly magazine *Vedom* (We Lead), produced in the youth home where he lived with other 13- to 15-year-old boys. Hachenburg’s script is much darker than *The Treasure,* the young author created an allegorical world in which the bones of the elderly are collected as raw material, Death is enslaved by a dictator, and the characters become increasingly brutal, trapped in a vicious circle of escalating violence and absurdity. The play, like *Smoke of Home,* was apparently never performed in Terezín. Hachenburg was deported in December 1943, to the Terezín family camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau, where he perished.

Another remarkable text, a German-language *Purimspiel,* was preserved in Israel in the archives at Beit Terezín in Givat Chayim. This text, the only original theatrical work from Terezín on a specifically Jewish theme that has thus far come to light, was written by a young Zionist from Brno, Walter Freud. Many documents preserved from the ghetto testify to Freud’s intense involvement in Terezín’s cultural life until his deportation to Auschwitz. He organized several programs with Jewish themes, helped young people adapt their favorite stories for the stage, and also indulged his passion for puppetry, teaching children in the youth homes to make marionettes. The *Purimspiel,* written in cabaret style, presents the city of Shushan as an ironic mirror image of Terezín; for example, young Zionists, struggling to learn Hebrew in the ghetto, communicate with each other mainly through lines from folk songs, and scholars, immersed in intense religious debates, forget they are imprisoned in the ghetto. In the grand finale, the performers present the scene where Ester reveals Haman’s treachery to the king by singing it as an operetta, composed completely of lines from prewar works such as *Die Fledermaus* and *Carmen,* but with new Purim-specific lyrics.

Additional German-language texts appeared in the collections of the Jewish Museum in Prague. For example, cabarettist Hans Hofer,
MÄRZ 1943
PURIMSTÜCK
VON WALTER FREUD
REGIE, - AUSSTATTUNG:
WALTER FREUD
MITWIRKENDE:
Revezz  Guv.
Erich Huppert,
Hans Epstein,
Frant. Weiss,
Karel Fleischer,
Walter Freud
u. Jugendliche der Heime Q 114 und 141
3 Wiederholungen BV 241

Figure 8.4
born in Prague in 1907, worked for years as an actor in the theaters of Vienna. When he and his wife, Lisl, were deported together to Terezín in 1942, both became intensively involved in the German-language theatrical life of the ghetto. For his cabaret performances Hofer wrote satirical songs and verses about many aspects of life in Terezín, from the food distribution system to the postal service to the challenges of obtaining a theater ticket. Although all are ironically exaggerated, in many cases they provide quite accurate descriptions of how these ghetto institutions actually functioned. The Hofers were deported to Auschwitz in fall 1944, and were assigned to separate labor camps; they both miraculously survived and were reunited after the war.

A German-language text which has already caught the attention not only of scholars but also of contemporary performers is a verse drama, *The Death of Orpheus*, written by young poet Georg Kafka. Kafka, a distant relative of Franz Kafka, was born in 1921 and deported with his parents to Terezín in July 1942; his work was praised by older poets and scholars in the ghetto. Although H.G. Adler admired *The Death of Orpheus* for being “without reference to the ghetto or the times,” it is difficult to imagine that this work did not have allegorical meaning for the Terezín audience. Orpheus is roused from his melancholy when his lost love Eurydice sends him a lyre as a gift from the underworld. Orpheus begins to play; a frenzy of music and dancing ensues and Dionysus’ followers, the Maenads, tear him apart. As the play ends and the lights fade, the audience’s attention is drawn, not to the sight of the dying Orpheus, but to the glint of the lyre. Georg Kafka voluntarily joined his mother when she was included in a transport to Auschwitz, and subsequently perished in Schwarzheide.

Altogether, these eleven texts represent the enormous diversity and artistic vitality of the Czechoslovak and Austrian Jews of the interwar period: Czech- and German-speaking, Zionist and assimilated, traditional and avant-garde, each author represented the ghetto in his own way—or formulated his own temporary escape from it. Preliminary stagings of these plays have revealed their dramatic impact upon audiences of today as well, and the English-language edition will make the works available to an even wider audience. The texts provide us with a view, not into the darkness of anonymous death, but into a wide range of individual voices and the prisoners’ struggles during the last months of their lives: their fight to assign some meaning to their fate, their efforts to help each other gain some temporary relief from their suffering, and above all, their commitment to continue to live as human beings in a dehumanizing environment.
Figure 8.5

Hans Hofer
Liesl Hofer
Anny Frey
Heini Deutsch
Walter Deutsch
Fredy Deutsch
Hugo Böhm
Wolfi Lederer
Josef Stein