1944 Jewish writing in German continues in Theresienstadt and beyond

In the early summer of 1944, a poetry competition held as part of the officially sanctioned cultural activities attracted 3,000 entries of German verse from the more than 30,000 inmates of Terezin—or Theresienstadt, to use the revived Germanic name originally given the town by Joseph II in 1730 when it was founded. Klopstock had immortalized Joseph II in his "Song of Praise to the Emperor" with the words "You made the Jew a man." In November 1941, however, Jewish men were being made prisoners in Theresienstadt, initially men from the so-called Protectorate. Before the year was out, it became the destination also for Jewish women, and by the spring of 1942 German and Austrian Jews were arriving, many of them prominent leaders in the Jewish community—artists, industrialists, and decorated military veterans. They had been promised a safe retreat in the quiet garrison town; some had even made down-payments on apartments, requesting rooms with a southern exposure.

Despite the cultural activities that began to flourish in the spring of 1943, Jews faced two major adjustments in Theresienstadt beyond the obvious shock that this was not what had been promised: hard manual labor on a starvation diet with little sleep in overcrowded, lice-ridden barracks, and the threat of being transported elsewhere. Around 33,000 did not survive the first threat. Of those who did survive, 88,000 were transported from Theresienstadt to camps in the east, and of these people, only 3,500 survived. By 1944 Theresienstadt had been exposed for what it really was—the "anteroom to Auschwitz." This was the central anguish around which life (including cultural activities), revolved. Theresienstadt was more than a destination; it was a departure point. Two stanzas of Ilse Blumenthal-Weiß's poem "Bunter Abend" (Variety evening; translated in Schwertfeger 1989, 70) underscore the reality of the latter:

It's curtain time: Faces change to poses
Before an audience acting like it's home.
On stage they dance and sing and twirl
And kill the sadness with the theater's wings. . . .
The curtain falls: on empty floorboards
Vermin keeps on eating mind and limb.
To-morrow's dawn will bring another call
To stagger towards the slaughter-rail for
Transport.

Although "Variety Evening" is an accurate description of camp reality, this poem was written *after* the liberation of the camp (it was published in *Mahnmal* in 1960). The sources used in this essay are for the most part drawn from poetry and diaries written *in* the camps, in deference to the troubling preposition "in"—in the title's "Jewish writing in Theresienstadt." The issue has been addressed by Alvin Rosenfeld,

among others, about the advisability of imposing a theory of aesthetic autonomy on camp literature. If it is hard to evaluate the writings "born of terror and silence" (as Ellen Fine calls them, quoted in Moll 1988, 38), the challenge to approach the work that predates and presages such writings is even more daunting. What was written in the camps has been largely marginalized by what was written after the camps—by writers like Paul Celan, Nelly Sachs, and Jean Améry—and assigned to a different kind of "Lebenstraum" than has any other body of writings in German literature.

"The year zero" (1945) may have defined new beginnings for German literary history, but it also elided the years, and especially the year that preceded it. Painful as it is, there is a modest body of camp writings—fragmentary, narrow in its themes, limited in genre—that were recorded in German by Jewish men and women, most of whom were not known as writers then—or after. Their work includes lyric poetry written in Auschwitz long before the painful struggle to define an aesthetic for Holocaust writings and certainly before the debate about the appropriateness of writing poetry after Auschwitz.

With the exception of two lyrical dramas written in Theresienstadt by Georg Kafka (a distant relative of Franz Kafka), the two genres that dominate all camp writings are the diary and the poem. The medical journals of Theresienstadt, compiled from the findings of hundreds of physicians interned there, constitute a special category of writings for which the term "medicina Theresiana" was coined by Professor Alfred Wolff-Eisner (Scheuer 1983, 53). Apart from these writings, there were also recipes and numerous jottings, including detailed descriptions (by Werner Weinberg in Bergen-Belsen) about transports and the size of barracks. Drama and fiction (like *The Terezin Requiem* by the Czech writer Josef Bor) would come later: like all postcamp literature, it underwent a painful birth.

