
Music: An Active Tool of Deception? The Case of *Brundibár* in Terezín *

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On 3 May 1945, the Theresienstadt Concentration Camp (known in Czech as Terezín) was among the last of the German concentration camps to be liberated. Chosen in 1941 by the Nazi hierarchy, first as a collection camp for the population of Czech and Moravian Jews, 75,000 men, women and children, young and old, were penned together in a town that could barely hold seven thousand people in standard living conditions. Terezín was thus truly a ‘concentration camp,’ holding its concentrated population of Czech and Moravian Jewry; but it had another intrinsically important function for the German government. The camp played a role in the ‘Final Solution’ as a so-called old-age ghetto for ‘privileged’ German and Austrian Jews—those over sixty-five years of age, decorated war veterans, prominent Jews, scholars and famous artists. Terezín became the ‘show-camp’ for the rest of the world through the visit in June 1944 of the International Red Cross (before which a ‘beautification’ campaign by the German authorities took place), and the subsequent filming in August 1944 of a propaganda documentary known colloquially as *Der Führer Schenkt den Juden eine Stadt* [The Führer Gives a City to the Jews].¹

Prior to these important events, from mid-1942 an enormous influx of talented artists enabled the *Ältestenrat* (Jewish Council of Elders) to establish the *Freizeitgestaltung* (Leisure-time Organisation) in the camp. A body for cultural and teaching activities, the *Freizeitgestaltung* administered a vast array of activities, including performances of opera and large choral works in German and Czech, symphonies and chamber music, appearances by smaller choral groups, cabaret evenings, artistic ventures and the clandestine education for children.

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¹ The actual title of the film was *Theresienstadt – eine Dokumentarfilm aus den jüdische Siedlungsgebiet* [Theresienstadt: A Documentary Film from the Jewish Settled Territory]. The film was directed by Kurt Geron, a famous Jewish actor and entrepreneur, and it was filmed just after the visit to Terezín from the International Red Cross.

To this day, commentators in mainstream media continue to make accusations regarding the complicity (conscious or otherwise) with the Nazis of the performers and organisers of the cultural activities in Terezín, especially with regard to their role in the 1944 documentary and Red Cross visit. In 2005, Peter Aspden singled out Terezín in his article 'Orchestrating the Holocaust':

[T]he most controversial musical development to take place in Nazi Germany during the war [was] the establishment of concentration camp orchestras. At Theresienstadt, these were cynically set up so that the Nazis could show the world that, even though Jews were imprisoned inside a camp, civilised values continued to flourish. The camp was proudly exhibited by the Nazis to the International Red Cross Committee in 1944, and was the subject of a propaganda film later that year, in which prisoners were shown, clustered around tables embellished with bouquets of flowers, enjoying concerts of classical music ... In reality, Theresienstadt was little more than an ante-chamber, a mocking prologue preceding execution.²

Earlier popular commentators, such as Michel Schneider, extended this argument even further:

In Terezín as elsewhere, music was therefore first of all décor, allure, a trompe-l'œil. The whole camp's function was to sort people; it was a stage towards Auschwitz and, faithful to their attitudes of secrecy, the Nazis wanted this antechamber of horror not to be so horrible. Moreover, in the heart of the camp, the cultural and musical activities were the threshold of this antechamber, and the window of the *Freizeitgestaltung* (Leisure-time Organisation), directed by those who were responsible and were Jewish, made its contribution to the lie.³

By extending an accusatory approach regarding the complicity of cultural activity, the very people who are imprisoned and persecuted are both implicated in and inferred to be partly responsible for their own demise. The heavy hand of history lies over cultural activities in Terezín, and in examining such activities there is no escaping where they gained their 'fame.' Just as 'there is no outside' in interpretation, so too there is no outside to history. Schneider and Aspden read Terezín's cultural activity as teleologically embedded within the greater notion of Holocaust, but by doing so, they fail (or forget) to take into account the personal perspectives of those who actually experienced this musical activity in Terezín. Many accounts by those actually interred in Terezín remained unexamined, under-examined, inaccurately quoted or unacknowledged up to now.

