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Brundibar in Terezin: Music as Spiritual Resistance During the Holocaust



# Brundibar in Terezin: Music as Spiritual Resistance During the Holocaust

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When one thinks of the Nazi concentration camps of the Third Reich, several thoughts and images come to mind: emaciated prisoners, torture, evil, racism, suffering, death. These camps were an attempt to destroy entire religious and cultural groups deemed to be undesirable, and the horrors that were carried out remain an irreconcilable blight on the history of all humanity. When one thinks of this tragic era, music usually does not make the short list of concerns. Music did, however, play an important role in the lives of camp prisoners in a variety of different ways. Of all the Nazi camps, Terezin had the most vibrant cultural scene, including the performance of operas, oratorios, orchestral works, chamber music, and the like. One of the most frequently performed works was Brundibar, Hans Krasa's opera for children; it was staged fifty five times in Terezin over the course of its short existence. Brundibar's popularity arose from its thinly disguised political message: we will overcome our adversity through struggle, as the Jewish community had so many times in the past. For the prisoners of Terezin, Brundibar and other such works functioned as a form of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>Pearce, "Brundibar at Theresienstadt A People's Struggle to Maintain a Level of Musical Culture in the Face of Imminent Peril." *Opera Quarterly* 10, no. 4 (1994): 6.

spiritual resistance- a way to defy the Nazi system through the power of music.

Though not written in Terezin, Brundibar is firmly rooted in the clandestine musical activity of the Jewish people after the Nazi bans on Jewish culture. This opera, written by Hans Krasa with librettist Adolf Hoffrneister, was composed in 1938 for a Czech Ministry of Education and Culture competition.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, the contest never took place, and the opera went unperformed until the winter of 1942-43, when it received its secret premiere in Prague at a Jewish orphanage for boys to approximately one hundred and fifty invited guests.<sup>3</sup> Since the Nazis had banned all Jewish musical activity, the performance of the work was a dangerous act of defiance. In fact, by the time the work was first performed, its composer had already been sent to Terezin. Even before it was performed in Terezin, Brundibar had been used as a resistance work. By 1943, the entire original cast of the opera was interned in Terezin, and the opera began its long run of performances.<sup>5</sup> Krasa's work continued to serve as a resistance work within the camp setting, expressing a political message within the context of Nazi oppression.

The plot of *Brundibar* is simplistic: Annette and Little Joe are the children of a single mother, who is ill. The mother visits a doctor, who tells them that she needs milk in order to recover. They are too poor to buy milk, so the children decide to imitate Brundibar, an organ grinder, and sing in the marketplace to earn some. Brundibar chases them away, because they are singing in his territory. The children later meet a sparrow, a cat, and a dog, who along with the children of the town, sing a lullaby and earn the necessary money. Brundibar then steals the money, but the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Joe Pearce, "Brundibar at Theresienstadt," 7.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Ibid., 81.

children and animals are able to catch him, recover the money and chase him out of town. The opera ends with the chorus singing in the market square about their victory over the evil organ grinder. The themes of overcoming evil, the triumph of the 'underdog' and strength through unity are apparent throughout the text of the work. The appeal of such themes was no doubt felt by the prisoners, and their implicit meaning in the camp circumstances must have provided hope, despite their current situation.

Brundibar received its Terezin premiere on September 23, 1943 in a small barracks auditorium.<sup>7</sup> All of the shows were performed there, with the exception of a performance in the much larger and better equipped gymnasium for the International Red Cross Committee.<sup>8</sup> The Nazis used it as a propaganda work to show the committee that the camp prisoners were being treated humanely- clearly, they missed the political nature of the libretto. Because Terezin was a relatively stable camp with tolerable living conditions, the majority of the cast was able to stay with the show for its full run, though some members were shipped out to Auschwitz earlier than others.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the work was able to maintain stability in its performances, which was a factor as to why it was performed so many times, and its subsequent popularity.

Located in Czechoslovakia, Terezin (Theresienstadt in German) was a in many ways an unusual concentration camp; it was not a death camp like Auschwitz, nor was it designed for hard labour. People were not routinely gassed, shot, or tortured; rather, they frequently died due to the lack of proper nutrition, lack of medical care, or from conditions brought about by

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Pearce, 80.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Joza Karas, Music in Terezin 1941-1945 (Hillsdale: Pendragon Press, 2008), 83.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Ibid.

tremendous overcrowding. 10 As music critic Joe Pearce notes, "Obviously, it was an awful place to be, but if you had to be in a concentration camp, Theresienstadt [Terezin] was the one to aim for." 11 Essentially, Terezin acted as a transit camp; a sort of way station for the larger internment centers; the majority of those sent out from the camp were later exterminated at Auschwitz. 12 It was also used as a "model camp" - a 'cleaned up' version of the other, more sinister camps - in order to squelch rumours of Nazi atrocities. 13 Terezin is the most famous of the model camps, as it was inspected by both the International Red Cross and representatives of the King of Denmark on different occasions.<sup>14</sup> Again, these relatively bearable conditions allowed for stability, and artistic endeavours such as Brundihar flourished as a result. The unique environment of Terezin allowed for such circumstances- it is unlikely that such a coherent production could have occurred at many other camps.

