

## Choral Music in Theresienstadt, 1941-1944

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By Nick Strimple

There is a small town about an hour's drive northwest of Prague, close to the convergence of the Labe (in German, Elbe) and Ohře (Eger) rivers; it was originally called Theresienstadt. Built by the Hapsburg Emperor Joseph II in 1780 and named for his mother, the Empress Maria Theresa, it was designed to protect Prague from a potential attack by Frederick the Great of Prussia. The complex consisted of a small fortress on one bank of the Ohře and a garrison town on the other. The town itself, called the Big Fortress, contained three large military barracks (Sudeten, Brandenburg and Magdeburg) and was partially walled; altogether it could easily accommodate about 6,000 people. By the beginning of the twentieth century Theresienstadt was obsolete as a military bastion, the Little Fortress serving only as a maximum security prison (Gavrilo Princip, whose assassination of the Austrian Archduke Francis Ferdinand provided the catalyst for World War I, was imprisoned there). When Czechoslovakia became a republic after World War I, the town's name was officially changed to the Czech equivalent, Terezín.

After the Nazi invasion of Western Europe in May 1940, Jews in the occupied countries, like those in Germany and in occupied Eastern Europe, immediately began to be persecuted. During 1941 the outside world became increasingly alarmed by the Nazis' wholesale arrests and transport of the occupied western countries' Jewish populations to unknown destinations of "resettlement" in the East. To counter this all too correct impression, the Nazis decided to create a propaganda façade: a town in a picturesque area where Jews could be observed living "normal" lives within their own close-knit community - a community that just happened to include the intellectual and artistic cream of European Jewry. Terezín was chosen for this because it could accommodate a large number of people and because it was ideally situated to become a secondary transit camp for those being shipped to extermination in the east. In 1941 the Nazis changed the town's name back to Theresienstadt, evacuated its inhabitants and, in late November, began transporting Czech Jews there.

The first transport arrived on 24 November and consisted of *Aufbaukommando*, young men assigned to complete preparations for housing a large number of people, including the completion of the wall around the town. Among these were the prominent choral conductor and pianist Raphael Schaechter and the pioneering theatrical director Karel Švenk. Informal evenings of music making began in the barracks virtually immediately, with the inmates singing folksongs together, an activity that may have been organized by Schaechter (Karas, 13). Other transports, filled with children and elderly people, arrived on 30 November and 2 December, and a second transport of *Aufbaukommando* (some of whom managed to bring instruments) arrived on 4 December. The first documented concert occurred shortly thereafter, perhaps as early as 6 December, in the Sudeten barracks. (The program, dated 6 December 1941, was typed at some point after the concert; at least one survivor, Kurt Maier, believed that the actual date was a week or so

later. See Karas, 13.) Thereafter, evening musical activities steadily increased as more and more of Czechoslovakia's finest musicians arrived in the steady stream of transports. On 28 December the Nazis officially recognized these previously secret concerts as *Kameradschaftsabende* (evenings of fellowship). After all, what could be more normal in a "normal" town than to have evening concerts?

Schechter was thus able to begin a thorough organization of choral and other musical activities, and early in 1942 he produced a cabaret show with Karel Švenk called *The Lost Food Card*. The highpoint was the show's finale, a new composition by Švenk entitled "Terežín March". It quickly became known throughout the ghetto and would appear in all subsequent shows produced by Švenk in Theresienstadt. The tune was easy to remember and the text uplifting:

Everything goes, if one wants,  
United we'll hold our hands.  
Despite the cruel times  
We have humor in our hearts.  
Every day we go on  
Moving back and forth,  
And can write letters in only thirty words.  
Hey! Tomorrow life starts over,  
And with it the time is approaching,  
When we'll fold our knapsacks  
And return home again.  
Everything goes, if one wants,  
United we'll hold our hands  
And on the ruins of the Ghetto we shall laugh.  
(Uncredited translation in Karas, 14-15)

This song, which not only spoke directly to the inmates' predicament but also insisted on a hopeful future, matched in style, tone and content earlier songs written in Nazi concentration camps: "Die Moorsoldaten" (written in Börgermoor by Rudi Goguel, Johann Esser and Wolfgang Langhoff, 1933), "Buchenwald Lied" (written in Buchenwald by Hermann Leopoldi and Fritz Loehner-Beda, 1938) and "Dachau Lied" (written in Dachau by Herbert Zipper and Jura Soyfer, 1938). "Die Moorsoldaten" circulated outside the camps in Germany during the 1930s, and some inmates (including Leopoldi and Zipper) were released from camps and expelled from Germany during that period, so it is possible that Švenk could have known one or more of these songs.