Many of the poems composed in Theresienstadt were written for birthdays and other special occasions in relentlessly rhymed, stilted German that H. G. Adler called "rhyming sickness" (Adler 1960, 618). They are the literary equivalent of the art that depicted Theresienstadt as benign. The year 1944 is a culminating point around which to organize camp writings not because more (or less) was written then than in the other twelve years of the Third Reich but because what was written pulsates with the excruciating rawness of the Final Solution. Theresienstadt of 1944 is an appropriate *Ausgangspunkt* (starting point) not only in the literal sense but also as a stage on which the German-Jewish symbiosis was played out. Adler describes the German Jews of Theresienstadt as living in a false sense of their identity: "An advanced state of assimilation was taking bitter revenge on them. . . . The Germany of 1942 often seemed to these people to be that of 1900" (304). He also points out: "In Auschwitz sheer despair was supreme, and the reality of the situation was unambiguously recognized. . . . It was not that way in Theresienstadt, where almost anything could be repressed, where illusion ran rampant and hope, merely dampened by anxiety suffused everything that lay under thick fog" (82).

The most overt expression of what Adler perceived as "rampant illusion" was the daily rostrum of literary readings and cultural activities in the attics, at the end of what had become by 1944 a seventy-hour work week. Though long since expelled from German life, Jews did not jettison their cultural heritage in these deplorable camp conditions. There were lectures on Hegel, Kant, Hesse, and seminars on Faust by scholars in the sciences and in the humanities described by one woman—Alice Bloemendahl—as "guardians of the best of the European past, architects of a future that was fit for people to live in" (Bloemendahl n.d., 1). Even though lectures could not be titled "Jews in German literature" but only "German-speaking-Jews in literature," a German cultural heritage was invoked that was, in fact, more reminiscent of Germany at the turn of the century. For the German Jews of Theresienstadt, however, it was a bulwark against the stultifying daily life of the camp, which included the linguistic assault on the German language in the form of "Lagerdeutsch"—camp German that was rapidly evolving its own vocabulary.

Several diaries written "beyond Theresienstadt" suggest a German consciousness, but it is

represented in terms more of erudition than of heritage. Quotations from prominent German writers—mostly non-Jewish—preface several diaries. (The most striking use of German writers in a diary is, of course, *Goethe in Dachau* by Nico Rost, the Dutch "Germanist," a political prisoner in Dachau.) Renate Laquer wrote her diary in Dutch in Bergen-Belsen and prefaces it with a quote from Goethe: "What I have, I see as if from afar and what disappeared has become reality." Ruth Klüger wrote about reciting ballads by Schiller to overcome the tedium of endless hours standing for roll call in Auschwitz. In 1944 Victor Frank quoted Nietzsche to his fellow prisoners and taught them that life has meaning. In Bergen-Belsen, a diary written in 1944 by a Frau Zielenziger is prefaced with a line from Rilke: "And courage has become so tired, and longing so great." There is, however, no equivalent in other camps for intellectuals (like Rabbi Leo Baeck) who were harnessed to hearses that were used as bread carts, and who discussed German philosophers as they pulled the carts through Theresienstadt.

Gershom Scholem perceives Freud, Kafka, and Benjamin as Jews who wrote with the full consciousness of the distance that separated them from their German readers; they knew they were German writers but that they were not Germans (Scholem 1986, 277). The Theresienstadt of 1944 not only crushed the German-Jewish identity; the problematic ambivalence was also crushed. There were 60,000 books in the library at Theresienstadt, confiscated from incoming transports, but by 1944 most of the librarians that had catalogued them had been sent to Auschwitz. The Red Cross visited in June; its representatives were restricted to areas of the town that had been beautified for the occasion. Several thousand elderly people, however, were transported to achieve the desired effect. A film was made that became known as "The Führer Gives the Gift of a City to the Jews," but the film producers were sent to Auschwitz after it had been made. The effect of this clash of illusion and reality is most clearly seen in the memoirs written after the liberation of the camp, which reveal a strong consciousness of alienation from a German-Jewish identity.

