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## **Speculations about German Jews: Elderly People from Germany in the Theresienstadt Ghetto\***

Jacob Jacobson, the former director of the Central Archive of German Jewry, recalled his time in Theresienstadt after the war: “It took everyone some time to come to terms with the new circumstances and to learn to see with Theresienstadt eyes and to understand and judge everything around with justice to the specialities of Theresienstadt.”<sup>1</sup> Even though he was ten years younger, Jacobson’s statement in many respects represents that of the older generation of Jews from Germany deported to the Theresienstadt ghetto. Jacob and Henriette Jacobson were no longer young when they were transported (54 and 58 years of age, respectively), with little knowledge of Czechoslovakia or Czech culture. Initially for Jacobson, Theresienstadt was a shock, but eventually he assimilated into the ghetto, and became a part of the prisoner community.

This article analyzes the elderly German Jews within the Theresienstadt inmates’ community. Using the case study of old Jewish Germans, it offers insights both on the situation of the elderly as a group in the ghetto as well as a contribution to German Jewish history. The essay sketches out the numbers and mortality, as well as conditions for life in the ghetto. Furthermore, it traces their experiences, cultural values, follows the questions how they behaved, what was important to them, and how did they differ culturally from other groups. It examines

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\* This article is a translated and revised version of Hájková, „Mutmaßungen über deutsche Juden: Alte Menschen aus Deutschland im Theresienstädter Ghetto,” in *Alltag im Holocaust: Jüdisches Leben im Großdeutschen Reich 1941-1945*, eds. Doris Bergen, Andrea Löw, and Anna Hájková (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2013), pp. 179-198. I should like to thank Ingrid Schupetta, Doris Bergen, Stefanie Schüler Springorum, Eva Gilois, Jennifer Polk, and Elizabeth Strauss for their input to this essay.

<sup>1</sup> Report of Jacob Jacobsohn (spelled with “h”), no date, Yad Vashem (YVA), O2, 373. I give the age at the point of arrival of the individual to Theresienstadt; for instance, Jacobson was born in November 1888 and deported to Theresienstadt in May 1943, hence 54 years of age.

their view of the ghetto, and what sense they made of the prisoner society. Most of the German Jewish elderly in the ghetto were the weakest party who became an alert and flexible component in Theresienstadt. The handful of them who survived have also ardently borne testimony, even though their voices have not experienced the spotlight they deserve.

The relative inattention to the experiences and perspectives of elderly Holocaust victims is what this issue of Yad Vashem seeks to correct, an important and worthwhile undertaking. However it would be misleading not to acknowledge the historiographical treatment that the experience of the elderly has garnered: while I have been critical of H.G. Adler's study of Theresienstadt, I have always appreciated that the monumental study gives ample space to the experience of the elderly.<sup>2</sup> In her study of Holocaust diaries, Alexandra Garbarini examined seniors alongside the middle aged and young people, and offered with great empathy a history of the elderly diarists' mentality and emotions.<sup>3</sup> At the same time the original German version of this essay was published, Elizabeth Strauss defended her PhD on the elderly in the Lodz ghetto, which will be the first monograph on the topic.<sup>4</sup> And Elizabeth Anthony discussed in her PhD from the same year the many Austrian elderly who survived the Holocaust and who represented a large segment of the Viennese postwar Jewish Community.<sup>5</sup> Notwithstanding these examples, however, it seems that a real recognition of the elderly as a topic for Holocaust historians emerged only with Dan Stone's insightful piece on the elderly survivors in 2018.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> H. G. Adler, *Theresienstadt 1941-1945: Das Antlitz einer Zwangsgemeinschaft* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1955).

<sup>3</sup> Alexandra Garbarini, *Numbered Days: Diaries and the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth C. Strauss, "'Cast me not off in my time of old age...': The Aged and Aging in the Łódź Ghetto, 1939-1944," University of Notre Dame, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> The book has subsequently been published, Elizabeth Anthony, *The Compromise of Return: Viennese Jews after the Holocaust* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Dan Stone, "Somehow the pathetic dumb suffering of these elderly people moves me more than anything": Caring for Elderly Holocaust Survivors in the Immediate Postwar Years," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol. 32, nr. 3 (2018), pp. 384-403. In terms of recognition, I refer to the call for articles for this special 50<sup>th</sup> issue of Yad Vashem Studies that referenced one piece: Dan Stone's.

How to define what was “elderly”? Dan Stone put the age boundary at 55 and older, “because anyone that age who survived the Holocaust was exceptional.”<sup>7</sup> While this statement is absolutely correct for those who passed selection in Auschwitz, were sent for forced labor, or ghettos such as Lodz where the elderly and children were sent to their deaths at one point, the context for some other places was different. One important group were those in hiding, where older people were at some disadvantage, but not a total one.<sup>8</sup> The definition of the elderly in Theresienstadt was defined by the age boundaries of labor duty that for most of the duration of the ghetto was 65 for men and 60 for women. The elderly who did not have to work, and did not work, received much smaller food rations, and had much higher mortality. Therefore for Theresienstadt, and in this piece, I define elderly as 60 (for women)/65 (for men) years of age.

This history is one of a decimated group. Over 92,72% of the elderly German Jews did not survive Theresienstadt.<sup>9</sup> It is all too easy to summarize their history as one of death. Elizabeth Strauss has rightly critiqued historians’ tendency to focus on the eventual deaths of the seniors rather than following their lives, however short, or depiction as burdensome by other witnesses.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, there is a source bias: testimonies are written by those who are alive. Those who keep a diary only record as long as they are reasonably well. Similarly, postwar narratives were only written by those who survived. But while it is difficult to capture the voices of those who are close to death, we can analyze the relationship of the authors to their relatives and friends as they were dying. We can look to the ways in which they experienced death in

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<sup>7</sup> Stone, „Somehow,“ p. 385 gives 93,6%, based on my old calculations. Thanks to Wolfgang Schellenbacher, Documentation Archive of Austrian Resistance, for checking the numbers.

<sup>8</sup> Alice Stein-Landesmann, “The Strength of Two,” in Eric H. Böhm, ed., *We Survived: The Stories of Fourteen of the Hidden and the Hunted of Nazi Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949), pp. 2–35.

<sup>9</sup> Total number for the entire duration of Theresienstadt, counted for those born before 1878 (hence were 65 in 1943).

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Strauss, “This rug, handmade by a resident of the old age home, should serve as evidence of the willingness and ability of elderly people to work”: Elderly Survival Strategies in the Łódź Ghetto, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, forthcoming.

Theresienstadt, as it became a probable event. This bias may make my interpretation appear perhaps too positive. Indeed, several of the German Jewish elderly mentioned that they fear that they had described Theresienstadt in too rosy a light.<sup>11</sup> Thus I formulate this source bias at the outset, encouraging the readers to take this predisposition on board.

### **Arrival of German Jews to Theresienstadt**

Theresienstadt was founded in November 1941 as a transit camp for Jews of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia.<sup>12</sup> Later, when the German and Austrian Jews arrived, its function changed to that of a ghetto for the elderly, and as an “advantage camp.” Later still, the Nazis fashioned Theresienstadt into a propaganda camp to be shown to a delegation of the International Red Cross. Scholarship on Theresienstadt often over emphasizes this last aspect, while overlooking the fact that this visit and the subsequent propaganda film to emerge from it had little impact on everyday life in the ghetto. Prisoners died of malnutrition, were surrounded by dirt and insects, and lived with the ever-present threat of deportation to the East. Altogether 144,000 Jews were transported to Theresienstadt—74,000 from the Protectorate, 42,007 from the Germany, and over 15,000 from Austria. These larger groups were followed by smaller groups of Jews from the Netherlands, Denmark, Slovakia, and Hungary. Over 33,000 people, the majority of whom were elderly, died in Theresienstadt of diseases linked to malnutrition and poor accommodation. Most families lived separated, men and women in different houses or rooms. Lodgings were furnished with bunk beds, housing between eight to two hundred inhabitants. Theresienstadt fell under the administration of the SS; however, given that there

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<sup>11</sup> Edmund Hadra, LBI, AR 1249, 2 (Hadra referred to reports of fellow survivors).

