Resistance:
The Artists of the Holocaust

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HST 4420: Nazi Germany and the Holocaust
December 11, 2017
A picture is worth a thousand words. This idea is true for many events captured on paper, but it holds true especially for the Holocaust. To prevent other countries from interfering and to keep the country of Germany in a “clean” light, the systematic murder of the Jews was forbidden to be depicted in any form. Despite their efforts, the horrors of the Holocaust were captured by many artists throughout their deathly experiences in the many camps and ghettos in Nazi territory. Artists such as Sophia Kalski, Imre Amos, Ella Iranyi, Dina Babbitt, Leo Haas, Ava Hegedish, Felix Nussbaum, Otto Ungar, Bedrich Fritta, and Karel Fleischmann all tell the horrors of the Holocaust through art despite the severe consequences they faced if caught. “The purpose of art is to enhance life.”1 To enhance means to magnify, amplify, strengthen, or intensify. The art from each of these Holocaust survivors enhances the truth to these atrocities. The purpose behind many of the pieces were to create beauty within the horrors of everyday life, a way to cope with their reality, to show the world the actual happenings within the ghettos and camps, and to portray their lives and what each day was like. These artists put everything in jeopardy to inform others of the truth of the Holocaust.

During the Holocaust, Hitler devised a plan called “The Final Solution”. This verbal command was put into effect to allow the Nazi soldiers to capture all the Jewish people, and remove them from Nazi controlled Europe. This solution meant killing any Jew they could find. To carry out these murders, the Nazis systematically sent the prisoners to concentration camps on trains. There were two main types of camps during the Holocaust: labor camps, and death camps. In labor camps, prisoners were forced to do certain jobs for the Nazis. This included: carrying bodies to designated areas, removing gold fillings from the dead, shaving prisoners before they were loaded into gas chambers, making certain items that were needed throughout

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1 Gerald Green. *Artists of Terezin*. Place of publication not identified: Schocken, N.Y.
the Nazi territory, etc. The jobs were often difficult for the weakened prisoners and many times they were beaten if they slowed down during the job, were too weak to carry out the job, or did not perform to the Nazis’ expectations. Many prisoners who were in labor camps died from the harsh living conditions, starvation, or exhaustion. Auschwitz-Birkenau is a well-known example of a forced labor camp. The other type of camp that was mainly used during the Holocaust were death camps, sometimes called killing centers. There were four death camps: Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka. It was here where prisoners were sent to their deaths in gas chambers. Most prisoners who were sent here did not survive, hence the name “death camp” and “killing center.” Their only purpose was to kill everyone who came through on the trains.² Once the trains arrived at the camps with the Jewish people aboard, they were be sorted by the officials: those fit for forced labor, and those fit for death. The ones condemned to die were led to the gas chambers where they were stripped of their clothing, sometimes shaved before being put into the gas chambers, and then killed. After everyone in the chambers had died, their bodies were searched for gold fillings. if they were not shaved before being killed they were shaved now, and then their bodies were taken to the crematorium where they were burned to ashes.

While the main killings happened here at the camps, the Nazis also set up many ghettos throughout Poland. These ghettos were usually in the worst part of a city. Before the Final Solution was devised, many Jews were sent to these ghettos and walled or fenced off to keep them all in the same area until a solution was thought of. The living conditions in these ghettos were appalling. Many people were starving and living on the streets. The food was so scarce or expensive that many were forced into labor to gain small amounts of food to help keep their families alive. Disease was rampant in the confined living spaces within the ghettos and many

people died. According to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “The largest ghetto in Poland was the Warsaw ghetto…Other major ghettos were established in the cities of Lodz, Krakow, Bialystok, Lvov, Lublin, Vilna, Kovno, Czestochowa, and Minsk”. It was horrible in the ghettos, but not many people knew because it was forbidden to capture the conditions through photography or art. Despite this restriction, many artists within the ghettos and camps secretly captured the truths through paintings and drawings.