Diaries written in 1944 reveal an extraordinary mobility between ghettos, transit camps, work camps, and extermination sites, as Jews were systematically flushed from one level of expendability to another. The ability to do manual labor, mostly for the war industry, became the only reason to allow them to live—30 percent of the inmates did manual labor in Auschwitz (Kröhle 1989, 36). Experiences are documented that cover a geographical area that stretched from Les Milles in Provence to Auschwitz. One of the most cruel ironies is that Bergen-Belsen in 1944 was named an "Erholungslager" (recuperation camp) for those who were literally too ill to work; many died of thirst and starvation there. Of the 15,257 inmates at Bergen-Belsen in December 1944, around 8,000 of them were women and girls, among them Anne Frank, who died there in March 1945 (Kolb 1991, 37).

Auschwitz and its satellite camps were the epicenter of the German concentration camps, as Eugene Kogon later noted. Before it entered into symbolic language as a metaphor for unspeakable suffering, Auschwitz was a railway station. (There is a sense in which it has been frozen in that image.) At least, that is how an Austrian woman describes her first impressions when she arrived there in May 1944 from Drancy: "I press my nose against one of the cracks and read 'Auschwitz.' The name means nothing to me. A short time later we are at another little station and this time I read 'Birkenau.' We stop. The chains rattle. A crack opens" (Naor 1986, 31). Max Mannheimer remembers spending a vacation in Auschwitz as a teenager. The memory suddenly comes back when he is carting cement down the main street of the town: "I recognize the street again. As a sixteen year-old I spent a vacation there: . . . in an Auschwitz without barbed wire and gas chambers" (Mannheimer 1985, 113).

The word "Auschwitz" hangs like a huge shroud over camp memoirs, evoking a sense of terror that no other word can generate. Transports to the east were the dread of Theresienstadt, and by the autumn of 1944 not even the Jewish elders were spared. These transports began in the autumn of 1944—eleven of them between Sep-

tember 28 and October 28. Of a population of 11,804 men only 5,000 were left, and more and more women were pulled into the labor force. Trude Groag describes parting from her mother: "Then my mother's name was called. She walked with their head held high to the transport truck. She stood to the front when she got on. A thick, cold, damp mist enveloped everything. . . . In a few seconds a world of love had been swallowed up" (Groag n.d., 16). The first stanza of "Transport" (Schwertfeger 1989, 88), the poem Else Dormitzer wrote in Theresienstadt, reads:

Running, whispers, anxious questioning
In drab September days,
Here a querulous complaint, there quiet
quavering,
A whole city is on its legs,
In every mouth a single expression stays;
Transport.

When Auschwitz is seen from the perspective of another camp—Dachau—the effect is even more alienating. Max Mannheimer was twenty-three when he arrived in Auschwitz in February 1943. He recorded his impressions in a diary he began to write later in Dachau: "It is the beginning of February without a coat. Without a hat. Without food. Without parents. Without siblings, wives. Without a home. Without help. Without hope" (Mannheimer 1985, 104). The same note of despair using a different word—*außerhalb* (outside) is captured in the diary the Dutch lawyer Eberhard Kolb wrote in Bergen-Belsen: "It is now 1944 and there is still no end in sight. We stand outside of time, outside of life, outside of space" (Kolb 1991, 74). In the summer of 1944 Max Mannheimer was en route by foot to the west from Warsaw, before boarding a freight train in Kuvno with ninety prisoners: "We ask for water. A prisoner breaks off a gold filling from his tooth. He receives water for it. Gold for water" (125). In the train they are pushed and shoved together and beaten. "It does not help. The space does not get any bigger" (125). They finally arrive in Dachau and are renumbered: "Numbered three times and yet still alive" (125).

In Auschwitz Simha Naor wrote: "It is around Christmas time, 1944. Holidays are particularly loved by Mengele to make selections" (Naor 1986, 109). She is advised by the guard, a fellow-Austrian, that she must never show any emotion, never resist beatings, always give her age as younger, and destroy all personal documents. She further describes how she is tattooed with a red-hot needle dipped in blue ink (36). She sees the chimneys but does not want to believe that people are gassed there. Tea is described as "a dark grey, bitter-tasting, luke-warm liquid" (49).