<sup>12</sup> On the history of Theresienstadt, see Hájková, *The Last Ghetto: An Everyday History of Theresienstadt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

were only thirty SS officers present in Theresienstadt, it was Czech gendarmes who guarded the ghetto. The SS did not administer Theresienstadt, and outsourced the running of the ghetto to the Jewish self-administration. The commandant and his men controlled the ghetto through daily contacts with the Elder of the Jews, numerous reports, spot checks, the last informed by a network of Jewish denouncers.<sup>13</sup>

The ghetto had a Jewish self-administration which created a complex system of departments. In this respect, Theresienstadt was over rather than under organized. Theresienstadt never became a labor ghetto. Due to the run-down conditions of the town and high number of elderly, 90% of labor was put towards the maintenance of the ghetto's infrastructure.<sup>14</sup> There was a general labor duty for everyone between 16 and 65 years of age. Men over 65 years of age and women over 60 were not required to work (these ages were to change during the ghetto duration), and those that wished to needed to find a manager who would employ them.

Food in the ghetto was distributed according to one's status as a worker. A complicated system of food ration assignments designated who was entitled to what kind of rations. Roughly speaking distinctions were made between the hard laborers (S, *Schwerarbeiter*), normal laborers (N, *Normalarbeiter*), and non-laborers (K, *Kranke*). While a table of the alleged calories per day according to each category survived, such as 1,487 kcal for the non-laborers, the real portions were smaller, and lacked all vitamins or fiber. Only few inmates, and mostly men, who worked in jobs requiring hard physical labor, such as bakers, butchers, cooks, people who carried flour or potatoes, as well as men in the Shipping department and members of the Council of Elders were

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<sup>13</sup> See Hájková, *The Last Ghetto*, ch. 1; see also Benjamin Murelstein, „Geschichtlicher Überblick,“ 1073, 3.

<sup>14</sup> See Miroslav Kárný, „Pracovní“ či „zaopatřovací“ Terezín? Iluze areality tzv. produktivního ghetta, Litoměřicko vol 25 (1989), pp. 95-107.

categorized as hard laborer.<sup>15</sup> Almost all of the hard laborers were Czech Jews. Importantly, these food categories were introduced by the Jewish self-administration rather than by the perpetrators on May 18, 1942.<sup>16</sup> It was two weeks before that the Jewish functionaries learned that German Jewish elderly would be arriving.<sup>17</sup>

Starting in June 1942, certain categories of Jews from all over Germany, 42,007 in total, were deported to Theresienstadt.<sup>18</sup> The IVB4 of the Reich Security Main Office transported here people over 65 years of age; those heavily disabled, its officers and bearers of the Iron Cross.<sup>19</sup> These elderly were the largest group among those sent from Germany to Theresienstadt and the reason why one of its functions was the ghetto for the elderly (*Altersghetto*). All above groups were accompanied generally with spouses and children below 14 years of age. Next group were the *Geltungsjuden*, persons of mixed heritage who after Nuremberg laws was a member of the Jewish community or married to a Jew.<sup>20</sup> After January 1943, the spouses of the non-longer existing intermarriages, whether separated by death or divorce, were also sent to Theresienstadt (although some were forced here already before), the functionaries of the Reich association of Jews, and also those in hiding who were caught and lucky enough to be sent to Theresienstadt rather than to Auschwitz.<sup>21</sup> At the very end of the war, from January 1945 on, most of the Jewish

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<sup>15</sup> One surviving list „Zusätzlicher Lebensmittelverbrauch der einzelnen Kategorien“ is in Archive of the Prague Jewish Museum, T, 116.

<sup>16</sup> Note 45, Central Book Keeping and Financial Department, May 18, 1942, YVA, O64, 34.

<sup>17</sup> Egon Redlich, *Zítá jedeme, synu, pojedeme transportem: Deník Egona Redlicha z Terezína 1.1.1942-22.1.1944*, ed. Miroslav Kryl (Brno: Doplněk, 1995), entry for May 1, 1942, p. 115.

<sup>18</sup> With thanks to Wolfgang Schellenbacher for checking the numbers,

<sup>19</sup> Beate Meyer, "Altersghetto", "Vorzugslager" und Tätigkeitsfeld: Die Repräsentanten der Reichsvereinigung der Juden in Deutschland und Theresienstadt, *Theresienstädter Studien und Dokumente* (2004), pp. 124-149; on the Jewish veterans, see Michael Geheran, *Comrades Betrayed: Jewish World War I Veterans under Hitler* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020)

<sup>20</sup> On *Geltungsjuden*, see Maria von der Heydt, "‘Wer fährt denn gerne mit dem Judenstern in der Straßenbahn?’ Die Ambivalenz des ‚geltungs-jüdischen‘ Alltags zwischen 1941 und 1945," in Doris Bergen, Andrea Löw, and Anna Hájková, eds., *Der Alltag im Holocaust: Jüdisches Leben im Großdeutschen Reich 1941-1945* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2013), pp. 65-80.

<sup>21</sup> Meyer, "Altersghetto"; Alfred Gottwaldt and Diana Schulle, *Die „Judendeportationen“ aus dem Deutschen Reich 1941-1945* (Wiesbaden: Marix, 2005). The categories however did not mean that all elderly over 65 were indeed

spouses from existing intermarriages were expelled here.<sup>22</sup> The establishment of these exception classes had a pacifying effect on German Jews<sup>23</sup>: the deportees expected preferential living conditions in a town with a nice climate. Many of the German Jews expected Theresienstadt to fit the framework of their existing experience, as one of the Bohemian spas, Karlsbad, Franzensbad, or Marienbad.<sup>24</sup> Beate Jacoby, a Berlin writer born in 1878, recalled that when she was picked up by the Jewish orderlies, she assured her Theresienstadt was a small spa with a “free apartment, boarding, laundry, physician, and a pharmacy.”<sup>25</sup>

## Numbers and people

Among the elderly German Jews on the transports to Theresienstadt, women constituted two thirds. This gendered difference reflected the better chances for men at emigration from Nazi Germany, where women had worse chances to leave but also were frequently expected to take care of their parents.<sup>26</sup> These people were largely of a middle-class and upper-middle-class background.<sup>27</sup> 73 percent of the total number of German Jews sent to Theresienstadt were older than sixty years. From the 42,007 people from Altreich deported to Germany, 30,175 were born before 1880: 71,8 percent. These numbers includes 2,000 people from mixed marriages who arrived between January and April 1945, who were on average much younger.<sup>28</sup> A Berlin

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deported to Theresienstadt: in 1942, 37% people from this group still in Germany fell into one of the transports to the East.

<sup>22</sup> Max Strnad, *Privileg Mischehe? Handlungsräume jüdisch versippter Familien 1933-1949* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2021), pp. 326-352.

<sup>23</sup> Beate Meyer, *Tödliche Gratwanderung: Die Reichsvereinigung der Juden in Deutschland zwischen Hoffnung, Zwang, Selbstbehauptung und Verstrickung (1939-1945)* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2011), p. 194; Meyer, „Altersghetto.“

<sup>24</sup> Regina Oelze's report (1947), Alte Synagoge Essen.

<sup>25</sup> Beate Jacoby (1953), WL, 1267, 5.

<sup>26</sup> Marion Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>27</sup> Rita Meyhöfer, „Berliner Juden und Theresienstadt, *Theresienstädter Studien und Dokumente* (1996), pp. 31-51.

<sup>28</sup> Gottwaldt and Schulle, *Die Judendeportationen*, p. 366; Strnad, *Privileg Mischehe?* gives 1,901 on p. 462.



deportee in year 1942, when the majority of Berlin Jews were deported to Theresienstadt, was typically a 77-year-old woman.<sup>29</sup> In summer and fall 1942, as most of the German and Austrian deportees arrived, most of them were assigned accommodations in the unfurnished attics of the large barracks without windows, electricity, or running water, which is why they were still available. Here the elderly lay on bare ground, with the nearest bathroom facilities on a lower floor or even in courtyards. Berl Herškovič, a young Czech prisoner and Hechalutz member who inspected one of the attics, was shocked: “Inhabitants of the attics faced the problem of how to get to the lavatories and access water. People defecated in their clothes although they had nothing to change into. There were not enough mattresses. It was horrendous, horrendous!”<sup>30</sup> From 1943 onwards, when the conditions in Theresienstadt improved somewhat, German Jews usually lived in small houses rather than barracks— the barracks were roomier, and insects could be kept at bay somewhat easier than in other places.<sup>31</sup> Once the elderly either died or moved elsewhere, the attics were renovated and often used for kumbáls, small self-timbered rooms of the social elite.<sup>32</sup>

The elderly prisoners chronicled the deaths of their relatives and friends. Otto Bernstein from Berlin recorded the passing of his many relatives, including “aunt Mascha who lasted longer. She died in April 1944. She kept her humor until her death.”<sup>33</sup> Edmund Hadra, a 66 year old Berlin physician, remarked that the dying of most people in Theresienstadt lasted two years

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<sup>29</sup> Mayhöfer, p. 38.

