
What Theresienstadt Taught Me

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Prior to the day trip I was attending to Theresienstadt ghetto and concentration camp, organised by Protestant Theological Faculty of Charles University, I spent some time researching current public and political opinions on war remembrance, particularly in reference to the Holocaust. To my surprise, there was substantial negativity, even during conversations with my university friends on the topic of my visiting Theresienstadt, with some of their responses being along the lines of “why would anyone wish to visit such a place”. It appears that our generation is entering a chapter where people are coming out to debate the importance, significance and representation of the World Wars and the artefacts remaining from them. With the increasing politicalisation of war remembrance in Europe, people are confidently querying like never before, the relevance, sacredness and justification of its symbolic aspects (an example in my lifetime is the British tradition of wearing the Poppy flower in November) and of the hard, existing evidence of the Holocaust like the Nazi concentration camps, in our society. Why is it that we have not only kept such horrific relics of the past, but have actively preserved them?



Our tour of students drove for just under an hour outside of Prague, until we were dropped off in the bleak, quiet town of Terezín, where our lovely tour guide from the Theresienstadt Ghetto Museum (I highly recommend booking a tour with them if you do decide to visit), who continuously impressed me by flitting in between at least three languages throughout the day, met us. He began with a summarisation talk of the site's history, and allowed us to browse the exceptionally detailed and stimulating exhibition inside the museum, comprised of numerous photographs of officers and prisoners, an interactive model of the camp, survivors' stories, information placards, maps. Most unforgettably, there were rooms dedicated to a vast display of the prisoners' creativity – original drawings by the children of Terezín encased in glass, of their homes and families, photographs of plays performed at the camp, compositions, theatre scripts and completed novels. Through the speakers of the exhibition rooms, surviving sound recordings were being played of the prisoners singing, acting, fluently performing piano and violin.

An even larger exhibition was devoted to five famous artists (Bedřich Fritta, Otto Ungar, Leo Haas, Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer, Peter Kien) who were forced to produce propaganda material by the Nazis during their imprisonment yet courageously persisted with and concealed their personal paintings, drawings and writing depicting the horrific daily hardships of the camp. A considerable quantity of this work was treacherously snuck past the ghetto guards in to the hands of the outside world, of which some successfully made it through, some were found and destroyed, and most were found post-liberation. Today, historians and artists have interpreted their artwork as a practical mechanism, an endeavour to cope, survive, a plea for help to the outside world, and a rebellious one – a message of community, faith, courage and a channel of truth to the world at what was happening behind the towering walls of a propaganda camp. Today, their illustrations of life in the camp and the Nazi regime rest in Theresienstadt museum in perfect condition. Something that endeared and captured me was the durable effort of the museum to research and print every single author's name, age, nationality, place and date of death (for most of the authors, this was Auschwitz-Birkenau) next to their work – whether

it was a child's scribble on a piece of paper, or a skilled piece by a professional. It was here that the reality of where I was hit me, where I passed from a theoretical, classroom understanding of the Holocaust to a more tangible one. Our group next walked the streets of Terezín ghetto, which was originally a garrison town built in 1780 by Emperor Joseph II and named after his mother, Maria Theresa of Austria. The previous military presence was visibly evident in the distinguishing layout of Theresienstadt: tall walls, underground passageways, slit windows and fortresses. This laid the path for its later conversion and control under the Nazis into a "model ghetto" or propaganda camp. Behind this deception, it was used to congregate Jews from many countries across Europe, which is commemorated by a particular concrete memorial spread across a garden, dedicated to the specific countries of the Jewish victims (the Netherlands, France, Germany, Austria, Belgium, Hungary, Denmark, Poland, Romania and so on). The guide informed us that Theresienstadt was an organisational instrument to the Nazis, as its location in central Europe permitted the concentration and large transfer of Jews to the extermination camps. The train tracks which performed this transportation are still present in Terezín today, although they are somewhat damaged and incomplete. The first recorded arrivals to the ghetto were in 1941 and more than 150,000 people passed through its gates – 88,000 were transferred to extermination camps and 35,000 perished in Theresienstadt, primarily due to starvation, unsanitary living conditions, disease, direct killings and beatings.