With the continued influx of musicians and the establishment, later in 1942, of the *Freizeitgestaltung* (Administration of Free Time Activities), choral activities blossomed. Schaechter added a women's chorus to the original male chorus organized in the Sudeten barracks. These groups could be put together to form a mixed chorus, but in that configuration occasionally had to be rehearsed outdoors because the approved rehearsal space, in the Sudeten barracks basement, was too small to accommodate everyone and other facilities were not always available (Krasa, interview of 8 February 2003). Further,

at this time there was no piano in the ghetto, so Schaechter had to conduct rehearsals using a pitch-pipe. Throughout 1942 circumstances for music-making gradually improved, first with the securing of a reed organ and accordion (both only partly functional) and then thanks to the secret procurement of a piano, which was found outside the town and smuggled into the ghetto at night. It was missing legs and a couple of strings but was useable.

Encouraged by Schaechter, other choral ensembles were developed according to need: Rudolph Freudenfeld continued the children's chorus he had begun at the Prague Jewish orphanage; Karel Berman started a girls' chorus; Karel Vrba conducted a boys' choir; the Viennese Siegmund Subak formed a choir for liturgical and other specifically Jewish music. And, lastly, there was Karl Fischer's German oratorio chorus, which managed to present highly successful performances of Haydn's *Die Schöpfung* (The Creation) and Mendelssohn-Bartholdy's *Elijah*. Henry Oertelt, a member of this choir, wrote afterwards that he was not only struck by the fact that a work by the "racially" Jewish Mendelssohn could be performed but also by the attendance of numerous Nazi officers (Strimple, 110). In Theresienstadt, Nazi officials allowed the inmates to perform whatever they wanted, including secular and liturgical works by Jewish composers (Mahler, Schoenberg, Bruno Walter and others) and other "degenerate" music as well, including jazz. Most interesting, as exemplified by *Die Schöpfung*, the Theresienstadt inmates were also allowed to play German music, an activity expressly forbidden to the *Jüdische Kulturbund* in Germany during the 1930s. In all, Joža Karas identified at least eight choirs, in addition to Schaechter's choruses, Švenk's cabaret ensembles and ad hoc choruses in the various children's barracks, and commented that: "little is known about the activities of [these] groups, whose existence is documented through extant posters. Some of them sang mainly for their own enjoyment and for the most immediate neighborhood." (Karas, 25)

There was an urgent need for repertoire. In some cases inmates, brought music with them or found it in the Theresienstadt town library. Raphael Schaechter apparently reconstructed Smetana's *The Bartered Bride* from memory; Karel Berman taught his girls classic works of the Czech treble choir repertoire from single copies (Berman, interview of 9 November 1989). Pre-existing rounds in Hebrew, Czech and German (many of them patriotic or Zionist in nature) were taught by rote to the children in their barracks. As early as December 1941, Schaechter had been joined in Theresienstadt by the brilliant young pianist and budding composer Gideon Klein (1919-1945), who assisted first by making arrangements of folksongs for various choral configurations and later, in 1943, by composing three of the most original, worthwhile and difficult choral works produced in Theresienstadt: the two madrigals on texts by Friedrich Hölderlin and François Villon, and the male chorus *První Hřích* (The First Sin), on a Moravian folk text [see below]. Schaechter also provided folksong arrangements, as did Bernard Pollak, Karel Berman, Karel Vrba, Zikmund Schul and, later, Viktor Ullmann. Because paper, especially manuscript paper, was scarce, only one copy -- if any -- of an arrangement could be made; sometimes the arrangement existed only in the head of its composer. The music was always taught by rote, which may account for the large number of canonic

arrangements. (Lewin, interview of 17 May 1991; Kleinová, interview of 17 July 1990; Viktor Ullmann also commented on this in one of his concert reviews: see Bloch, 1998.) According to Eliška Kleinová, sister of Gideon Klein, well over two hundred new choral arrangements of folksongs were taught to the choirs (Kleinová, interview of 8 November 1989). Because these songs either were never written down or existed only in lost manuscript copies, we now have only one Hebrew folksong arrangement by Schul, fourteen Hebrew and Yiddish arrangements by Viktor Ullmann, seven arrangements (Czech, Slovak, Moravian and Russian) by Klein, as well as his *Bachuri Leantisa* (if it is, indeed, a folksong; see below), and a Slovak folksong arranged by Schaechter and Klein (reconstructed by the author with the assistance of survivors Dasha Lewin and Francis Maier). Also surviving, and similar to these folksong arrangements, is a new canonic setting of a Czech folksong text, *Komaři se ženili* (The Gnat's Wedding), which is almost certainly by Klein (reconstructed by the author with the assistance of Francis Maier), and a unison song, probably by Klein and Schaechter, sung secretly only in one of the girls' barracks (Lewin, interview of 10 May 1991). One understands immediately, on reading the text, why this song was never sung publicly:

Even though a power dominates in the world,  
Fists raised without rights, in a world of lies,  
We will remain loyal and maintain honor  
Because the truth will prevail.  
We are wounded but we will not betray  
The faith which remains in our hearts.  
A day will come! A day will come!  
The truth will prevail!  
The world's development continues  
In spite of reactionary criticism;  
He who lies builds his own destruction,  
But we salute the day when the truth will prevail!  
The truth will prevail!  
(translated by Monika Miller and Nick Strimple)

The text of a similar song, sung by youths in the Brandenburg barracks in 1943, appropriately celebrates Purim:  
But once the day will arrive  
When we walk out of the ghetto,  
And life will smile at us.  
In defiance of the Hamans  
We will break the bars.  
Forward our hope leads us.  
(unknown translation; quoted in Karas, 90)

A few choral works that were not written for children or for secret political purposes also survive. Because of the exceptionally high quality of the musicians in Theresienstadt, composers could often write as their muse dictated, and this artistic freedom resulted in

works that are not only of very high artistic quality but in some cases also quite difficult. Among them are *May Song* by František Domažlický, *Cantata Judaica* by Zikmund Schul, *Al S'fod* (Do Not Lament) by Pavel Haas, and works by Viktor Ullmann and Gideon Klein; all of these were written for male choir.

*May Song* is a slight but attractive piece written in the pleasant, neo-romantic style that also informs Domažlický's post-war works. Only the final chorus of Schul's *Cantata Judaica* (1942) survives. This setting of a text that spoke directly to the inmates' predicament ("sound the great Shofar for our freedom, and say Amen") was inspired by the shofar's sound and is noteworthy for its accomplished contrapuntal writing.

Before the war, Pavel Haas had been the best known of all the composers who later found themselves in Theresienstadt. When the foreboding future of Czech Jewry became clear to him, he divorced his wife in order to save her and their daughter, Olga, from the concentration camps. During the 1990s a number of American newspapers carried stories about the Theresienstadt musicians and claimed that Mrs. Haasová and Olga had died in a concentration camp, but the truth is that Haas's ploy worked. His wife's family had emigrated from Russia when she was a child, shortly after the Bolshevik Revolution, and because her hometown's city hall and all its contents -- including family records -- had been destroyed in the fighting, new identity papers were issued to her family prior to emigration -- papers that did not identify them as Jews. In spite of constant harassment by the Gestapo, she and Olga survived. She died in Brno in April 1982, and Olga and her family still live there (Haasová interview, 10 January 1992). Haas, who could not have known that his efforts to save his wife and daughter would ultimately succeed, was despondent for some time after he had entered the ghetto. Through the encouraging efforts of Gideon Klein he eventually began to compose again. His first Theresienstadt work was a setting for male voices of a poem written in Palestine in 1939 by David Shimoni:

Do not lament, do not cry  
At a time like this,  
Don't lower your head,  
Work, work!  
Plower, plow, sower, sow,  
At a bad moment  
Two-fold toil.  
Two-fold create, plant and hoe  
Remove stones and fence in.  
Level and pave.  
Pave the path to light and liberty:  
In the path of affliction  
Goes deliverance.  
And the blood screams  
For the people's soul:  
Awake and labor,

Redeem and be redeemed.

(Uncredited translation in Bloch, 1998)

Much has been made of Haas's choice of text and of the inscription on the manuscript's title page, written in Hebrew made to look like musical notation: "In remembrance of the first, and at the same time, last anniversary of the Terezín exile." Perhaps more interesting here is Haas's quoting of part of an old Hussite hymn, the St. Wenceslaus Chorale, which he had also used in works written prior to his incarceration in the ghetto. Haas was neither religious nor culturally Jewish, so his utilization of this material represents the determined effort of a Czech patriot. The work is tonal but rather difficult; a satisfactory performance requires an accomplished choir.

Viktor Ullmann's folksong arrangements occupy a somewhat different position from those made in the ghetto: all apparently survived, and they represent Ullmann's only choral writing. There are pieces for every choral ensemble configuration; some treble arrangements even distinguish between those for women and those for children. We know from the key relationships and the Hebrew/Yiddish transliterations the exact Zionist source that Ullmann consulted to find the original songs (*Makkabi-Liederbuch*, Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 1930); the two for mixed choir - *Eliahu hanavi* (Elijah the Prophet) and *Anu olim artza* (We are going up to the Land) - although challenging, are well within the reach of most choirs, including those that cannot attempt the madrigals of Klein. Finally, the musical intelligentsia are interested in Ullmann because he was a student of Arnold Schoenberg. All of these arrangements are charming, and the mixed choruses in particular produce a powerful effect in performance.