The ghetto, Theresienstadt, was a different type of ghetto. Located in the city of Terezin, it was originally a transportation camp for Czech Jews, but went through many changes and was used for many things. Its role in the Holocaust was determined as early as October 1941. The town of Terezin was converted into a ghetto that was so good at transporting Jews east that the plans for a second ghetto named Kyjov in Moravia were scraped. The conditions in Terezin were the reason why Theresienstadt was so favorable to the Nazis. Gerald Green, the author of *The Artists of Terezin*, explains that Terezin “could be easily controlled, cheaply guarded…the Kleine Festung made a superb Gestapo prison…Nearby was the rail station…Another neighboring town housed Wehrmacht and SS troops.” The SS officials told the Jewish leaders in Prague to create a group of experts to help with the conversion of the Terezin barracks into the Theresienstadt ghetto. Thus, the Aufbaukommando work group was created. It consisted of “police, postal experts, administrators, financial and economic experts...mechanics, drivers, construction workers.” Many of the people who went were volunteers and they were told, “Work at Terezin…and your families will not go east.” The Jews were very relieved. They dreaded the deportation to the East and the mysteries that it held. They felt that the Theresienstadt meant

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4 Gerald Green, *Artists of Terezin*. Pg 42.
better living conditions and “a little town of their own!” Out of the 140,000 workers in the Aufbaukommando who left Prague on November 24, 1941, 112,000 people died. Ultimately, Theresienstadt became a “Model Ghetto”, being used to hold

The old Jews of Germany, the many decorated war veterans, famous Jews of yesteryear whose sudden disappearance could have stirred curiosity and inquisitive questions from within and outside of Germany…15,000 children-prisoners who with the exception of 100, perished in the fires of Nazi hatred…held within her walls many baptized Jews who believed themselves to be Christians, but who according to Nuremberg racial laws were classified as Jews. Despite this, the Theresienstadt ghetto was just a “funnel for death camps”. Prisoners were held here and eventually, they were deported to camps to die. An estimated 88,000 Jews were deported from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz. Within the Theresienstadt ghetto, some 40,000 Jews died from malnutrition and mistreatment. One prisoner of Theresienstadt, Pavel Friedmann, who later died in Auschwitz in 1944, wrote a poem describing his time in the ghetto:

He was the last. Truly the last.  
Such yellowness was bitter and blinding  
Like the sun’s tear shattered on stone. 
That was his true colour.  
And how easily he climbed, and how high,  
Certainly, climbing, he wanted  
To kiss the last of my world. 
I have been here seven weeks,  
‘Ghettoized’.  
Who loved me have found me,  
Daisies call to me,  
And the branches also of the white chestnut in the yard. 
But I haven’t seen a butterfly here.  
That last one was the last one.  
There are no butterflies, here, in the ghetto.

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5 Ibid, 42-43.  
There were other poems written about the conditions of Theresienstadt and their time there.

Franta Bass, a prisoner there, wrote in their poem, “The Garden”, about how the people in Theresienstadt were alive one day, but could die at any moment.

A little garden,
Fragrant and full of roses.
The path is narrow
And a little boy walks along it.
A little boy, a sweet boy,
Like that growing blossom.
When the blossom comes to bloom,
The little boy will be no more.9

One poem, titled “Fear”, was written by a 12-year-old named Eva Picková. This poem perfectly describes the ghetto and how dangerous and horrible it was.

Today the ghetto knows a different fear,
Close in its grip, Death wields an icy scythe.
An evil sickness spreads a terror in its wake,
The victims of its shadow weep and writhe.
Today a father’s heartbeat tells his fright
And mothers bend their heads into their hands.
Now children choke and die with typhus here,
A bitter tax is taken from their bands.
My heart still beats inside my breast
While friends depart for other worlds.
Perhaps it’s better–who can say?–
Than watching this, to die today?
No, no, my God, we want to live!
Not watch our numbers melt away.
We want to have a better world,
We want to work–we must not die!10

Despite the many depressing poems, there was one poem written by Alena Synková that has a slightly more hopeful tone. This is most likely because she wanted to be hopeful about what was ahead for herself and others and she expressed their wishes for what the future should look like.