Like all of the transit camps, Terezin was short lived- it only ran for a total of three and a half years. <sup>15</sup> Because of this, it had no opportunity to develop into a hard labour or extermination centre in the way that some of the earlier camps did. It was also designed to house a population of higher social status than the other camps: people of high regard in the Czech-Jewish cultural community, such as First World War heroes, were imprisoned there. <sup>16</sup> Though German, Dutch, and Danish Jews

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Pearce, "Brundibar at Theresienstadt" 3.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Alvin Goldfarb"Theatrical Activities in Nazi Concentration Camps." *Performing Arts Journal* 1, no. 2 (1976): 3.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>15</sup> Karas, Music in Terezin, 1.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Pearce, "Brundibar at Theresienstadt" 3.

would eventually end up in Terezin, its original purpose gives an explanation of why the camp was so culturally vibrant.

It seems that the relatively relaxed setting of Terezin contributed greatly to the amount of music that was performed there. Because the camp was not designed for hard labour or extermination, the prisoners had a measure of spare time. As such, a great many musical works were performed there; Tosca, Aida, Carmen, Die Fledermaus, and La Boheme were among the operas staged in Terezin. Since Terezin was a "model camp," the Nazis oversaw the production of these 'safe' classics for the purposes of propaganda. 17 Many works, including banned and politically controversial works, were staged less 'officially,' and with varying degrees of clandestine activity. 18 Some of the works of a controversial nature were performed publicly but simply overlooked, while others were entirely hidden from the officers through secret rehearsals and performances. Brundibar was staged in both contexts- as a semi-legal piece and as deliberate propaganda used by the Nazis. The Nazis chose to use Brundibar in a propaganda performance, despite its obvious political message; because the work is so musically accessible, it is easy to overlook its subtext.

It is important to note that while the level of organization and number of productions mounted in Terezin was unusual for the Nazi system, the use of music for a variety of purposes within the camps was not. Prisoners in the most severe concentration camps, such as Auschwitz, had very little opportunity to stage works the way they could in Terezin In such camps, formal cultural or musical events were virtually impossible. As such, the majority of musical activity in Auschwitz was informal singing, and it focused on the conditions in the camp. The song

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Goldfarb, "Theatrical Activities in Nazi Concentration Camps." 10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Ibid., 4.

'Gazownia' is a good example of the sentiments expressed in these songs:

> There is one gas chamber, Where we will all get to know each other, Where we will all meet each other, Maybe tomorrow—who knows? 19

Though musical activities were difficult to create, it would be simply untrue to say that there were no organized musical events in the more harsh camps such as Auschwitz; rather, they were less frequent and more secretive. As Goldfarb notes, the most common cultural activities in these camps was the presentation of clandestine programs of songs and readings in the relative privacy of the barracks.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, Holocaust historian Dr. Mark Dvorzhetski pointed out that these cultural activities, such as group singing, were held in the barracks of the Jewish Estonian camps, even though these were some of the worst hard labour sites in the entire camp system. 21 This is a testament to the power of music- even those living in the worst conditions felt it necessary to continue their musical activities.

The most interesting works performed in the camps were those that functioned as outlets for resistance; Brundibar is only one of some fifty musical works written (or scored) in Terezin that have survived.<sup>22</sup> For example the song "Our Town is Burning" was sung frequently in Auschwitz, both as a lament for the internees and an assurance that many previous oppressions had been overcome throughout Jewish history.<sup>23</sup> Within Terezin, there were many political pieces performed; Karl Schwenk's The

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Shirli Gilbert, Music in the Holocaust, 152.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Goldfarb, "Theatrical Activities in Nazi Concentration Camps." 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Pearce, "Brundibar at Theresienstadt" 7. <sup>23</sup> Goldfarb, "Theatrical Activities in Nazi Concentration Camps" 6.