The subjects of this article are the survivors of Terezín who experienced performances of the Czech children's opera *Brundibár* in the camp; they were sustained and nourished by these performances and value the memory, even sixty years later. Their accounts answer the

² Peter Aspden, 'Orchestrating the Holocaust,' *Financial Times* [London], 15 January 2005: Weekend Magazine.

³ 'A Terezín comme ailleurs, la musique fut donc d'abord un décor, un leurre, un trompe-l'œil. Le camp tout entier avait une fonction de triage, d'étape vers Auschwitz, et fidèles à leur attitude de secret, les Nazis voulurent que cette antichambre de l'horreur ne fût point horrible. En outre, au sein du camp, les activités culturelles et musicales étaient le seuil de cette antichambre et sa vitrina la *Freizeitgestaltung* ("Administration des loisirs") dirigée par des responsables juifs apporta sa contribution au mensonge.' Michel Schneider, 'La Musique au lieu de la mort,' *Temps Modernes* 562 (May 1993): 140. Translation into English by Lana Woolf and Joseph Toltz.

accusations of Schneider, Aspden and others. These survivors argue that *Brundibár* in Terezín was part of the subversive and powerful Czech-Jewish cultural life in the camp. The Czech libretto of *Brundibár* (using words similar to those of Czech cabaret and everyday Czech work songs) created a language barrier against any German objections, and invested the work with a special power of resistance, especially for the children who performed in it or saw it. This resistance is most strongly embodied in the words of the final song of the opera: 'He who loves his father, mother and native land, who wants the tyrant's end, join us hand in hand and be our welcome friend'.⁴ Far from music acting as a tool of deception by the Nazis for the greater world, music for these survivors was a tool of resistance, survival and nourishment.

Brundibár is a small opera, no more than forty minutes long, written for children.⁵ Composed in 1938 by Hans Krása with lyrics by Adolf Hoffmeister as an entry for a children's opera competition,⁶ it received a clandestine premiere in occupied Prague, performed by children at the Jewish Children's Home, with design and stage direction by the avant-garde theatre director František Zelenka and musical direction by Rafael Schächter. *Brundibár* had only one additional performance at the orphanage before the transportation of Bohemian and Moravian Jews to Terezín began in 1942. On 7 July 1943, Rudolf (Rudi) Freudenfeld, the son of the director of the Jewish Children's Home, arrived in Terezín with his allotted fifty kilograms of luggage.⁷ Smuggled within was the piano score of *Brundibár*. In the camp, the score was re-orchestrated by the composer for the various instrumentalists who were available. Rehearsals were held in secret. The set, to Zelenka's design, was constructed out of stolen wood; choreography was undertaken by Kamila Rosenbaum, a prominent modern dance exponent in Vienna prior to her transportation; and the premiere of the Terezín version took place on 23 September 1943, in the hall of the Magdeburg barracks. All in all, *Brundibár* was performed fifty-five times in Terezín up to the end of 1944, making it the most popular and most frequently performed work in the camp. In October 1944, after the primary visit of the Red Cross and the completion of the documentary film, *Kunstlertransporten* (transportation of artists) to Auschwitz and other destinations East began, and performances of *Brundibár* ceased until after the war.

⁴ 'Kdo má tolik rád maminku s tatínkem, a naši rodnou zem, je náš kamarád a smí si s námi hrát!' Hans Krása and Adolf Hoffmeister, *Brundibár: Dětská opera o dvou jednáních* [*Brundibár: A Children's Opera in Two Acts*]; English version by Joža Karas, piano and vocal score ed. Blanka Červinková (Prague: Tempo Praha, 1998), 73–74.