9 Gerald Green, Artists of Terezin, pg 187.
10 Ibid, pg. 172.
I’d like to go away alone
Where there are other, nicer people,
Somewhere into the far unknown,
There, where no one kills another.
   Maybe more of us,
   A thousand strong,
   Will reach this goal
   Before too long.\textsuperscript{11}

Another prisoner and survivor of the Theresienstadt ghetto, Vera Katz, said “My immediate family perished there. My grandmother, sister, father, and mother died victims of hunger and indescribable conditions of filth and extreme hardship.”\textsuperscript{12} In her book \textit{A Theresienstadt Diary}, Katz translates diary entries written by her deceased mother. At one point in the book, she describes the conditions of Theresienstadt in a footnote

\begin{quote}
The barracks were crowded, dirty and infested with all kinds of vermin. We had little or no water and restricted access to latrines. But worse yet was the all-pervasive fear of deportation Eastward. Persistent rumours had it that somewhere in the East were installations built with the sole purpose of murdering inmates by the thousands…day by day starvation sapped our health and strength. The average inmate received 300 grams of bread daily… a large cup of brown concoction called coffee in the morning and a serving of watery soup, reconstituted “Ersatz” powder in the evening.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

Theresienstadt was a horrible ghetto and the food rations for each prisoner was miniscule. This topped with the rumors of the killing camps weakened the prisoners. To make things worse, when a prisoner became sick, their bread rations were decreased and, in some cases, their bread rations were taken away completely. At the end of the diary, Katz describes some people in the ghetto that made life a little less dreary. She mentions the artists, “whose persistent work lifted some of the drabness and sadness of our hopeless situation, under unimaginable circumstances.”\textsuperscript{14} Leo Haas, Felix Nussbaum, Otto Ungar, and Bedrich Fritta were the artists of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} Ibid, pg 190.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Elsa Katz and Vera Schiff. \textit{A Theresienstadt Diary}. Toronto. Vera Schiff, 2005. Pg. 1.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Ibid, pg. 6
\item \textsuperscript{14} Ibid, pg. 3
\end{itemize}
Theresienstadt. They were some of the artists who were part of what is known as the “Terezin Painters Affair”. They participated in secretly portraying everyday life in the ghetto in their art and then smuggling these pieces out of the ghetto or hiding them within the ghetto. The artists within the ghetto were tasked to create pieces for the Nazis. A few of the many items they created for the Nazis were maps of the ghetto and camps, portraits or prisoners, architectural plans, propaganda to put out to the public, and posters for the ghetto and camps that promoted sanitation despite the dirty surroundings.\textsuperscript{15} The “Terezin Painters Affair” was the resistance against the rules of the Nazis by depicting the true nature of the Theresienstadt ghetto. According to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the description of their mission was “documenting the dreadful conditions of daily camp life, such as the search for food, prisoner transports, starving and hanged prisoners, and the many ill and dying residents”. They always met secretly to draw, and it was always at night when they did their work. They smuggled artwork out of the ghetto to reach outside audiences. They also hid their work throughout the ghetto in walls or buried under the ground.

Bedrich was made the head draftsman of the construction office in Theresienstadt, called Zeichenstube. This group of artists worked to create artwork, maps, charts, and anything else the Germans requested from them. This group was considered among some officers, the elite of the prisoner.\textsuperscript{16} It was here that he met Leo Haas, who was transferred from the railroad construction crew to work here. Fritta formed a group of artists within the Theresienstadt ghetto their sole


\textsuperscript{16} Gerald Green, \textit{Artists of Terezin}, pg 44.
purpose was to depict their struggles through artwork. Their jobs in the department allowed them to gain access to the art supplies that they required to carry out their work.\textsuperscript{17}

They were successful in their secrecy until July 17, 1944, when they were arrested and sent to be questioned by the Terezin Commandant Karl Rahm, two SS officers named Captain Moes and Captain Hans Gunther, and Adolf Eichmann himself. They were accused of distributing propaganda to the outside world and went through many sessions of questioning, beatings, and torture to try and get the truth from them. All that they said when asked why they did what they did was that they were simply drawing what they saw every day. The artists and their families were sent to the Kleine Festung, or the “Little Fortress” where they endured more beatings and questioning.\textsuperscript{18} This was the isolation prison where they put prisoners who broke the rules of the ghetto. No one confessed, and they were convicted of distributing propaganda outside of the camp. Haas and Fritta were sent to Auschwitz. Fritta died soon after from either blood poisoning or dysentery.\textsuperscript{19} Leo Haas was the only one of the artists involved in the “Terezin Painters Affair” who ultimately survived the persecution of the Jews.\textsuperscript{20}