<sup>30</sup> “Der Theresienstädter Hechalutz: Aus den Erinnerungen von Berl Herškovič,” *Theresienstädter Studien und Dokumente* (2000): 151-163, 157.

<sup>31</sup> Most of the diarists and authors of testimonies whose self testimonies I studied write about living in the houses, as opposed to the younger people, who usually lived in the barracks. See also Margarete Pedde’s (Archive of the Theresienstadt Museum [APT], A, 10549 ) and Arnošt Klein’s diary, Jewish Museum Prague [AŽMP], Terezín, 324) (both were house elders, Klein was Czech, and write extensively about their residents.) See also Camilla Hirsch, *Tagebuch aus Theresienstadt* (Vienna: Mandelbaum, 2017).

<sup>32</sup> Hájková, *The Last Ghetto*, p. 65.

<sup>33</sup> Bernstein. Marie “Mascha” Bernstein nee Alschwang, born 1866 in Moscow, died on 18 April 1944.

until they starved to death or died of what he called silly diseases; it was humane, but still most terrible.<sup>34</sup> Regina Oelze was a 65 year old Essen widow from mixed marriage who documented the hunger she and others seniors suffered in the ghetto. Oelze noted of the dying around her: “As the time passed, the very old or very sick disappeared or rather died, and the streetscape became a bit better.”<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, the combination of horrible housing conditions, little food, old age and minimal health-care for enteritis the soon resulted in death in the worst conditions. In September 1942, at the peak of its population (60,000 residents), 3,976 people died; 3,700 of them were older than 65 years, and 2,450 of them were Jews from the Altreich. The SS “solved” the crisis of overpopulation by specifically targeting old people to deport to Treblinka and Maly Trostinets; no-one survived. After the wave of these transports, only 33 percent of the ghetto inhabitants were over 65 years old. By the end of 1942, when the majority of German Jews, 33,505 people, were sent to Theresienstadt, the figures changed: 8,953 people died, while 6,913 were deported to the camps in the East; only a half of the German deportees was still alive and in Theresienstadt.

Solely at one point became old age a structural advantage: During the large liquidation transports from fall 1944, the SS protected people over 65, and thus also those elderly German Jews who were still alive and present. This meant that for the only time, between late October 1944, with the last transport to Auschwitz, and early January 1945, with the large arrivals of

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<sup>34</sup> Edmund Hadra.

<sup>35</sup> Regina Oelze.

Jews from mixed marriages from the Protectorate, German Jews were as large a group as the Czech Jews.<sup>36</sup>

As the large majority of the German Jews were over 60/65 years old, they did not have to work and often were too sick or weak anyway. The non-working elderly were placed in the non-worker food category with only a minimal amount of food. The lack of food had fatal consequences. People grew weaker and could not fend off even minor diseases. Enteritis became such a frequent phenomenon that it was called *terezínka*. Enteritis is an infectious intestinal inflammation that almost all inmates in Theresienstadt were sick with at some point. However, for the malnourished, weakened elderly it was deadly. The victims died of dehydration and cardiac stress. Over time, the Jewish physicians in Theresienstadt developed a surprisingly good health care, but enteritis was not categorized as a disease that was treated.<sup>37</sup> In spring 1943, Karl Loewenstein, the head of the Ghetto Guard, visited the pathology. He was shocked: “The corpses of those who died, whom I got to see here, were only bones covered by skin. These dead literally starved to death. I saw corpses who were not heavier than a small child.”<sup>38</sup> When he inquired, the doctors confirmed that such corpses were quite normal.

The combination of small food rations, inferior accommodation, and untreated enteritis translated into sky-rocketing high mortality of the elderly, far more than any other group in Theresienstadt. 84% of people above 60 years of age died in Terezín, and 92% of those who died here were above 60.<sup>39</sup> As soon as people were younger than 60, their mortality sank significantly: German Jews born in 1890 had a mortality of 11,5%; Czech Jews 3,12%. Among

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<sup>36</sup> On October 29, 1944, there were 3,671 German Jews and 3,764 Czech Jews in the ghetto (counting people from the Sudetengau as Czech because of the mentality of the prisoner community that categorized people from pre-war Czech lands as Czech, see Hájková, *The Last Ghetto*, p. 87).

<sup>37</sup> Anna Hájková, „Medicine in Theresienstadt,“ *Social History of Medicine* Vol. 33, No. 1 pp. 79–105, p. 84.

<sup>38</sup> Karl Loesten [postwar name of Loewenstein's], “Aus der Hoelle Minsk in das 'Paradies' Theresienstadt 1941-1945,” Leo Baeck Institute New York (LBI), ME 398, p. 262.

<sup>39</sup> Hájková, *The Last Ghetto*, p. 77 and 116.

those who perished in Theresienstadt, only 2,7% were under 45 years of age. Summarized, these numbers meant: if a person was over 60 years of age, it was very probable that they would perish in the ghetto. Those younger would have suffered from hunger, dirt, insects, fear from transports, and pain from losing their dear ones; however, as long as they stayed in Theresienstadt, it was improbable they would die.

In the following, I analyze the mortality of the old people in Theresienstadt, first in terms of ethnicity and gender for all those who died, second in terms of the duration of survival in Theresienstadt.<sup>40</sup> Are there significant differences in respect to gender and place of origin? I concentrate on the three largest inmates groups: the German, Czech and Austrian elderly. I include these three groups to provide context, rather than make comparative statements about suffering.

The following table shows an overview on those over 65 years who either died in the ghetto, or were liberated here (hence excluding those who were transported to the East):

**Table I**

Group	Total	Died in Terezín	%
Cz women	3.225	2.724	84,47%
Cz men	2.431	2.067	85,03%
De women	12.268	11.133	90,75%
De men	6.865	6.537	92,60%
At women	3.833	3.272	85,36%

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<sup>40</sup> I should like to thank my father Radko Hájek for his help in analyzing this data.

At men	2.371	2.120	89,41%
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Elderly German Jews died in somewhat greater numbers relative to the Czech and Austrian Jews. Elderly Czech Jewish women have the lowest mortality rate, at 84.47 percent, where the elderly German men have the highest at 92.6 percent. Overall, the result is surprising, namely that the difference is only that of seven percent. The Czech Jews frequently arrived at the ghetto with their children and grandchildren, while the families of German Jews had mostly either emigrated or were deported elsewhere. One would assume that the presence of one's family would lessen mortality rates for the elderly, but this was apparently not the case. Many young Czech Jews mentioned the presence of their grandparents only in passing, often limited only to their rapid passing away.<sup>41</sup> As I have explored elsewhere in detail, the intergenerational solidarity did not span more than two generations.<sup>42</sup> In addition, in this context the mortality of the German Jews is not at all particularly high. It is also curious that the Austrian rate is not higher, since the Austrian elderly arrived in Theresienstadt without their families.

In her ground-breaking article, Sybil Milton argued that women adapted better to the concentration camps and ghettos, and sometimes had better rates of survival.<sup>43</sup> Leaning on Milton's work, Anita Tarsi examined the situation of the old German women in Theresienstadt. She asserted that old German women had better survival rate than the old German men.<sup>44</sup> While

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<sup>41</sup> Miloš Pick, *Naděje se vzdát neumím* (Brno: Doplněk, 2010), p. 35.

<sup>42</sup> This topic is discussed in more detail in Hájková, *The Last Ghetto*, ch. 3.

<sup>43</sup> Sybil Milton, "Women and the Holocaust: The Case of German and German-Jewish Women," in Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grossmann, and Marion Kaplan, eds., *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany* (New York: Monthly Review, 1984), pp. 297-333, pp. 311 and 313. This claim has to be seen in the context that the majority of camp survivors were men, and women had much worse chances of surviving the selection procedure.