⁵ Synopsis: Aninka and Pepíček, two little children, have a sick mother. The doctor has prescribed milk for her health, and they go seeking milk in the town marketplace, although they have no money to purchase it. Three traders hawk their wares—an ice-cream man, a baker and a milkman. The children engage the milkman in a song, but he tells them that they need money for milk. Suddenly the children spot the organ-grinder, Brundibár, playing on the street corner. Seeing his success, they decide to busk as well (and proceed to sing a song about geese), much to the annoyance of the townsfolk (and Brundibár), who chase them away. Three animals—a sparrow, cat and dog—come to their aid, and together they recruit the other children of the neighbourhood to help with their plan. Night falls. Dawn comes, and the children and animals begin their morning exercises as the townsfolk get ready for the day. The plan goes ahead: the animals and children drown out Brundibár, then join in a beautiful lullaby. The townsfolk are very moved, and they give Aninka and Pepíček some money. Suddenly, Brundibár sneaks in and steals their takings. All the children and the animals give chase, and recover the money. The opera concludes with a victory march sung about defeating the evil organ-grinder.

⁶ Červinková, introductory note to score of *Brundibár*, 5–6.

⁷ Ingo Schultz, 'Theresienstädter Musiker in Ullmann's Kritiken Biographischer Anhang,' in Viktor Ullmann, *26 Kritiken über musikalische Veranstaltungen in Theresienstadt* (Hamburg, 1993) 103.

I cannot judge how clear an idea the German Command had up to that time that plays had been acted in Czech in the camp. One thing, however, is certain. They never learned about the real character of the Czech theatre. Otherwise, prohibition of its activities would have hardly passed without much worse consequences. The Czech theatre knew how to draw full advantage from its semi-legal position. At that time not a single Czech performance could have passed the Nazi censorship unpunished. These circumstances permitted freedom of artistic expression to be smuggled into a milieu of suppression; Czech cultural life reached unbelievable heights: there was an opera, a stage play, cabarets, recitals and lectures, concerts, a puppet theatre, a children's ensemble and even a children's opera. The performance of the children's opera, *Brundibár*, by Hanuš Krása, and Smetana's *Bartered Bride* directed by Rafael Schächter, were among my greatest experiences in the ghetto.⁸

In Terezín, *Brundibár* was a work of exceptional importance and power, especially to the Czech internees. Extending its influence beyond musician, singer and audience to embrace many others who worked toward its conception, it became a powerful point of artistic resistance. The layers of allegorical meaning in *Brundibár* are many and varied. Perhaps it is because of this that it continues to appeal, even to those for whom the work may potentially bring back traumatic memories. Many still remember the work affectionately to this day. *Brundibár's* simplicity works in its favour as a popular drama, and, through interviews with my subjects, all manner of exciting, different particulars emerged to enrich this subject. I was able to establish new factual information about the production and rehearsal processes, introducing speculative dialogues about the inspiration for the work. General material about musical life of the camp was also recorded. Even now, further documentation and research is warranted, in particular, the recording and analysis of music performed in everyday life in Terezín.

Approximately 141,000 people passed through Terezín in the period from 1941 to 1945: 75,000 Czech Jews, 42,345 from Germany, 15,324 from Austria, 4,897 from Holland, 1,270 from Poland, 1,074 from Hungary and 466 from Denmark. Eighty-eight thousand of the total number were transported to the East, and 3,097 native Bohemians and Moravians returned. Numbered among those transported were 15,000 children, of whom fewer than 150 returned. Many never even left Terezín: 33,500 prisoners died in the Ghetto from maltreatment and disease, half of them from exhaustion and starvation. Just over 23,000 people were liberated in Terezín on 8 May 1945.⁹ Thus, in basic terms of numbers, life in Terezín was dominated by the Czech Jews, and the Czech language was the only language other than German permitted in performance. Of all the performances in the camps, only those in Czech could get away with political, subversive messages. One fine example of this is the cabaret show by Karel Švenk, *The Last Cyclist*, an allegorical play set in a mad kingdom. In 'Farewell,' the only surviving song from this cabaret, the heroine Manka sings to her imprisoned lover, the last bicycle rider, on the day he is to be exiled to the moon (the ultimate transport).