Leo Haas was a Czech Jewish artist. Haas was arrested in Ostrava, Czechoslovakia, for being a communist and sent to the Nisko labor camp. After being arrested again for smuggling items in the labor camp, he and his family were sent to Theresienstadt in 1942. During the day, he mainly worked on architectural charts. At other times, however, he worked in secrecy with other artists to capture the truth of the horrors within Theresienstadt.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{18} Tara Malone, “Butterflies in the Ghetto”
\textsuperscript{20} Tara Malone, “Butterflies in the Ghetto”
\textsuperscript{21} Gerald Green \textit{Artists of Terezin}, pg 1-2.
Haas was transferred around for a while doing various jobs for the Nazis because of his artistic abilities. He was freed in 1945. Both he and his wife survived, but she was very sick for the rest of her life. After liberation, they both adopted Fritta’s orphaned son and they lived in Prague until his wife died in 1955. Haas moved to Berlin after this and lived there while showing his work until he died in 1983.22

Haas dealt mainly with ink sketches on paper. His pieces normally depicted everyday life in the ghetto. Some of his pieces include: the different SS Labor Camp Guards, Jewish forced laborers carrying lumber, a fellow concentration camp member, inmates witnessing a hanging, inmates lined up for roll call. Hass’ style was realistic, and his drawings portrayed an accurate picture of the places he was kept prisoner.23 Most of his artwork was hidden behind a secret panel in the wall by his bunk. He hid his art there along with some of Fritta’s work. It stayed here until after the war when Haas went back to Theresienstadt to recover his work. He found it, untouched, where he had left it before being deported to Auschwitz. His artwork remains, to this day, serving as a testament to his pain.24 (Figure 1)

Otto Ungar was another Jewish man in Theresienstadt. Before the war, Ungar, his wife, and daughter lived in Brno. Here, he taught at a Jewish secondary school and was an artist on the side. Anyone who knew him described him as a quiet and reserved person who tended to be anxious most of the time. Despite his nature, Ungar still participated in portraying the ghetto to spite the Nazis and spread the truth. He was arrested by the Nazis when they found out and thrown into the Kleine Festung, or “Little Fortress”. He went through daily beatings and torture.

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22 Tara Malone, “Butterflies in the Ghetto”
24 Tara Malone, “Butterflies in the Ghetto”
The guards hurt him so much, that his hand was broken, and two fingers amputated. While in the hospital after the Holocaust, the doctor noticed the horrible conditions of his body, “The hand. It had been crushed, mutilated, two fingers amputated... An artist, he’d offended the Germans somehow. He’d been made to pay for it. To make the punishment fit the crime.” In the face of these mutilations, Ungar continued to draw. After being forced to go on one of the worst death marches from Europe to Buchenwald in 1945, and then surviving the march, Ungar became sick with tuberculosis. Despite being so close to death, Ungar managed to find little scraps of paper and carry out the same mission that he, Leo Haas, and Bedrich Fritta had set out to accomplish back in Theresienstadt. Some of his fellow prisoners said, “they had seen him crouched on his cold bed, hungry, silent, morose. In his maimed right hand, he clutched a lump of coal. With pained, awkward movements, he tried to draw pictures on a scrap of paper.” Ungar did not survive. He was alive to see the liberation of Buchenwald in 1945, but a month later, he died from illness. Despite the hardship and punishment he endured for drawing, Ungar continued to create art of the camp. Ungar was so determined to show everyone the truth that he drew through the pain and the beatings to show the world what he went through. (Figure 2)

In 1930, Bedrich Fritta came to Paris to study art. He was a very talented and outgoing man during his life. In 1941, he was sent to Theresienstadt with others to set up the ghetto. Due to his talents, Fritta became the head of the ghetto’s construction office where the draftsmen drew anything needed by the Nazis. He and Leo Haas met here and began to secretly make their own art. While in the ghetto, one of Fritta’s most prominent pieces was the illustrated