<sup>44</sup> Anita Tarsi, "Das Schicksal der alten Frauen aus Deutschland in Theresienstadt," *Theresienstädter Studien und Dokumente* (1998), pp. 100-130.

we lack reliable data for scrutinizing Milton's claim, thanks to the Terezín Initiative Institute's prisoner database we can examine the situation of Theresienstadt.<sup>45</sup>

The difference between the mortality of men and women is also very low, even lower than the difference among the ethnic groups. Women's mortality is slightly lower, but the difference is not large enough to be relevant outside of the historical context: In the Western world, since the beginning of the Twentieth century and the introduction of better health care for women, in particular safer birth-giving, men have shorter average life spans relative to women.<sup>46</sup> The old German Jews in Theresienstadt, people born before 1883 (that is, denoting a 60 year old woman in 1943), were the first generation on whom these health care changes had an impact. This difference in mortality rates between men and women thus derives from medical advancements rather than a higher female survival rate.

The second table examines the period of time between arrival in Theresienstadt and death, in an effort to find any differences between men and women.

## **Table II<sup>47</sup>**

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<sup>45</sup> For examples of quantitative work on Holocaust victims, see Andreas Kranebitter, „*Zahlen als Zeugen*,“ Diploma thesis (University of Vienna, 2012); Evgeny Finkel, *Ordinary Jews: Choice and Survival during the Holocaust* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

<sup>46</sup> Louis Henry, “Men's and Women's Mortality in the Past.” *Population: An English Selection* 44, no. 1 (1989): 177–201; Oliver Wisser and James Vaupel, “The sex differential in mortality: A historical comparison of the adult-age pattern of the ratio and the difference,” *Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research Working Paper* 2014, <https://www.demogr.mpg.de/papers/working/wp-2014-005.pdf>.

<sup>47</sup> For some (very few, eg 13 for the elderly Czech Jews) people, we are not able to ascertain their sex, hence the difference in total numbers.

Group	days -19	20-49	50-99	100-199	200-299	> 499	total	Median
Czech w	463	385	524	560	569	222	2723	98
Czech m	250	278	375	482	520	162	2067	124
German w	1731	1711	1702	2811	2106	1023	11024	112
German m	817	974	1028	1646	1304	567	6336	117
Austrian w	377	523	626	788	620	316	3250	109
Austrian m	214	309	379	515	490	200	2107	144
Total								
Czechs	715	665	900	1049	1090	384	4803	108
Germans	2579	2716	2758	4494	3437	1604	17588	114
Austrians	591	832	1005	1303	1110	517	5358	115

If they died in Theresienstadt, older women passed away significantly earlier than men. Czech Jewish women died on average within 98 days after arrival, and the men 26 days later (after 124 days). For the German Jews the difference was only that of five days (112 for women, 117 for

men). The Czech elderly died sooner than the German or Austrian, thus confirming the dearth of intergenerational solidarity among Czech Jews. Most people, 24.7 percent, died between 100 and 199 days after their arrival. The second largest group, 20.4 percent, died between 200 and 499 days after their arrival. Analyzing these figures hints to several conclusions: first, the elderly did not die immediately after their arrival, as is often stated in testimonies. If they were not deported further, they lived long enough to be a presence in the ghetto, between three months and year and half. Second, elderly women died just as often as elderly men, and typically did so before them, by circa ten percent: old women passed away after 109 days, old men after 120 days.

Of course, these results could and should be further examined. It would be interesting to find out the exact age of men and women in the group over 65 years old, when they died in Theresienstadt: perhaps the women were on average older. In addition, many of the elderly German women came alone, but most of the men came with a spouse. Therefore, it would be useful to check whether those without partners died earlier. Furthermore it would be wise to question the degree to which transports to the East influence these demographics. Such an analysis will however take much more time and energy than the one above, which had the goal of demonstrating a quantitative framework to the qualitative analysis which follows. Quantitative analysis, therefore, when possible, can be immensely helpful in counter-balancing qualitative findings, or pointing out to new lines of inquiry.

### **Life in Theresienstadt**

Almost all of the testimonies of the German elderly touch on the bias of the Czech Jewish majority towards the German Jews. This bias derived from an asymmetric relationship. Any community develop assumptions about groups within, together with power dynamics dependent



on such factors as age, time of arrival, culture and origin. For Theresienstadt, the fact that the Czech Jews arrived here first, seven months before the German Jews, was an important factor in shaping the structure of the community. Additionally, for some time, they also remained the absolute majority, and they were almost always the largest group in the ghetto. The young Czech Jews became the socially dominant group in the ghetto, with the best access to resources, and at the same time being a group with huge social status and prestige.<sup>48</sup>

The young Czech Jews were the social elite in the ghetto, and to them, the German Jews were on the bottom of the social hierarchy. People from Germany were old, infirm, confused, did not speak any Czech, and had little idea about Czech culture or history. To them, Czechoslovakia was the site of the spa towns,<sup>49</sup> and a place where some of their younger relatives and friends had emigrated. Theresienstadt, in this sense, was the first encounter of the Reich Germans with things Czech, where the German party was not a priori the stronger one. The elderly Austrian Jews, who would deserve a study of their own,<sup>50</sup> were in a similar but not entirely identical position. Many of the Viennese elderly inmates had Czech relatives in the ghetto. It seems that many Viennese had some linguistic abilities in Czech from conversing with Czech servants.<sup>51</sup> It is worth noting that the mortality of the Austrian elderly, as discussed in the previous section, was approximately the same to the Czech and German elderly prisoners.

Ethnicity played a strong, indeed dominant, role of as categorizing factor in the prisoner society. Most of the inmates of a Jewish ghetto thought in stereotypes informed by nationalistic

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<sup>48</sup> Hájková, „Die fabelhaften Jungs aus Theresienstadt: Junge tschechische Männer als dominante soziale Elite im Theresienstädter Ghetto,“ *Beiträge zur Geschichte des Nationalsozialismus*, vol. 25 (2009), pp. 116-135.

<sup>49</sup> See also Miriam Triendl-Zadoff, *Nächstes Jahr in Marienbad: Gegenwelten jüdischer Kulturen der Moderne* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007).

<sup>50</sup> See also Wolfgang Schellenbacher, „Momentaufnahme Frieda Nossig: Ältere Menschen im Ghetto Theresienstadt,“ (2021) <https://www.doew.at/erinnern/fotos-und-dokumente/1938-1945/momentaufnahme-frieda-nossig>; Camilla Hirsch's diary; on the surviving elderly, see Anthony, *The Compromise of Return*, ch. 2.

<sup>51</sup> I have noticed the former from my genealogical work on geni.com. For the second point, I should like to thank Georg Gaugusch, Vienna.

views, which proved fairly consistent over the duration of Theresienstadt.<sup>52</sup> This view was an interplay of national, ethnic, cultural, and biologizing elements: For instance, the German Jews would be frequently described as externally looking in such-and-such way, and thus behaving correspondingly, based solely because they came from Germany.

The Czech Jews had an entire set of negative historical stereotypes from which to draw. These were shared among generations, people from the various regions, and amongst groups speaking Czech, German or bilingual. Jiří Borský's opinion is a good example for what many Czech Jews thought of the newly arrived Germans: "Unpleasant news was the arrival of the first transport from Berlin on June 2, 1942. It was a strange and foreign element speaking in a foreign language, very different in its Kraut habits. We were right in our apprehension that the SS will prefer the Jews from the Reich."<sup>53</sup> Some Czech inmates were expressed assumption that German deportees supported Hitler.<sup>54</sup>

This hostile tone was not lost on the Germans Jews. The above criticism resonates in Egon Strassburger's testimony, a 77-year old Berlin Jew sent to Theresienstadt in 1944: "The Czechs were not keen on liking the Germans, and unfortunately they always believed that the Germans Jews are responsible for Hitler's coming to power. And when the German [Jew] showed loyalty to his fatherland, then the Czechs claimed that it was a bad character quality. And yet noone loved his fatherland as passionately as the Czechs; indeed, they were fiercely chauvinistic. The Czech had never suffered under Benesch and Masaryk."<sup>55</sup> In short, the German

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<sup>52</sup> For a strengthened nationalism in Czechoslovakia in this time, see among others Tara Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls: National indifference and the battle for children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900-1948* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).