For this research, four individuals were contacted to discuss their experiences in Terezín. The first subject, Jaroslav (Jerry) Rind, went to Terezín in his late teenage years. Working as a

⁸ Jana Šedova, 'Theatre and Cabaret in the Ghetto of Terezín,' in F. Ehrmann, O. Heitlinger and R. Iltis, eds, *Terezín* (Prague, 1965) 221.

⁹ Figures were originally drawn from Schneider, *La Musique*, 138, and later corrected by Professor Konrad Kwiet, Adjunct Professor of Jewish Studies and Roth Lecturer in Holocaust Studies, University of Sydney.

carpenter in the camp, he was responsible for the illegal acquisition of wood for building the set of *Brundibár*. Through him, contact details were obtained for two other witnesses who had lived in Terezín. The first, a major figure in the *Brundibár* story, is Ela Steinova Weissberger, one of two surviving principal performers from *Brundibár*. She performed the role of Kocour (cat) in the Terezín production, never missing a performance. The other survivor, Josef (Joe) Neustatl is Rind's step-brother; he was filmed as an audience member in the documentary film made by the Nazis in 1944. The final interviewee (who wished to remain anonymous) was a very young child when deported to Terezín.

Much of the information given by Ela Weissberger was empirical, and thus valuable as a response to previous studies of *Brundibár*, especially in light of the prime account in English of musical life in Terezín by Joža Karas, whose account of the Terezín performances contains many gaps and inaccuracies, one of which is his referring to Ela Weissberger as Eva.¹⁰ Weissberger described the audition process for *Brundibár* and the criteria that the panel was looking for, contending that the preference was to choose singers who had skill, but not mature vocal training. She mentioned the cases of sickness (coming as a result of malnutrition) that would leave various principals unable to perform, and she contradicts Karas's assertions that the roles of Aninka, the bird and the dog were constant, asserting that only she and Honza Treichlinger (who played the character of the organ-grinder Brundibár) were in every production. While Karas hardly mentions choreography, Weissberger insists that Kamila Rosenbaum choreographed the entire show, and that there was organised movement throughout.¹¹ Weissberger's testimony really gives a taste of one of the 'normalising' skills that children in the production acquired throughout their journey with *Brundibár*—something as simple as dancing acquired an enhanced meaning not only in the camp, but also then transforms into a positive post-trauma memory for Weissberger; so much so, that she could dance an 'English waltz' with her mother during the celebration of her grandson's Barmitzvah, and recollect the first memory with genuine affection.

Rind and Weissberger share an explicit agenda in exploring and commemorating *Brundibár*: exploring through personal collecting of recordings and information, commemorating it as speakers at performances, and advocating future performances of the work. They both hold the determined belief that the meaning of *Brundibár*, the simple message advocating an eventual triumph of good over evil, makes it all the more worthy for performance as a message of tolerance, one of the reasons they invest so much emotionally in the work. Both Rind and Weissberger also believe that performing *Brundibár* in a modern context commemorates the lives of the children who did not return from Auschwitz. Coming from assimilated Czech families, Czech art and music resonated more strongly for them than did the performance of German cultural works in Terezín, and Rind believes most strongly that an understanding

¹⁰ Karas Joža, *Music in Terezín 1941–1945* (New York, 1985) 99.