25 Ibid  
26 Gerald Green. Artists of Terezin, pg 3  
27 Tara Malone, “Butterflies in the Ghetto”  
28 Gerald Green. Artists of Terezin, pg 3.  
29 Tara Malone, “Butterflies in the Ghetto”  
30 Ibid
children’s book he created in 1944 for his son’s third birthday. It was from this book that his son, Thomas, learned to read. The pictures in the book portrayed a world extremely different from the one that they were currently living in. One picture portrayed Fritta’s son standing on his suitcase and looking out of the window at a bird in the sky. The caption says, “To Tommy on his third birthday in Terezin—January 22, 1944.” 31 Another picture is of a child reading a book and the caption reads, “Tommy praying.” 32 There is another page with a self-portrait of Fritta and a portrait of his wife and it says “My mother, My father.” 33 There is a picture on another page of Tommy playing in a beautiful, flower-filled field where the sun is shining and the Holocaust is not real. It is a peaceful and care-free illustration and captioned, “This is not a fairy tale. It’s true!” 34 The next few pictures are pictures asking what Tommy could grow up to be. They are captioned, “And what would you like to be? An engineer?...Or a boxer?...Or a painter?...And also not a general!...But not a businessman, I beg you!...Or a big detective?” 35 Fritta was also arrested and sent to Auschwitz with Haas and Ungar. On the way here, he got severely sick, and on arrival to Auschwitz, he was sent to the infirmary. His friends visited when they could and brought gifts of smuggled food, but because of his deathly ill state, he could not hold anything down. Bedrich Fritta died eight days after he arrived in Auschwitz. His wife and son were still back in Theresienstadt, and about a month later, his wife died. Their son survived the war and was later adopted by Leo Haas and his wife. 36 (Figure 3)

Fritta’s art is very distinct, and he often played around with light and shadow. Throughout the course of the Holocaust, Fritta created more than 100 pieces. They were sketches

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31 Gerald Green, *Artists of Terezin*, pg 44-45
32 Ibid, pg 46.
33 Ibid, pg 47.
34 Ibid, pg 48.
36 Tara Malone, “Butterflies in the Ghetto”
and illustrations. He mainly worked with ink on paper. Fritta’s art served the purpose of informing the public on the state of the ghetto. He sacrificed a lot just to be able to tell his story, and in the end, it led to his death. His efforts and sacrifice live on in his haunting pieces of death, hearses, gaunt figures, and the horrible living conditions.

There were other artists within Theresienstadt who also secretly drew: Karel Fleischmann and Felix Nussbaum. They drew to remember what they went through. Fleischmann said, “I tried to occasionally pick up a pencil and a pad. I would pause for a moment, in the middle of the chaos all around me, either in a corner of the yard, or in the sick room, to quickly sketch something, in order to remember.” Fleischmann was sent to Auschwitz and died in 1944. During his time in Theresienstadt he mainly captured what life was like. Fleischmann’s art is described by the World Holocaust Remembrance Center as, “documenting daily life in the ghetto, Fleischmann painted portraits in confident and concise lines, providing a critical and ironic view of ghetto functionaries.” Fleishmann has a total of 18 works that were found after the war.

(Figure 4)

Felix Nussbaum was arrested in 1940 in Belgium; however, he escaped and went into hiding in Brussels along with his wife. He eventually was caught and sent to Auschwitz where he and his wife were killed in 1944. One very popular painting of his is called The Refugee. Nussbaum painted it in 1939. It depicts a Jewish man at the end of a table, crouched on a stool. He is obviously very upset. At the other end of the table there is a globe. Walter Smerling, the

37 Ibid
show’s co-curator, comments “In the painting, he asks himself, ‘Where can I go in this world, where can I live, where can I work and exist?’”40 (Figure 5)

There were other Jewish artists who were in other ghettos and camps besides Theresienstadt. Ella Iranyi was an artist from Vienna, Austria. In March of 1938, Austria was annexed into Germany. This meant that the harsh ideals and laws enacted throughout Germany years prior, such as the Nuremberg Laws, Aryanization, and the Sterilization Laws, were put into effect in Austria. In 1939, Ella Iranyi was captured and then deported to the Izbica ghetto in Poland. During her time there, her artwork at her home was hidden. She died in Izbica in April of 1942. After the war, her artwork from Vienna was recovered and serves to commemorate her and the struggle others like her faced during the Holocaust. Her art style was grim. One piece has a skeleton posed to look as if it might be dancing with other animals while people seem to be in pain around it.41 This could possibly represent the Nazi idea that Jews were to be treated as animals because of their inferiority. (Figure 6)