<sup>53</sup> Jiří Borský, APT, A, 476. My own translation from Czech, as all following. For a similar accusation, see entry for January 19, 1943 in Arnošt Klein's diary. See also the reception in Edmund Hadra and Hedwig Ems, YVA, O33, 91

<sup>54</sup> Helga Hošková-Weissová, *Zeichne, Was Du Siehst* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2001), pp. 27f; cf. Elly and Ernst Michaelis, „An Unbekannte Freunde,“ (1945) LBI, AR 11148.

<sup>55</sup> Egon Strassburger, YVA, O33, 988. On a similar note, see also Elly Michaelis.

Jews joined a community, whose most senior and largest element harbored disadvantageous and fairly consistent prejudices against them. This was a structural given with which they had to come to terms during almost the entire duration of the ghetto.

Apart from the shock from transports for the East (people were promised Theresienstadt would be a final destination), the second concern of every prisoner was hunger. Elderly receiving non-worker rations were in direct danger of starvation. Accordingly, the elderly German Jews starved, lost weight, and watched their friends and acquaintances die. Weight became one of the central topics in the diaries and early postwar testimonies. People lost 30 to 40 kg within a year, to 30 or 40kg for women, where their weight stopped.<sup>56</sup> Louis Salomon, a 74-year-old Berliner, was amazed that he could lose 106 pounds and still be alive.<sup>57</sup> Hulda Schickler, 74-year old from Lüneburg, reported that in fall 1944, she weighed 32 kg. She observed how the elderly searched through rubbish for potato peels and swallow up anything edible.<sup>58</sup>

People tried, as much as they could, to get a good position, where they could either get so-called extra rations (*Zubusse*), or a job where they could happen upon extra food, be it through preferential access, or theft. Many of the German Jews found that working in the ghetto was not only good manners in terms of being a good Theresienstadt inhabitants, but for those over 65-years-old it meant simply surviving or dying. Martha Glass from Hamburg, who lost her husband in Theresienstadt, who turned 65 six weeks before the following diary entry, repeatedly

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<sup>56</sup> See discussion in Martha Glass, "*Jeder Tag in Theresin ist ein Geschenk*": *Die Theresienstädter Tagebücher einer Hamburger Jüdin 1943 - 1945*, ed. by Barbara Müller-Wesemann, (Hamburg: Ergebnisse, 1996), passim. There is also a new online edition of this diary: <https://juedische-geschichte-online.net/dossier/martha-glass>. See also diary of Louis Salomon (written from May 1945, this entry is hence written retrospectively), YVA, O33, 1560; diary of Hulda Schickler, Leo Baeck Institute Jerusalem, 512, entries in October 1944; Regina Oelze's report; Käthe Breslauer, "Erinnerungen an Theresienstadt," WL, P.III.h, 215; furthermore the Viennese Camilla Hirsch, *Tagebuch; Opfer des Faschismus* application of Gertrud Kahle (born 1897), CJA, 4.1, 928; Alice Randt, *Die Schleuse* (Hann. Münden: Chr. Gauke, 1974), pp. 50-58. Randt was born in 1895.

<sup>57</sup> Diary of Louis Salomon.

<sup>58</sup> Diary of Hulda Schickler, Leo Baeck Institute Jerusalem, 512, entry for fall 1943 (peels) and October 1944 (weight). For similar story, see also Regina Oelze's report.

stressed that she was trying to get or keep a job, although she was actually too weak to work: “I would love to have a compelling job, but at my age, I cannot find anything. Only the working people are here humans, they receive extra rations etc, baths. All elderly are superfluous and should kick the bucket. How long can I last here!!!!”<sup>59</sup>

Connected with the food dynamics was also the question of mail and especially packages. The amount of food parcels arriving from the outside varied strongly, but for the most time, Czech Jews were sent the largest share of the arrived mail. Due to the high number of intermarriages and generally Gentile friends, most of the Czech Jews received packages on a regular basis; among the German Jews, it was a minority within the whole group. It is not surprising that almost all of German Jews envied their fellow inmates. Käthe Breslauer, a 68-year old former teacher from Berlin, looked back at the packages: “Whereas the Reich Germans received only small parcels, the Czechs received enormous packages, sent by their acquaintances, to whom they handed the mailing confirmation.”<sup>60</sup> However the mailing confirmation (*Zulassungsmarke*), enabling the Gentile friend or relative to send a package, was nothing the Czech inmates could simply hand to their Czech Gentile connections: sending parcels was quite complicated.<sup>61</sup> Czech Jews receiving large parcels became a constant trope in the German Jewish narratives, who grew increasingly bitter. The parcels of others always appeared larger, as having more interesting contents, arriving more regularly, and finally, as not shared.

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<sup>59</sup> Martha Glass, entry for March 19, 1943.

<sup>60</sup> Käthe Breslauer, Wiener Library (WL), P.III.h, 215 (15.1.1956).

<sup>61</sup> As outlined in František Beneš and Patricia Tošnerová, *Pošta v ghettu Terezín = Die Post im Ghetto Theresienstadt = Mail service in the ghetto Terezín* (Prague: Dům filatelie, 1996). See also the forthcoming collection Jan Lambertz and Jan Láníček, eds., *More than Parcels: Wartime Aid for Jews in Nazi-Era Camps and Ghettos* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2022).

What were the central values of the old German Jews in Theresienstadt? For one, there was a recurring reference to former status and the continuity of the old patterns. For many of the men, it was their experience from the First World War. Many of the German Jewish men referred to their military decorations, stressing these in various applications.<sup>62</sup> However, this adherence to military also follows the characteristics of those German Jews who did not emigrate: those older and more politically conservative. But even more important was the habitual front experience: some of the men emphasized how they survived four years in the trenches, surrounded by death and with no possibility to wash; Theresienstadt could not impress them.<sup>63</sup> Many people also stressed their former status, or their old profession. Former colleagues recognized one another on the street and would meet to talk about the old times.<sup>64</sup> Old people who were very seriously inquiring about their opposite's the former social status, and then treating them accordingly, became so frequent that it became an object of jokes. In Theresienstadt, it did not matter whether one inmate was friends with the nobility, or even part of the aristocracy themselves;<sup>65</sup> they stayed in the same room, changed in front of others, wore the same clothes and waited in the same line for the toilettes.

But at the same time, references to one's social background continually resurfaced.<sup>66</sup> Elisabeth Argutinsky, a 69-year old Berlin painter and a widow of a Russian prince, graphically described the importance of this topic when depicting her fellow roommates: „It was horrifying

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<sup>62</sup> Edmund Hadra; also see the reasons given in the petitions to be taken out of transport, YVA, O64, 12-22, and their discussion in Hájková, *The Last Ghetto*, 214-219. The military experience of many German Jews was a recurring issue to reinforce their status and masculinity.

<sup>63</sup> Edmund Hadra.

<sup>64</sup> See Philipp Manes, *Als ob's ein Leben wär: Tatsachenbericht Theresienstadt 1942-1944*, ed. Ben Barkow and Klaus Leist (Berlin: Ullstein, 2004), pp. 89f and passim.

<sup>65</sup> Thomas Kurrer, ed. *K.Z. Theresienstadt April 1944-Mai 1945: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen von Else Gräfin v. Schlitz, gen. v. Goertz und Freifrau v. Wrisberg* (Schondorf: Edition Blaes, 2016).

<sup>66</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge/Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984).

to find out how thin was our class, and yet how impossible, after giving up all terms of aesthetics, culture, individualism to get used to all this, in a way to integrate the habits of the uncultivated ones.”<sup>67</sup> Yet Argutinsky did make peace with her roommates, and they created a little retreat for themselves. Unfortunately, with the next reorganization the room was taken apart—the ghetto inmates had to move quite often. Argutinsky had to move into the next room with 37 inhabitants, where she was not at all happy with her new neighbors: „[A] cohabitation with a completely different cultural milieu, a grizzly state that ended up with our entire defeat. [...] This is juices rising to the top, climb of the uncultivated. [...] Everyone is saying, as long as we lived together with the Aryans [sic], the Jews got a push on themselves—but today, each Jewish huckster becomes a boss.“

The narrator made clear, that she, an old, distinguished individual, could not get along with her new “proletarian” neighbors. Argutinsky did not feel respected, she wanted the others to be quiet and take consideration. She was however alone, while her immediate room mates were part of a five-member family. Argutinsky kept, in her own eyes, the last word: she was the one who told the story. She demonstrated her dominance by possessing a truly meaningful, intrinsic value, namely “culture,” which the “plebs” cannot gain. Even if Argutinsky had to “de-civilize” in order to survive the ghetto, for her, her “culture” was innate.