In addition to his folksong arrangements, Gideon Klein composed several other small choral works in Theresienstadt. Of these, three are the works of a master and one is a beautiful enigma. The enigma is the Hebrew-language *Bachuri Leantisa* (My boy, where are you going? My sweetheart, it's all over.) This setting for three-part treble choir was thought to be a folksong arrangement because it was first performed in a concert otherwise consisting of fourteen folksong arrangements. But, at this writing, the source remains unknown. Further, Klein's sister certainly thought of it as original: she included it in the first version of the Complete Edition of his work, along with the charming solo song, *Wiegenlied* (known to be an arrangement), but excluded his other surviving arrangements on the grounds that they "do not represent Gideon's work; they're only arrangements of folksongs" (Kleinová, interview of 20 November 1994). Confusion is furthered by the absence of a complete text. Only two phrases of text exist in the manuscript (see above), although the notation of eighth notes (some flagged and some connected with beams) clearly indicates that additional text, apparently known to the composer, existed. In any case, the piece is hauntingly beautiful and well within the grasp of most children's or women's ensembles. The editors of the Complete Edition inserted the text later in the piece when the opening music returns, leaving the rest to be sung on a neutral vowel or "lai". Repetition of the opening text is a logical procedure, but the fact is that we know neither the complete text nor the composer's intentions.

Klein's madrigals on texts by Hölderlin and Villon are frighteningly difficult and remarkably satisfying. The severely modern musical language -- much more in line with Klein's Piano Sonata and Songs, Op. 1, than with *Bachuri* - suggests that the pieces were probably intended to be sung like early Italian madrigals, with only one singer per part. Although numerous accomplished chamber choirs could perform them today, their delicacy is best preserved when they are performed by only five musicians (SSATB). The texts are poignant reminders that Klein had a very realistic view of his predicament in the ghetto:

The agreeable things of this world were mine to enjoy,  
How long gone are the hours of my youth!  
April, May and July are distant,  
I'm nothing any more, yet listlessly I live on.  
(Friedrich Holderlin. Unacknowledged translation in Bloch, 1993)

Death, I plead against your harshness  
Which stole away my mistress,  
And yet you'll not be satisfied  
Until you also have me languish.  
Since then I've had no strength, no vigor.  
But what harm did she to you when alive?  
Death, I plead against your harshness  
Which stole away my mistress.  
Though we were two, we had one heart;  
If it is dead, I too must pass away --  
Yes, or live lifelessly  
Like an image, in the heart.  
(François Villon. Unacknowledged translation in Bloch, 1993)

Klein set a Czech translation, by Otakar Fischer, of Villon's original French. But the Hölderlin setting contains both the original German and a Czech translation by E. A. Saudek. Karas states flatly that both madrigals are in Czech (Karas, 201). David Bloch acknowledges the presence of the German in Klein's manuscript, but thinks it was added later. In this author's recollection of the manuscript, the Czech is in a different color ink and located below the German, which would indicate that Klein first set the original text. However, the piece sings very well in both languages and, in any case, it seems apparent that Klein was willing to have it performed in either language.

The last of these pieces, *První Hřích* (The First Sin), for male voices, sets a Moravian folk version of the biblical story of Adam, Eve, the serpent and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. In no other choral work is Klein's genius more apparent: There is just enough folk influence in the initial musical material to acknowledge the text's popular origins; the chromatic lines are controlled with a sure hand; the sudden flash of A Major at the work's climax is brilliant; and the relatively quick dénouement clearly establishes

Adam and Eve's recognition that they made a grave mistake. Of all Theresienstadt's surviving choral works, this is clearly the finest.

No article on choral music in Theresienstadt can fail to mention the famous performances of Verdi's Requiem in 1943 and 1944. These performances, like all the large choral performances in Theresienstadt, had to be given with piano. After the first performance, possibly in early September 1943 (see Karas, 140), Raphael Schaechter had to re-form the chorus completely because most of his singers had been taken to Auschwitz, and after the second performance the choir was again decimated. Most of the third group managed to stay together long enough to give fifteen performances, including one for the Red Cross dignitaries whose useless visit occurred in the summer of 1944, just prior to the large and relentless transports that took virtually all the remaining musicians to Auschwitz. Even though Schaechter's decision to present a Roman Catholic funeral mass was severely criticized at the time, everyone familiar with the incident now recognizes that it gave the performers the opportunity to declare -- sometimes in their captors' faces -- that a judgment day was coming. It is a further testament to the courageous will of the Theresienstadt inmates, neatly summed up by Viktor Ullmann, who wrote in his famous essay, *Goethe and the Ghetto*, that in Theresienstadt "our efforts in regard to Art were commensurate with our will to live."

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