Sophia Kalski was originally held in the Trembowla ghetto with her mother, Sarah, and her father, Natan. The family was forced into this ghetto as the Nazis invaded and occupied their part of Poland in 1942. The ghetto was in Trembowla, Poland, what is now Terebovlia, Ukraine. Her father, Natan, escaped the ghetto and made his way to Lvov, but he never found freedom because the authorities put him into the Lvov ghetto. Sarah attempted to send Sophia, who at that time was 10 years old, to her father but he had died in January of 1943 from typhus. This meant Sophia had to escape and make her way back to Trembowla. While the ghetto was being liquidized, Sophia and her mother escaped to Humniska, Poland, where Anna and Voitek

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41 Iranyi, Ella. Untitled. Ink and wax crayon on cardboard, Vienna, 1937.
Gutonski, the former neighbors of Sophia’s grandparents, hid them in their barn in an underground hiding spot until March 1944, when the Soviets came and liberated the areas around them.42

Sophia was a young child at the time of the Holocaust. In the beginning, Sophia was 10, and near the end of the Holocaust, Sophia was around 12 years old. Sophia mostly painted after the end of the Holocaust. Her art served to remember and reflect upon what she went through during her younger years. One painting she made shows a young girl with messy blonde hair. She looks very gaunt and sick. She has a Jewish armband on her left arm, and is wearing a blue coat and a red scarf. Behind her is a wooden fence with barbed wire. Sophia Kalski comments about her piece.

I always see myself as a small girl. The small girl in me. I feel it cannot change. Even at the beginning of old age, I remember her--the little girl. I identify with her image and everything else I push away. Everything else I push away, there is a great denial in me, the little girl in me refuses to disappear in the shadows of the years and the events chase me throughout my life, and don't let me brush them off. To grow up from the beginning always sweet and I listen to her endless story, she will never die and never disappear from me, this little big girl from the Holocaust.43

Kalski painted to remember. She painted to make sure that the horrors that happened to her are not forgotten, not by the world around her, but by her own denial, fear, and sadness she feels within herself. As she says in her statement, “she will never die and never disappear from me, this little big girl from the Holocaust.” Sophia Kalski’s past plays an important role in her art, and by painting these remembrance pieces, they also serve as a reminder to others. Some of her art shows what she went through in the ghetto, and some of her other paintings show what her

43 Ibid
life was like. There is one painting that depicts the murder of a Jewish woman on the streets. Kalski states: “A woman walked in the ghetto and all of a sudden, a German murdered her for no reason. Hearing the screaming, I walked out and I saw four policemen removing her wrapped in a blanket and drops of blood falling on the road.”

Ghetto life was rough, especially for a girl so young. Kalski experienced so much hardship through her childhood, that art was her way of coping in her later years. Some of her pieces included: people of the Lvov ghetto hiding in a bunker, her escaping the Lvov ghetto through a fence, and one of kids playing out in the ghetto in 1942. She commented on the latter picture:

Most of the time the children were inside without an opportunity to go out, and only when there was a moment of peace, the children would play in the courtyard under the supervision of their parents. The game that they were playing was always the same--building bridges. The game itself lacked the joy of childhood. Already then, the children didn’t know how to laugh.

Her paintings are like an interview or book about her experiences. They share her hardships with the world and shows that the Holocaust was every bit as cruel as the books describe, sometimes even more cruel. Her works give a truthful first-hand account and insight into the lives of the Jewish people in the ghettos. (Figure 7)

Imre Amos was a Hungarian Jewish artist. He was born in 1907. Later on in his life, Amos married Margit Anna. Margit was a painter and the two lived happily in Hungary. He was arrested and assigned to multiple forced labor groups in 1940. After assignments, Amos was allowed to go home until his next assignment. While home, he exhibited and produced more art along with his wife, who was a painter. Amos was murdered in 1944 at the Ohrdruf

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44 Ibid
46 Ibid
47 Ibid, children playing in the Lwow ghetto
concentration camp, which was located near the town of Gotha.\textsuperscript{48} This camp was created in 1944 as a subcamp of Buchenwald. It served the purpose of providing forced labor for a railroad that led to a communications building. Ohrdruf was also the first Nazi camp that the United States troops liberated during WWII. On April 12, 1945, General Dwight D. Eisenhower visited the camp. He contacted the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington D.C to describe the horrible things that he saw in Ohrdruf,