¹¹ 'People [from modern productions] are asking "Why are you looking for some movement?" and I said, well, this [*Brundibár*] was the first time I learned how to dance, waltz and all that, and when we learned English waltz, my mother was an excellent ballroom dancer, and when I came one day, I said, "Mum, I want to dance with you an English waltz." My mother looked at me and said, "Where did you learn English waltz?" I said, "Mrs Rosenbaum; she taught us how to dance within *Brundibár*," and I was humming and dancing with my mother.' Interview with Ela Kleinova Weissberger by the author, recorded 15 August 2005, Tappan, New York.

of the Czech language was crucial to understanding the potentially subversive message of victory against tyranny contained within the Opera.¹²

Through dialogue between himself and Weissberger, and through his role in the construction of the set, Rind positioned himself as a contributor to the Terezín production. Although reluctant to talk in depth about his unpleasant experiences, the most important, moving and upsetting part of Rind's narrative is the loss of his beloved mother. This is an essential part in shaping his thoughts about *Brundibár*: the central tenet of the opera's story is two children looking to find milk to give to their sick mother, and when Rind listens to the lullaby near the finale of Act II, his personal association is very evident.¹³ In finding this personal connection, Rind transcends the spurious notion of complicity, and stamps his ownership on the work.

Precise cultural understanding of the work is exceptionally important to Rind and, as well as pointing out the inadequacies of the current English translation, he also brings forth hidden meanings in the narrative. The character of Brundibár is an organ-grinder in the plot, and the cultural understanding of the role of organ-grinders in the post-World War I Republic of Czechoslovakia is crucial to Rind's reading of the work. Organ-grinders were often wounded soldiers granted license to busk in their own particular area or canton and, when the children begin to busk on Brundibár's turf, they transgress this adult rule, without being aware of it, and thus earn the ire of all the adults. Without this cultural understanding, the character of Brundibár could quite easily transform into a typical evil (outsider) caricature from fairytale or folklore. Rind's contextualisation is therefore crucial in informing an accurate cultural reading of the story.

Rind has also developed his own theory as to the origin of the title. He believes it to be inspired by the popular fair song, 'Houpity Ho,' which was well known at the time. In communicating this, he also reveals that a rich Czech folksong tradition was continued in the camp, one where children and adults alike sang various songs in the context of daily life; it is quite probable that these songs were never recorded as having been performed in Terezín, and an opportunity exists to expand this into an important study of another musical 'life' of Terezín.

The other two surviving audience members, Joe Neustatl and the anonymous interviewee (hereafter referred to as H), have less emotional investment in *Brundibár* than Rind or Weissberger. In particular, H (who was exceptionally young at the time) remembers almost nothing of his experience, other than an ambiguous feeling of a 'point of relief' during that time of darkness.¹⁴ It soon became clear in the interview process that, rather than having been involved in the production of *Brundibár*, H may have been involved in a later Red Cross visit

¹² In answer to my question 'What was the mixture of the audience in terms of age groups?' Rint replied: 'All ages—even up to old people, and mostly Czechs, but a lot of people who couldn't speak Czech remembered the melody and the story; but I think only the real Czech Jews could get the full meaning behind the whole ... it's a simple story.' Interview with Jaroslav Rind by the author, recorded 24 October 2003, Kangaroo Valley, New South Wales.

¹³ 'This I think is the nicest part of the whole lot. This is my own personal feelings on this. Especially now when I am older—I liked it then, I had tears in my eyes when I heard it there in Terezín, but now ... [emotional pause in Jerry's account].' Interview, Jaroslav Rind, 24 October 2003.

¹⁴ 'My recollection is that I took part in one of the group scenes ... So, the equivalent of the chorus. But only on two or three occasions, because most of the time I wasn't able to make it, or I was too stuffed to take part.' Interview with H by the author, recorded 10 September 2004, Gosford, New South Wales.

in early 1945, when the SS hurriedly recruited children as actors for a production of the Czech play *Fireflies in the Dark*. H's youth in Terezín (he was nine years old when liberated in 1945) means that he really only relates to *Brundibár* as a literal work as an adult, not as a parable from a child's perspective; nevertheless, his memory of relief in a time of trauma serves in this study to reinforce the notion that an artistic experience in traumatic context can be redemptive and sustaining.