Rosenfeld thinks it would be a misapplication of methods to search in ghetto and camp writings for "revealing patterns of imagery and symbolism, mythic analogies, or deep grammatical structures" (1980, 18). My observation is that there is no flatter prose landscape than that of camp writings, their chillingly laconic style broken only by even bleaker reminders of destruction, often captured in the word "Auschwitz." In Ravensbrück there was a little girl called Anna Horvath, motherless, her dad in Dachau. Women made up letters from her dad to comfort the child, who cried at night. Then comes the sentence: "Later she went with an annihilation transport to Auschwitz" (Buchmann 1959, 133). "September, 1944," writes Lisa Scheuer, "a really strange atmosphere hangs over this place." Scheuer writes about the stench, the smoke arising from the stacks, the brass bands, and the hum of the telegraph wires (35). Gerty Spies tells about the generosity of a woman called Heidi, who shared her very first food parcel with the twenty-five other women in her room, but then Spies adds (parenthetically) that Heidi later perished in Auschwitz.

Understatement and irony are also used, albeit unwittingly, and serve to underscore the total collapse of moral order. Simha Naor, employed as a physical therapist in Auschwitz, is assigned to the barracks that housed the criminals. She writes matter-of-factly: "I soon feel at home in this block among the criminals" (1986, 84). She records the pride expressed by her fellow inmates in their past crimes, which ranged from murdering a mother-in-law to burning down a friend's house. Justifying these crimes by standards practiced in the Reich they ask: "What's wrong with a little private murder?" When Naor points out that

many are being murdered in Auschwitz by gas, she is promptly interrupted with "It's quite different here. Those are Jews, but after all, we are Aryans" (Naor 1986, 105). Another example in Naor's prose is her description of her first impressions of Bergen-Belsen. She writes: "Here people are dying of natural causes" (114). (In the last months thousands died of thirst.) Margarete Glass-Larsson did not write her memoir until the late 1970s, but there is one line that is as clear as the day it was said in Theresienstadt: "Carry me outside so that I can see the sky and a tree." The request was made by a terminally ill woman in the last moments of her life. The writer then adds: "So now there was one fewer in the cell" (Schwertfeger 1989, 55).

At times the grammatical structure of the camp diary evokes the tempo of the work being done. When that work is in a crematorium, the effect on the tone of the diary is shocking, as in the diary kept by Arnold Keller and Hans Horwitz in Bergen-Belsen between March 8 and April 16, 1944. They wrote: "After touching a corpse, immediately wash your hands. . . . Up with the coffin, lay the corpse on an iron bier and push it into the oven on two rollers; up it goes, doors open, push the corpse in, close the doors, wash your hands" (Keller and Horwitz 1944, 3).

Everything that was written in the camps bears the stamp of the fragmentary and the clandestine, whether written on scraps of paper and concealed in empty Zyklon B canisters in Auschwitz; smuggled from one barrack to the other in Quark (a kind of cottage cheese) in Bergen-Belsen; thrown from the train en route from Westerbork to Auschwitz (like the letter by Etty Hillesum); scribbled on toilet paper, as was the case for the Dutch Germanist Nico Rost in Dachau; or hidden, such as the work by Lisa Scheuer concealed in the hole dug for excrement behind the barracks of the Freiberg labor camp. Thomas Rahe sees the fragmentary aspect of camp writings as the formal correspondence to the reality that was being experienced; the diary was the best way to document for posterity lives that had been deprived of meaning (1994, 201). Diaries were written at great risk and enormous personal sacrifice, typically at the end of the day; to borrow from Hopkins, they "bear man's smudge and wear man's toil." Malnutrition deprived inmates of energy and the ability to concentrate for long. Bread was frequently bartered in exchange for a pencil or a piece of paper.