Finally, we should note that Argutinsky, together with many other German Jews, spoke of plebs, but did not specify its ethnicity. This was quite symptomatic for her position: hierarchical demarcation in ethnic terms was not an option; German Jews were on the bottom of the Theresienstadt social ladder. They often accepted their position, and they also usually endorsed the position of the social elite of young Czech Jews. Denoting the others as (ethnically

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<sup>67</sup> Notes of Elisabeth Argutinsky, entry on March 15, 1943, Beit Terezin, 16.

unmarked) underclass was for the German-Jewish haute bourgeoisie a means of self-demarcation, establishing a social hierarchy. The “juices rising to the top”, canaille (Thomas Mann’s old consul Buddenbrook comes to mind) is a very different group, far inferior to the own community. This differentiating mechanism became for the older German bourgeois in the ghetto the more important: Here everyone was thrown together, stripped of the economic markers that previously defined class boundaries: all inhabitants of the same room shared identical bunk beds and food rations. With relevant economic capital absent, cultural capital became decisive in legitimating the own social superiority and upkeeping the sense of self, social location.<sup>68</sup> For former German Jewish upper and upper middle classes, feeling socially superior often became crucial, only link they had to their previous lives, lending them a sense of control and continuity.

Old German Jews were agile in the Theresienstadt cultural life, both as organizers and as visitors.<sup>69</sup> Their taste was, compared to the Czech inmates, old-fashioned. When the director of the Orientation Service and organizer of the cherished lectures series, the 67-year old former fur-dealer Philipp Manes, decided to add staged readings of theatrical pieces, his first choice was Goethe’s *Faust*: “Choosing the plays was not a problem for me. Was there any doubt about what should be presented? Goethe, of course. And if him, then only *Faust*. I reached for the stars.”<sup>70</sup> In staging *Faust*, Manes manifested his tie to the innermost, sacred piece of German culture. He was by far not the only one who kept referencing the piece; it was a beloved item to check out from the library, recite, and in one case, write an entire manuscript interpreting the piece.<sup>71</sup> Gertrud

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<sup>68</sup> See Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, “Beyond Identity,” *Theory and Society* vol. 29 no. 1 (2000), pp. 1-47.

<sup>69</sup> See for instance Elena Makarova, Sergei Makarov, and Viktor Kuperman. *University over the Abyss: The Story behind 520 Lecturers and 2,430 Lectures in KZ Theresienstadt 1942-1944* (Jerusalem: Verba, 2004).

<sup>70</sup> Manes, *Als ob's*, p. 134.

<sup>71</sup> Edmund Hadra.

Staewen, a gentile member of the Confessing Church who helped Jews, recalled a “83-year old Mrs Adler,” who was preparing for her deportation. The Jewish woman showed her a Goethe book she was reading with the words: “No-one can take away from me this Germanness, that was always my home, even in Theresienstadt they cannot.”<sup>72</sup>

However, for the Czech Jews, Goethe did not carry the same emotional importance. What we see as beautiful and meaningful piece of culture is often out illegible for people coming from a different cultural background. Czech Jews wept when listening to Raphael Schächter’s production of Smetana’s *The Bartered Bride*. For the German Jews, it did not carry much meaningful emotional meaning. The Czech prisoners barely mentioned Faust in their testimonies, and the German Jews were silent on Smetana. This gap reflects the different, and absent, emotional meaning that a canonical piece of culture had in one habitus as opposed to another. Moreover, not only was the German-Jewish taste old-fashioned in their selection of pieces (Manes was not staging Brecht), it was antiquated in its production. Manes was enthusiastic about his “heartfelt” and “simple and moving” Gretchen.<sup>73</sup>

It seems that old German Jews showed little interest in soccer, an extremely popular and public sport in Theresienstadt.<sup>74</sup> The matches were visited by three to four thousand spectators of all ages and origins. The old Czech and Austrian Jews attended matches,<sup>75</sup> but the German seniors did not: I have not found a single mention of a visit to a soccer match in all of the hundreds of testimonies and diaries of German Jews I have analyzed; indeed, it is rarely

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<sup>72</sup> Gertrud Staewen (1957), WL, PIIf, 733.

<sup>73</sup> Manes, *Als ob's*, pp. 135 and 137.

<sup>74</sup> On soccer in Theresienstadt, see Nicole Schlichting, “‘Kleiderkammer schlägt Gärtner 9:3’: Fußball im Ghetto Theresienstadt,” *Nurinst* (2006), pp. 73-90; František Steiner, *Fotbal pod žlutou hvězdou* (Prague: Olympia, 2009); Hájková, “Fabelhafte Jungs.”

<sup>75</sup> Hana L. to the author, January 16, 2009, Haifa.



mentioned at all.<sup>76</sup> For the Czech and Austrian society in the interwar years, soccer became a beloved mass phenomenon, extended beyond class or age. This phenomenon however did not take place in Germany. For the classical Theresienstadt German Jews, born before 1883, soccer was not part of their habitus. For them, it was an affair of the working class. Here, we can observe generational differences among German Jews of Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany particularly strongly. As historians such as Dietrich Schulze-Marmeling have shown, soccer was a popular sport for the Weimar Jewry.<sup>77</sup>

Faust and soccer: these two examples offer an indication for how strongly generationally segmented German Jewry became after 1918 -- or the group which was transported to Theresienstadt. It seems that German Jews were more generationally segmented than the Czech and Austrian Jews of their interwar years.

### **Adapting to Theresienstadt**

The German Jewish elderly responded to their imprisonment, in terms of what Barbara Rosenwein called “emotional community,” with courage, a sense of tenacity and duty, and pathos.<sup>78</sup> While these concepts may appear unrelated, they were connected. Many of the testimonies stressed how important it was for the elderly not to complain, to persist, to give in. This readiness to suffer, breathing from the texts, has at the same time something very hard, and

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<sup>76</sup> Günther Levy (a pseudonym), a ten year old *Geltungsjud*e who in Theresienstadt lived in one of the German language youth homes and played here soccer; significantly, he played soccer as a part of the youth home culture (the Youth Welfare was dominated by Czech Jews) and not as a German Jew: Beate Meyer, “*Jüdische Mischlinge*”. *Rassenpolitik und Verfolgungserfahrung 1933-1945* (Hamburg: Bölling und Galitz, 1999), p. 343

<sup>77</sup> For the importance of soccer for interwar German Jewry, see Dietrich Schulze-Marmeling, *Der FC Bayern und seine Juden: Aufstieg und Zerschlagung einer liberalen Fußballkultur* (Die Werkstatt: Göttingen, 2011), Schulze-Marmeling, ed. *Davidstern und Lederball: Die Geschichte der Juden im deutschen und internationalen Fußball* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2003); see also Michael Brenner and Gideon Reuveni, eds., *Emancipation through Muscles: Jews and Sports in Europe* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006).

<sup>78</sup> Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006).

yet very passive to it. A good example is the memoir of the 45-year-old Stuttgart chemist Martha Haarburger, who recollected the terrifying census at the meadow of Bohušovice in November 1943. The SS sent everyone to a pastureland between Theresienstadt and Bohušovice/Bauschowitz. The inmates were forced to stand for 16 hours in the rain and cold, without bathrooms or the possibility to sit, while the SS attempted to count them. Haarburger in particular remembered the old women: „I was frozen sordid. But then I looked at those old, emaciated women, standing there courageously, with hazy, tired eyes, and I thought of my friends, standing somewhere faraway, some of them probably even not on a dry soil, but in a swamp. I wanted to bear up, in spite of the cold and the exhaustion.”<sup>79</sup>

At the same time, the self-testimonies, both contemporary diaries and postwar reports, of the German Jews are interwoven with a topoi of pathos, sometimes with a tone of suffering, or focus on things that provoke emotional reaction that are thematized. In contrast, Czech narrators recount comparable situations in either an ironic, and/or sentimentalizing tone. One example is in a letter by the 72-year old Berliner Therese Klein who recollected briefly after the war the last time she saw her family:

„[...] but Rita [her daughter] and the child looked beautiful in my eyes. It is not easy for me, but they left me on October 15, 44, Daisy had a little knapsack on her little back, she had rosy expectations of the travel, and her last words were: ‘Granny, don’t be sad, I will always send you parcels and [unreadable] write.’ Dear Mr. Müller, one cannot believe what a man can take in suffering, my hope has unfortunately hit zero [...].”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Martha Haarburger, YVA, M1E, 711/596 (1945).