Neustatl's account is completely different, for his age in Terezín (eleven to fifteen) represents the age group at which *Brundibár* was initially aimed. Neustatl, like Weissberger and H, remained in Terezín until its liberation in 1945. There is absolute proof that Neustatl was a member of the audience of *Brundibár*, because he can be spotted clearly in the front row of the audience in the aforementioned propaganda documentary, clapping with great vigour, and smiling with delight after the curtain falls. The memory of *Brundibár* is strong in Neustatl's consciousness, and as an enthusiastic and knowledgeable music fan (for many years a broadcaster on 2MBS-FM), he engages in a personal dialogue with the opera, pointing out the pedagogical nature and characteristics of the music itself.¹⁵ Neustatl sees *Brundibár* as having been written with the purpose of training children's ears to acclimatise to non-conventional harmonic language, particularly jazz and folk idioms within a classical, operatic treatment, and he finds this method delightful, practical and enchanting.

So how are we to view *Brundibár* and indeed other cultural objects produced in traumatic contexts? Reading the work retrospectively as a cynically manipulative artistic cog in the Nazi death machine must be balanced with viewing *Brundibár* as a cultural object produced by those in a situation of internalised forced migration, as a point of resistance and sustenance during the years of horror. The very best we can hope for in trying to reach an 'understanding' of this subject is to continue to encourage these dialogues, so that gaining more diverse perspectives will assist the task of comprehending the incomprehensible, albeit acknowledging that we will never truly reach a state of full comprehension, having never experienced this firsthand. Does our culture now have enough perspective from the actual events of the Holocaust to be able to stage *Brundibár* divorced from its context? Perhaps the answer lies in a process that the ethnomusicologist Adelaida Reyes refers to in her most recent study of music in America:

In the meantime, technology speeds up the blurring of lines that distinguish the effects of immigration from those of internally generated diversity. No longer dependent on the physical presence of immigrants, who were their carriers throughout history, musical ideas now arrive from all over the world through the media. De-contextualised and detached from the people who had subjected them to the rules of a musical and cultural system, musical ideas and materials now become free agents. Thus unbound, they become vulnerable or receptive to exploitation, manipulation, appropriation, hybridization, and a wider range of creative possibilities.¹⁶

¹⁵ 'Well, look, it had a fantastic impact on all the kids, all the children. And of course what happens is that children have absolutely no understanding of the subtleness of the story—the children who came to see it. The children who were involved in it, it was indicated to them. But the children who went to see it did not have a clue; it was just a very simple story. And the impact of it was quite great—as I told you on the phone, I got a terrible surprise when I came to hear it again a few years ago, and I found that it's only a half-hour work. To us kids it was full entertainment!' Interview with Joe Neustatl by the author, recorded 24 January 2005, Waverley, New South Wales.

¹⁶ Adelaida Reyes, *Music in America: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture* (New York: OUP, 2004) 40.

Displacement, oppression and wholesale genocide continued unabated in the twentieth century, and continue in the twenty-first. We see the survivors of these traumatic events living in our midst in Australia, coming here with the hope of a new, stable life, or, in the case of Australia's Indigenous population, hoping for a just treatment some time in the future. For those fortunate enough not to know this trauma, it is incumbent on us to assist such people with sensitivity, empathy and understanding. Just as music is a common language of understanding and celebration, so too music acts as a point of resistance and sustenance during times of trouble, and it can unlock our comprehension of how human identity constructs and re-constructs itself during and following traumatic events. To pity or allege comprehension of the suffering of those who went through any refugee trauma situation is to begin wholesale, unbalanced appropriation of their pain. Dismissing cultural products of Terezín or other refugee situations as 'forced,' 'coerced' or even 'collaborative' discounts the real value of these products in the lives of the refugees. If we fail to engage this subject, one which informs so much of our perspective on the history of the past century, we are removing ourselves from a legitimate and important debate about the nature of culture in constructing identity. To record and hear the testimony of those who actually experienced a moment of respite in Hell is to begin to appreciate the power of music in our lives, then and now.