By the early summer of 1944, rumors, called "bonkes" in Theresienstadt, were already infiltrating the camp that the Russians were at the door. The Bergen-Belsen inmates knew about the Normandy landings in June. There are tired, veiled references to the outside world in diary entries, a world that had been challenged to respond to the camps in the spring of 1944 by a detailed document with maps and diagrams of Auschwitz, prepared by two Slovakian Jews who had escaped (Rudolf Vrba and Fred Wetzlar). The document circulated in the highest quarters—including to Churchill, Roosevelt, and the pope—provided information on the mass extermination of Hungarian Jews.

Beyond news from the outside there are occasionally shafts of light and life that penetrate the camp writings, but they merely expose the darkness rather than mitigate it. Scheuer noted in her diary the beauty of the mountains surrounding Mauthausen. Resi Weglein wrote of hearing nightingales sing as she sat at an open window on the night shift. Little Pavel Friedmann's butterfly—"the last butterfly"—is a fragile reminder of life beyond Theresienstadt. He wrote, "It went away, I'm sure, because it wished to / kiss the world goodbye." Rising above Ilse Weber's heartbreaking letter-poem to the child she sent to safety in Sweden is the tentative arc of praise: "Yet I am glad that you are not here." The distinguished art historian Gertrud Kantorowicz wrote "Daughter of the Day" sometime before before she died in Theresienstadt in 1945. The first stanza reads: "And so you fade. The step of hours is halting. / No laughter gives its hem to our weeks gravenes's, / So you have learned to walk dark halls where / living light and flower can only flutter" (Schwertfeger 1989, 71).

We now know that Gertrud Kolmar died in Auschwitz, just as she had said in the poem "Nachruf" (Obituary) written between 1937 and 1940: "I shall die, like all the others / . . . And

be dead, disappear completely, a nothing" (Schlösser 1960, 153). In another poem written around this time, she writes about the steps to her father's house being "dark, crooked, narrow and worn-down." Else Lasker-Schüler in *Mein Blaues Klavier* (My blue piano) also mourns in her Jerusalem exile the collapse of aesthetic order—rats waltzing on the broken keyboard of a blue piano "near the cellar door." Twenty years after his internment in the camps Jean Améry wrote about the total collapse of an aesthetic idea of death. Grete Schmal-Wolf, dying in Theresienstadt, would have agreed. Two days before she died she wrote on a scrap of paper:

Dying means nothing here
In these sad and gloomy rooms.
One stretch and you are free from hunger,
Hate and hopes and dreams.
Nobody weeps. Nobody prays.
There is neither touching nor mourning.
Just like a leaf that falls from its branch
Death has here no meaning.
Neighbours look with quiet calm
On the corpse with its doll-like wrapping
Another death. So what?
And stolidly keep on eating.
They think Good for him. Keep slicing
In case they miss a crumb.
Then the stretcher comes. That's what dying
Means in these sad and gloomy rooms
(Schwertfeger 1989, 54).

As wretched a picture as this is of an impersonal death, it does not evoke the sheer awfulness of Ruth Klüger's "Der Kamin" (The chimney), the poem the thirteen-year-old composed in Auschwitz in 1944 and wrote down later in Christianstadt, one of the satellite camps of Groß Rosen. Her poem also serves to underscore the distance between Theresienstadt and Auschwitz, between the anteroom and hell. Truth for Klüger had been reduced to the chimney: "Everything, everything lies in its hand / Everything, everything will be burned." Nelly Sachs was to mourn the loss of Jewish life through those same chimneys in lines that overarch the literature of the Holocaust and have entered into the poetic language of the twentieth century. The diaries and poems of the camps have found no such entrée. Eli Wiesel has written that a story about Treblinka is either not a story or not a story about Treblinka. Survivors wrote about their past, about the time before the annihilation, but not about the annihilation. He writes: "You can't write about that—not if you are a writer" (Wiesel 1977, 25). But some (like Richard Glazar) did write, and they were not writers. Their writings occupy a peninsula-like territory—one attached and related to the mainland of German history and literature and approached by way of dark, crooked, narrow steps.

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RUTH SCHWERTFEGER