<sup>80</sup> Therese Klein to Herbert Müller and Yvonne Adler (August 1945), YVA, O5.

Klein wrote about losing her nearest kin, her child and grandchild, and returning to nothing. It is a situation to which most of the old German Jews, if they had no Gentile relatives, returned to. She was in a desperate position. Yet it is typical that Klein did not break down, that she could articulate her emotions about losing her beloved ones.<sup>81</sup> Klein found a narrative — symptomatically, one of pathos, fitting her cultural framework — which enabled her to make sense of the catastrophes that befell her and her fellow German Jews.

This undertone stands in a clear juxtaposition with the above-mentioned courage and tenacity of the old German Jews: these were poles of the cultural belonging as a bourgeois, educated, cultured German and Jew. In many respects these were the very values central to the German Jewish bourgeoisie of the same generation as the group under study here.<sup>82</sup> Can Theresienstadt tell us something about the history of the Jews who were deported here in general, and German Jews in particular? I believe so. It is worthwhile to apply insights from studying the prisoner societies in Nazi camps and ghettos offer valuable insights for reflecting on Jewish societies long before.

A key moment of finding their place in Theresienstadt was for German elderly in subscribing to the master narrative about Theresienstadt. The prisoner society here was, in comparison to other ghettos, such as Lodz, Warsaw, Bialystok, or Minsk, relatively homogeneous and interconnected: by and large, it was indeed a community rather than an

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<sup>81</sup> On this point, see Garbarini, *Numbered Days*, ch. 4 and 5.

<sup>82</sup> There is a wealth of literature on German Jews in the Wilhelmine era and substantial amount for the Weimar years. Central works include: Marion Kaplan, *Making of Jewish Middle Class: Women, family, and identity in Imperial Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Donald Niewyk, *The Jews in Weimar Germany*, Baton Rouge 1980; Michael Brenner, *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); Till van Rahden, *Juden und andere Breslauer: Die Beziehungen zwischen Juden, Protestanten und Katholiken in einer deutschen Grossstadt von 1860 bis 1925* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2000); Jay Geller, *The Scholems: A Story of the German-Jewish Bourgeoisie from Emancipation to Destruction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).

arbitrary mix of people living by each other. People in Terezín gave life to a master narrative that endowed their experience of imprisonment with meaning. The critical, and often normative parts of this narrative included:

- Labor for the ghetto was seen as the maintenance of the community. Hence the logic of the food rations, which was mostly seen as just, even by many of the elderly.
- High source of prestige for the construction detail (*Aufbaukommando*), the first male only transports that came to prepare the desolate town for the future transports. The *Aufbaukommando* members were seen as extremely deserved pioneers, with a high status
- Children as the hope for the future, who should receive better care, food, conditions
- A free sexuality and intimacy; a notion of sexuality and romantic/sexual relationships as a meaningful way to spend time and come to terms with the incarceration

The master narrative served as a legitimating story about the place where the inmates cared for the children and generally with a civilized interactions, with a rich cultural life and selflessly working inmates to improve the living conditions.<sup>83</sup> In fact, much of the master narrative has come to characterize the perception of Theresienstadt to this day.

Here we have the fascinating moment, where we can see how those old German Jews who were not deported further, or did not die (or before either) became very much interested in their new surroundings, and became, in their own way, part of Theresienstadt. This happened in spite of structural drawbacks, the cultural prejudices of the dominant group, poor accommodation and access to food, and a lack of knowledge of Czech. The German Jews strolled around to find out more about their surroundings and infrastructure, how the self-

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<sup>83</sup> Jacob Plaut, YVA, MIE, 1942.

administration worked and where one could get what. They quickly learned that their new neighbors and generally welcomed new friendships—not only with other German Jews, but also with other ethnic groups. How much German-Jewish elderly accepted the legend of Theresienstadt, wanted to be a part of it, is demonstrated in the words of the 77-year old widower from the Allgäu, Jacob Plaut: “Even if the future in Th[eresienstadt] did not look rosy for myself, I did not hang the head, and in order to numb myself I executed all labor I was assigned.”<sup>84</sup> Incidentally, like many other elderly, Plaut worked in order to improve his food rations.

The elderly German Jews came from a habitus that did not encourage legitimate premarital sexual experience between equals; in particular, it was not seen as acceptable for women. However, Theresienstadt, with its spirit of young people having a lively romantic and sexual life, had an impact on the cultural values of German elderly. Several of the testimonies mention in a markedly benevolent tone the flirting, beautiful careless youth.<sup>85</sup> The house elder Otto Bernstein accepted that the sense of entitlement of the younger people and the need for private space to be intimate as a legitimate need, one that can be thematized.<sup>86</sup> Yet others noted that at night, their roommates had sex.<sup>87</sup>

Generation-wise, there was one crucial aspect to German Jews and sexuality in Theresienstadt: German Jewish elderly were in role of observers or possible enablers, but only rarely as participants.<sup>88</sup> For younger German Jews, their experience of Theresienstadt in general, and participation in sexuality in particular, was quite different. Several young German Jewish women had romantic or sexual relationships with other inmates -- very often with young Czech

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Among others: Hedwig Ems, YVA, O33, 91; Thea Höchster, YVA, O33, 3534.

<sup>86</sup> Otto Bernstein, YV, O33, 1549; see also Manes, *Als ob's*, pp. 435f.

<sup>87</sup> Egon Strassburger.

<sup>88</sup> For an participating older man, see Hadra.

men, the social elite of the ghetto.<sup>89</sup> Such relationships were a part of the sexual economy in the ghetto.<sup>90</sup> Significantly, these relationships were most often between “foreign” women and “local” men, thus creating a weaker/stronger dichotomy: weak was foreign and female, strong local and male. Sexual barter was a means to social ascent, but only for those in sexually active age and considered attractive. These were the very same relationships that the elderly German chronicles observed in good humor. In fact, Otto Bernstein called it by its name: “Many a passionate love began with a double portion of potatoes.”<sup>91</sup>

German Jews of both sexes and all generations kept remarking how carefully dressed the Czech women were, how much energy they put into their hairdos, and how made up they were.<sup>92</sup> Wearing make-up seemed to be remarkable for the German Jews. The older German Jews did not perceive the made-up young Czech women as cheaply made-up prostitutes, nor as elegant Parisians. Elly Michaelis remarked: “There are some particularly pretty people among the Czechs, the women are very chic and made-up and jolly [vergnügt].”<sup>93</sup> Bernhard Kolb, the 62-year old former business manager of the Nuremberg Jewish Community, remarked on the heavy makeup and bleached hair of the Czech women.<sup>94</sup> The German Jewish elderly understood wearing make-up as an expression of hunger for life, for a life here and now, and even if it be in a ghetto. This was an astute observation, because it was exactly what moved the young Czech

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<sup>89</sup> Jiří Borský and Willy Mahler (APT, A 5704) had German girlfriends, Helene and Gertrud, respectively. Ruth Herskovits’ older stepsister Lotte and Arnold M.’s younger sister Elli both had Czech boyfriends, who were described as “taking care” of them and introducing to their social circles. Interview of Arnold M., September 5, 1995, Moses Mendelsohn Zentrum, Nr. 16. Ruth Gutmann-Herskovits, *Auswanderung vorläufig nicht möglich: Die Geschichte der Familie Herskovits aus Hannover*, ed. Bernard Strebel, (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2002), p. 133.

<sup>90</sup> Anna Hájková, “Sexual Barter in Times of Genocide: Negotiating the Sexual Economy of the Theresienstadt Ghetto,” in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 38, no. 3 (spring 2013): 503-533.

<sup>91</sup> Bernstein.

<sup>92</sup> Diary fragment of Bernhard Kolb, entry for June 19, 1943, YVA, O2, 387; diary Eva Noack Mosse, Wiener Library Tel Aviv University, 504, d.

<sup>93</sup> Elly Michaelis.

<sup>94</sup> Diary of Bernhard Kolb, entry for 19 June 1943, YVA, O2, 387.