Last Cyclist was a popular work. It is based on the old saying that "Jews and cyclists are responsible for all misfortunes." The plot is a clear parody of the Nazi system: all cyclists and those who cannot prove that their ancestors had been pedestrians for six generations are deported to an island by the cruel, insane rulers of an imaginary country. Only one cyclist survives; he is exhibited in a zoo and everything is blamed on him. He does prevail in the end, and the insane rulers are defeated. <sup>24</sup> The Last Cyclist is another example of the political and satirical nature of works being performed in Terezin; despite Nazi control, prisoners were able to express their grievances in a musical context.

The Last Cyclist is less veiled in its meaning than Brundibar, but both have strong political meaning. According to Krasa, the character Brundibar became a personification of evil. <sup>25</sup> The audience would no doubt have associated him with Hitler and the entire Nazi regime that had forced them into the camp. It shows the children, representing the prisoners, triumphing over this evil in the end. This appealed to Jewish prisoners- it mirrors the struggles and triumphs that have occurred throughout the history of their people. The poet Emil Saudek altered the last few lines of the text in the final chorus to make the theme of political resistance clear:

Become members of our band, Right and justice we'll defend. Dictator will be defeated, United we'll win our stand. We shall give a good example To all people in this land.

He who loves his dad,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Goldfarb, "Theatrical Activities in Nazi Concentration Camps" 6.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Joza Karas, Music in Terezin, 88.

Mother and native land, Who wishes tyrant's end, Join us hand in hand And be our welcome friend.

He who loves justice and will Abide by it, and who is not afraid, Is our friend and can play with us <sup>26</sup>

The fact that the opera is performed entirely by children, and was composed in an accessible style, was a significant factor in its popularity. Moreover, its political implications were highly relevant at the time; according to Goldfarb, *Brundibar* was an allegorical attack on Hitler's Europe.<sup>27</sup> The eventual triumph of the children as protagonists is important to the work on several levels: it represents the prisoners triumphing over the Nazi regime, the spirit of the Jewish people surviving adversity, and an optimistic view on the future of the children performing the work.

It is difficult to see why the Nazis did not see the destruction of politically charged musical works within concentration camps as important; they thought that such works represented no real form of resistance, and thus their production did not matter. Even modern scholarship tends to ignore nonviolent resistances; the major scholarly texts devoted to the Holocaust tend to discuss armed resistance, not spiritual. The most discussed topic in Holocaust resistance is the Warsaw uprising, which represented an armed struggle between the

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Pearce, "Brundibar at Theresienstadt" 8.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Goldfarb "Theatrical Activities in Nazi Concentration Camps" 10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Eliyana R. Adler, "No Raisins, No Almonds" 51.

authorities and prisoners of the Polish capital's ghetto. This is aptly expressed by Yehuda Bauer:

The main expression of Jewish resistance could not be armed, could not be violent. There were no arms; the nearby population was largely indifferent or hostile.

Without arms, those condemned to death resisted by maintaining morale, by refusing to starve to death, by observing religious and national traditions. Armed resistance is a marginal comment on the Holocaust but it is written in very large letters indeed. <sup>29</sup>

The materials for armed resistance were not available to the prisoners in these camps, and yet they had to survive. By actively maintaining their cultural institutions in the context of the concentration camps, they made a powerful statement, both on about their will to survive and the power of music.

The Nazis made many attempts to destroy the humanity of those living in the camps- be it through inhumane treatment, starvation, torture, or a plethora of other methods. When it comes to our humanity, however, music is central in maintaining cultural cohesion and expressing identity. By inadequately addressing cultural institutions as important resistance tools, the Nazis could not be successful in fully dehumanizing the camp prisoners. *Brundibar* expresses many themes related to resistance, struggle and survival, and this is probably why it was so frequently performed in Terezin. The music making process can be used to unite people by itself, but coupled with the message of uniting against evil, *Brundibar* becomes a powerful force for spiritual resistance.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Yehuda, Bauer. A History of the Holocaust. (Danbury: Franklin Watts, 2001) 274.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Adler, "No Raisins, No Almonds" 52.

Neither *Brundibar* nor Terezin is unique; in all of the camps, music and other cultural activities were performed by prisoners. Some of these works were actively political, and others were not, but all served the valuable purpose of helping prisoners to remember hopes, dreams, and desires beyond the drudgery of the camps. Ultimately, most of the performers of Brundibar did not survive to see the end of the Nazi regime. But to lament their fate is, though important, to miss the point of spiritual resistance. Yes, the children did not survive; neither did many of the audience members. Their deaths are inexcusable examples of the depths of evil and hatred in the world. And yet, in some sense, these artists have shown us the strength of humanity through musical expression. Ultimately, though they did not survive, the performers and audience members of *Brundibar* maintained their humanity through the strength they found in music.

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