The things I saw beggar description. While I was touring the camp I encountered three men who had been inmates… I interviewed them… The visual evidence and the verbal testimony of starvation, cruelty and bestiality were so overpowering as to leave me a bit sick. In one room, where they were piled up twenty or thirty naked men, killed by starvation… I made the visit deliberately, in order to be in a position to give first-hand evidence of these things if ever, in the future, there develops a tendency to charge these allegations merely to “propaganda.”\textsuperscript{49}

During the Holocaust, Imre Amos created a series titled, Zsido Unnepek. The series consists of 14 prints of different Jewish holidays. He used a technique called linocuts to create these prints. He carved his art on a linoleum sheet, covered it with ink, and then placed a piece of paper on it to create the lines in the art. He began these pieces in 1940 when he was home after completing each of his assignments as a forced laborer for the Nazis. The cover of the series has a small bit of text and part of it talks about how there were 150 copies made from the linoleum plates that he created for the pieces.\textsuperscript{50} This art was a way to defy the Nazis. One goal of the Nazis during the Holocaust was to dehumanize the Jews and depriving them of their identity in the camps was a way to do this. The art created by Irme Amos, however, was a way to keep his, and many other identities of Jewish people, secure during the Holocaust. The subject of the prints, Jewish

holidays, was used to show what Amos believed in, and that no matter the trials he faced, Judaism was an important part of his life and beliefs. (Figure 8)

Ava Hegedish, a Yugoslavian Jew, was born in 1926. Her father was born into a Jewish family, and her mother converted from Roman Catholic to Jewish. She also had an older sister who was born in 1921. In the late 1930s, Germany had been rapidly taking land in Europe, Austria in 1938, Czechoslovakia in March 1939, and Poland in September 1939. The family fled for fear of being next and went to the capital of Yugoslavia-- Belgrade. While there, the family tried its hardest to blend in. They did not join a synagogue and tried to act as non-Jewish as possible so that they were not arrested. In 1941, German troops arrived in Yugoslavia. The Jews in Belgrade were beginning to be rounded up and to prevent his family from being taken, Ava’s father made a plan. The family was not registered and they each went into hiding separately. This was what he believed to be the best course of action for all of the family to survive the Holocaust. Her father went to Novi Sad to help his mother. Ava’s mother used her birth certificate as her identity because it said she was Roman Catholic because she was born into that religion, not Judaism. Ava’s sister married her fiancé who was Greek Orthodox, and they falsified the certificate to make the marriage date prewar. Her mother and sister also hid in apartments in the city. Ava had no way of falsifying papers or hiding, so she went into the countryside where she hid on a farm owned by her brother-in-law’s relatives. She worked on the farm as payment for letting her hide there. Her life here was hard. Ava could not understand the dialect here and her mannerisms made her stick out like a sore thumb. She pretended to be deaf and mute and never went outside of the farm. She hid in a shed with no running water and was very lonely. While on the farm, Ava got a hold of paper scraps and on them she drew. Her drawings were “a way to hold onto situations, feelings, and people, as well as her sense of self.”
Ava was hidden on the farm until the area was liberated in 1944. Ava later found out that her sister was killed just before liberation and her father and grandmother were sent to Auschwitz. She found her mother alive, and eventually applied to the Belgrade Academy of Art. She got in and received a scholarship and she studied set design at a film school in Prague. In 1949, Ava and her mother immigrated to Israel where she began to exhibit her pieces about the Holocaust. In 1985, she married an American and moved to Chicago.

Ava’s collection consists of ten drawings and two paintings. Since Ava was mostly on the farm during her hiding, many of her drawings were self-portraits, landmarks around her, her hiding spot in the shed and portraits of her mother when she visited her once during the war. One of her paintings was from before she went into hiding. She painted the Jewish boats that would come into the docks of the city and were prevented from docking because they were Jewish. This painting was made in 1941 and she used watercolor paint. Ava’s art was her way of coping during the Holocaust. She was very lonely when in hiding, so this was her way of passing the time and remembering those in her family that she had not seen in a while. (Figure 9)

Art was a prominent aspect of Auschwitz. The SS officials had a building called, The Lagermuseum. It was a sort of museum where artifacts confiscated from the prisoners on arrival were displayed. Items such as antiques, prayer books, and art were all displayed. They also had artistically inclined prisoners create pieces for this museum. The art created for this place was a lot different than the art made in secret. Officials often ordered pieces to be made that portrayed landscapes, German legends, or peaceful scenes. One piece is a painting of a ship on the ocean with a rainbow in the sky behind it.51 While these pieces were being made for the Nazis, on the side, artists were creating pieces for themselves. This was a very popular thing among prisoners.