Jews. Their youth took place in the ghetto, and here they lived it, without much consideration toward the less fortunate ones, one can even say happily.

By and large, the tone of the German-Jewish statements is generally positive. The German Jews praised the ghetto organization, were enthusiastic about the “self-sacrificing work,” and appreciated the effectivity. This acknowledgement of the administration’s skills was not only addressed at the old acquaintances from the Reich Association, but also at the unknown Czech Jews, and hence corresponded with the master narrative. When describing the Czech high-ranking clerks, the German narrators sometimes mentioned their being shrewd [Schlitzohr], or their weakness for attractive secretaries; but all that is always kept in a sympathizing tone. This positive vein included descriptions of the many interesting fellow inmates, the beautiful the surrounding, although it can only be observed from the fortification wall. Indeed, even the town itself is beautiful, with its classicist architecture reminding of Italy. The German Jews, old, as they were, were even learning some Czech, and adopted Czech expressions. The 62-year old Rose Scooler from Pirna in her “Ode to my bed in Theresienstadt” spoke of a “policzka” [sic, polička] rather than “Wandregal” [a shelf].<sup>95</sup> Margarete Pedde, a 55 year old from Mühlheim, called herself “babičko,” granny, or „maminka,” mama.<sup>96</sup>

Altogether, the relationship of the Czech and German Jews, the two largest groups in Theresienstadt, is particularly interesting, as it was asymmetrical in a multitude of ways and offers insights on social interactions and knowledge between top dogs and underdogs. The Czech Jews were barely interested in the German Jews as a group: they are mentioned in passing, and only marginally as stereotypes; begging for food, dying, or staying irritatingly German-national.

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<sup>95</sup> Wiener Collection at the Tel Aviv University, 586. See also Anna Hájková, “Odyssee ohne Wiederkehr: Alte deutsche Juden dichten in Theresienstadt,” *die tageszeitung*, January 21, 2012.

<sup>96</sup> Pedde, entry for August 17, 1943. The existence of the Czech vocative was quite lost on the non-Czech inmates, who would write about their friend Jirko or dog Budulínku.

If a German Jew is an object of interest to a Czech narrator, then because he or she was a famous person, such as Leo Baeck.

In contrast, the German Jews brought much more curiosity for the Czechs. The German observers highlighted the formidable corporeal image of the young Czech Jews. The German narrators described them in a predominantly physical, biologizing terms. They stressed their ‘healthy’ and ‘athletic’ appearance. The Czech Jews were repeatedly described as a ‘beautiful race’, one that was beautiful, ‘far-reachingly assimilated’ and ‘non-Jewish’ in their looks. This ‘assimilated’ look was sometimes interpreted as ‘Germanic’, other times as ‘typically Slavic’: “A beautiful race. Splendid boys -- well built young women. A real pasture for the eyes. The Slavic type was prevalent, the assimilation in Czechoslovakia seems to be far advanced.”<sup>97</sup> Egon Strassburger recollected his encounters with the Czech Jews:

„I liked the Czechs; they were open, clear, polite, and talented. They always turned out to be good, reliable buddies. Especially the men and women from Brno and Prague were lovely people. And often I was sorry to hear that they left on a transport the other day. Their looks were quite germanic, and the so called Jewish traits were rare. The people are tall, and well built, and the women in particular are charming. When angry and antagonized, they become courageous, adamant adversaries. They are hardworking and they never shy away from a physical labor. Idleness and comfortability are foreign to the Czech Jew.“<sup>98</sup>

When we contrast the situation at hand with encounters of the Eastern and Western Jews in other ghettos, we do not see German Jews applying Eastern Jewish stereotypes. German Jews in Theresienstadt developed new clichés, based on the pre-existing knowledge and also

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<sup>97</sup> Testimony of Otto Bernstein, YVA, O33, 1549.

<sup>98</sup> Egon Strassburger, “Ghetto Theresienstadt,” YVA, O33, 988.



asymmetries of power. This is why the Czech Jews were described as beautiful and dominant in corporeal terms: it is the impact of the Theresienstadt social hierarchy. Power was interpreted in terms of beauty.

German Jewish elderly repeatedly pointed out how culturally or socially assimilated the Czech Jews were. Indeed, the continuous focus of the German sharp observers on the assimilation of Czech Jews is a worthwhile reminder to realize that indeed the Czech Jews were very assimilated, a realization that the ghetto, with its enforced transnational community, made possible. Thinking about the German-Jewish and Czech-Jewish interwar history, with the Czech high intermarriage numbers,<sup>99</sup> the stories about the Moravian Jews in the ghetto wearing Valachian furs, celebrating the Czechoslovak National Holiday October 28 and reciting František Halas' For Prague, points out that Theresienstadt, with its enforced comparison, offers a powerful comment on the level of assimilation before the war. Whereas many among the Czech Jews, especially the younger generation, was moving towards a dissolution in the Gentile milieu, the generation of old German Jews, protagonists of this essay, lived more among each other.<sup>100</sup> Theresienstadt, where the German elderly kept relating to high German culture, exemplified in Goethe, at the encounter with the Czech Jews, people from Germany realized how German, and German-Jewish, they were.

## Conclusion

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<sup>99</sup> The intermarriage numbers in 1930s Prague were the highest Europe-wide—40% of Jews married a Gentile. Franz Friedmann, *Einige Zahlen über die tschechoslovakischen Juden: Ein Beitrag zur Soziologie der Judenheit* (Prague: Barissia, 1933).

<sup>100</sup> Marion Kaplan in her classic *The Making of Jewish Middle Class* presented the argument of the self-reproducing Jewish cultural milieu.

Old German Jews in Theresienstadt demonstrate a number of characteristics that invite us to reconsider and add to our understanding of German-Jewish cultural and social history. While they stayed connected to many of the familiar values that characterized much of their emotional community of courage, duty, and pathos, the old German Jews in Theresienstadt proved to be surprisingly tenacious, curious and flexible. This all although they were the one group in the ghetto that faced the worst possible conditions from the beginning: they were old, came without relatives, did not know the language, and were confronted with massive prejudices of the Czech majority society. Compared with the survival rates of the Czech elderly, who had their relatives nearby, the German mortality was not higher. This finding correlates with the findings about the tenacity and flexibility of German-Jewish elderly. Although the old German Jews did become a part of the Theresienstadt community, the young elite did not really acknowledge their presence beyond a cliché. The generational gap and seniority produced an insurmountable social hierarchy.

Surviving was not accidental. Among the surviving old Germans we find many people with Gentile relatives and those worked as house elders— a job that was relatively physically easy and hence manageable for the elderly and that offered better food rations. Also, while the overwhelming majority of the German Jewish elderly starved in Theresienstadt or were deported and murdered, those who survived did so thanks to the SS headquarter's protection of the elderly during the liquidation transports of 1944.

If the German Jewish elderly survived — and about 2,196 indeed did<sup>101</sup> — they became the first chroniclers of the ghetto.<sup>102</sup> The younger survivors were busy rebuilding up their lives,

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<sup>101</sup> Thanks to Wolfgang Schellenbacher for the calculation.

<sup>102</sup> On Jewish documentation of the Holocaust, see Garbarini, *Numbered Days*; Samuel Kassow, *Who will write our history? Rediscovering a hidden archive from the Warsaw Ghetto* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007);

finishing their education, founding families. The returning German Jewish elderly arrived into a vacuum, where everyone was dead, their home cities were destroyed, or worse, they lived in a DP camp. The very old and often lonely German Jews in old people's homes or DP camps who bore witness before passing away.<sup>103</sup> In their testimonies, they conveyed their fascination of the world of Theresienstadt, sometimes expressing a kind of satisfaction in surviving, describing, but also explaining. Their testimonies offer a guide-book, an encyclopedia, a report of their curiosity and open minds. If there is a morale to the story of the old German Jews in Theresienstadt, it is that even if much of the given structures are extremely unfavorable, we should, when we want to learn more about people in extremis, carefully listen to the many voices of the Theresienstadt inmates, different, as they were. They can show that often it is the underdogs who tell us the story first.

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Laura Jockusch, *Collect and Record! Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012)

<sup>103</sup> Many of the testimonies are written as letters to acquaintances or relatives abroad, stating how alone the writers are. Many of the Opfer des Faschismus applications from Berlin show the death of the applicant within three years after the liberation.