We were guided across the streets of the ghetto, which were grey, remote and seemingly untouched in areas, some of the damaged paths and buildings left as they were, and the surrealism of it all was intensified whenever the tour guide stood still to announce: "here was where x happened". Nonetheless, people still live and work in Terezín, as a community were born and grew up there – I saw a few people chatting, sitting in the park, popping to the local shop, which was a dramatic and moving contrast to the guide's morbid monologue of what happened there. It was the pitch black prison cells in the main fortress, the cramped stone sleeping quarters, the incinerator and autopsy room that left the greatest impressions on my memory. Yet I was intrigued by another contrast in Theresienstadt: scattered across all of these haunting places was a string of memorials, names, quotes, poems, statues, manifesting relentless messages of recognition, unity, hope, love and remembrance wherever we went. The most outstanding memorials to me were the Jewish cemetery and the gigantic Stars of David, both of which were covered in stones laid from its many visitors, and you will find countless other historical and religious points of interest across Terezín, such as abstract art statues, a tiny restored synagogue, hidden plaques in Hebrew, scriptural references carved in stone.



On the journey home, I revisited my original question of why key facilitators of the Holocaust, such as concentration camps, should or should not be preserved by post war society. Visiting Theresienstadt was unspeakably emotive and troublesome to contextualise and imagine but at the time, I realised that by facing the actuality of such a place, a long-lasting change in your way of thinking occurs, and a few others on the tour agreed with me. Before I had ever visited a concentration camp (I have also been to Sachsenhausen, near Berlin), my knowledge and understanding of the Holocaust was faceless, detached and distorted, as my only access to the Holocaust was through impersonal and reductionist sets of facts, figures and faded pictures in textbooks.

Although I do recognise that this is a complex and sensitive debate, I believe that our generation and the next must have opportunities to visit places such as Terezín, in order to access the empirical reality of historical events of genocide and persecution so that we are equipped to learn from it, develop social and religious tolerance, and ensure that the people and the politicians of tomorrow fight to ensure such events of persecution never repeat themselves, which I believe is particularly relevant recently due to alarming news of rising antisemitism across Europe. By conserving, observing and learning from the artefacts that have survived from the Holocaust, we are able to keep both physical and mental sight of such ideals, teach and spread the value of empathy.

However I can assure you that when visiting Theresienstadt, you will embody the same wide spectrum of states and experiences that our tour did, and I agree that it's incredibly troublesome to come to any conclusion. Terezín was a brutally self-reflective experience and frequently on the tour I questioned the appropriateness of my presence there, and I grew empathetic with the ideas for the destruction of the camps, or the closure of them to visitors, from the perspective that they have become inappropriately "touristic". But my visit revealed to me that the nature of such places should

arguably be public – everyone should have equal opportunity to see, interpret and learn from them, and the memories of those who perished there should live on in their minds.

Terezín, and the other camps, are sites of historical importance that carry infinite testaments and voices of real people, that arguably no set of statistics in a classroom can even begin to convey in a manner that communicates the reality of the Holocaust. We must learn, we must remember. I believe it is only time, and the judgments of those descended from the Holocaust's victims, that will decide the future of places such as Theresienstadt.



Poppy Gerrard-Abbott is an Erasmus student studying BA Humanities at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University and her home university is the University of Essex in England. She chose to write for the iForum to build on her journalism skills and meet other aspiring journalists; to grow closer to the social and creative life of Charles University and to learn more about Czech culture and life in Prague through attending local events and researching Czech issues and current affairs.

Poppy saw the iForum as an exciting opportunity to pursue her interests in politics, culture and history whilst meeting other Erasmus students. She thinks it's a very worthwhile and fun experience that has brought some exciting opportunities her way, extended her writing skills and her knowledge of the Czech Republic, and hopes Charles University continues to offer such placements to future students.