Many people wanted their portraits done in order to being documented and remembered. One prisoner in Auschwitz, Franciszek Jaźwiecki, drew over a hundred portraits of prisoners. In many of his drawings, the only detail is in the face, and the torso is just a line drawing with very minimal details. The one detail that is present in every drawing on every torso of the subject, is their identification number and the triangle patch to show why they were in the camp. This detail is the only thing that is almost as prominent as the details of the face. (Figure 10) This was helpful for many historians in Holocaust museums because it put a face and name to the identification number. Jaźwiecki’s portraits survived the war because he hid them in his bed and clothes. In 1946, after he died, his art was donated to the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.

There were other artists in Auschwitz. A book was found which contained 22 drawings created around 1943. The artist was unknown, but the drawings depicted the extermination of the prisoners of Birkenau in detail. The artist put the sketches in a bottle and hid them in the foundation of a building near the Birkenau crematoriums. Art historian, Agnieszka Sieradzka, at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum comments,

Some would be surprised that art existed in a place like that, in a place with crematories, but art was especially needed here behind the barbed wire, because the art could save a part of their human dignity. The art was a hope for a better future. The art was escape from the brutal reality of the camp to another, better world.52

The art from Auschwitz-Birkenau and the other camps and ghettos are very important. These pieces give valuable insight to the everyday life of a prisoner. They are also valuable because

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while the artist might have died, their art often survived the war and was found by others. This allowed even the dead to share their horrific stories to the world.

Dina Babbit was an artist who survived the horrors of Auschwitz. Before the Holocaust, she was living in Prague, Czechoslovakia, where she was studying art. The Nazis arrested her and her mother in 1942 and soon after, they were shipped to Theresienstadt. A year later, they were deported to Auschwitz. When they arrived the two women were sorted and deemed able to work. Babbit was forced to paint the portraits of Gypsy prisoners. She survived the Holocaust and after everything ended, she emigrated to the United States where she got married and became an animator. Her main medium of choice was watercolor. The reason she had to paint was the camp officers thought that watercolor paintings were able to capture the skin tones of the Gypsies better than what a camera could do. Babbit’s personal reason for painting these pieces was because they served as a reminder of the gypsies who were going to be sent to their death soon and not remembered by many. It was essentially the same reason many artists were asked to create during this time, to remember what a person looked like. She could have been the last person to ever capture the likeness of these people. Her art shows the temporariness of human life and how if not captured on paper, they can disappear from the world in a second. Seven of her artworks survived the Holocaust and in her remaining years, Babbit fought the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum for the custody of her paintings. They had not realized she was still alive and she was asked to identify her work. She went and did what they asked, but she died later in July of 2009, so she never actually got to take her artwork back while alive.53 (Figure 11)

There are many reasons why a person can choose to create art: to tell a story, to remember someone or something, to make money, to make something expressive and beautiful,

to explain their emotions, the process of creating helps them with their troubles and emotions, or even just because they like to make art. The artists of the Holocaust, however, did so much more. They painted to survive. They painted to keep themselves going. They painted to defy the Nazis. They painted to remember. They painted to warn against any actions like the Holocaust in the future. Their art serves as a reminder to all that the Holocaust was a horrible event that caused the murder of approximately 6 million Jewish people. Their art serves as a warning to the future generations that the systematic murders of the Holocaust could never happen again. Like the famous painter, Picasso said, “…painting is designed as a mediator between us and the world around it and it is not necessarily an aesthetic operation, but a way of acquiring power and giving concrete form to our fears, hopes, and wishes.”\

Bibliography

Amos, Imre. *Jewish Feasts*. Ink and pencil on paper, 1940.


Figure 2, Otto Ungar

Portrait of an Old Woman by Otto Ungar
Figure 4, Karel Fleischmann

Figure 5, Felix Nussbaum

Figure 6, Ella Itranyi
Figure 7, Sophia Kalski
Figure 10, Franciszek Jaźwiecki
Figure 11, Dina Babbit