



I have not seen a butterfly
around here

CHILDREN'S DRAWINGS AND POEMS FROM TEREZÍN

THE BUTTERFLY

The last, the very last,
So richly, brightly, dazzlingly yellow.
Perhaps if the sun's tears would sing
against a white stone. . .

Such, such a yellow
Is carried lightly 'way up high.
It went away I'm sure because it wished
to kiss the world goodbye.

For seven weeks I've lived in here,
Penned up inside this ghetto
But I have found my people here.
The dandelions call to me
And the white chestnut candles in the court.
Only I never saw another butterfly.

That butterfly was the last one.
Butterflies don't live in here,
In the ghetto.

In Bohemia, there is a strange place called Terezín, some 60 kilometers from Prague. It was founded by order of Emperor Joseph II of Austria, 200 years ago and named after his mother, Maria Theresa. This walled-in fortress was constructed on plans drafted by Italian military engineers and has 12 ramparts which enclose the town in the shape of a star. It was to have been a fortress and it became a sleepy army garrison dominated by the barracks, where the homes of the inhabitants were simply put up with. There were homes, taverns, a post office, a bank and a brewery. There was a church as well, built in a sober style and belonging to the barracks as part of the army community. The little town seemed to have been forced onto the countryside, a lovely countryside without either high mountains or dizzy cliffs, without deep ravines or swift rivers... only blue hills, green meadows, fruit trees and tall poplars.

Today, a shadow still lingers above this little town as though funeral wagons still drive along its streets, as though the dust still eddies in the town square, stirred by a thousand footsteps. Today, it seems sometimes as though from every corner, from every stairway and from every corridor, peer human faces, gaunt, exhausted, with eyes full of fear.

During the war years, Terezín was a place of famine and of fear. Somewhere far away, in Berlin, men in uniforms had held meetings. These men decided to exterminate all the Jews in Europe, and because they were used to doing things thoroughly with the calculated, cool passion of a murderer, they worked out plans in which they fixed the country, the place and the timetable as well as the stopping places on that road to death. One of these stopping places was Terezín.

It was meant to be a model camp which foreigners could be shown, and it was termed a ghetto. At first, Jews from Bohemia and Moravia were brought to Terezín, but finally they came from all over Europe and from hence were shipped further east to the gas chambers and ovens. Everything in this small town was false, invented: every one of its inhabitants was condemned in advance to die. It was only a tunnel without an outlet. Those who contrived this trap and put it on their map, with its fixed timetable of life and death, knew all about it. They knew its future as well. Those who were brought here in crowded railroad coaches and stockcars after days and days of cruelty, of humiliation, of offense, of beatings and of theft, knew very little about it. Some of them believed the murderers' falsehoods, that they could sit out the war here in quiet safety. Others came to Terezín already crushed, yet with a spark of hope that even so, perhaps they might escape their destiny. There were also those who knew that Terezín was only one station in a short timetable and that is why they tried so hard to keep at least themselves alive and

perhaps their family. And those who were good and honorable, endeavored to keep the children alive, the aged and the ailing. All were finally deceived and the same fate awaited all of them.

But the children who were brought here knew nothing. They came from places where they had already known humiliation; they had been expelled from the schools. They had sewn stars on their hearts, on their jackets and blouses, and were only allowed to play in the cemeteries. That wasn't so bad, if you look at it with the eyes of a child, even when they heard their parents' lamentations, even when they heard strange words charged with horror such as mapping, registration and transport. When they were herded with their parents into the ghetto, when they had to sleep on the concrete floors in crowded garrets or clamber up three-tiered bunks, they began to look around and quickly understood the strange world in which they had to live. They saw reality, but they still maintained their childish outlook, an outlook of truth which distinguishes between night and day and cannot be confused with false hopes and the shadowplay of an imaginary life.

And so they lived, locked within walls and courtyards. This was their world, a world of color and shadow, of hunger and of hope.

The children played in the barracks yard and the courtyards of the one-time homes. Sometimes they were permitted to breathe a little fresh air upon the ramparts. From the age of 14, they had to work, to live the life of an adult. Sometimes they went beyond the walls to work in the gardens and they were no more considered to be children. The smaller ones acted out their fairy tales and even children's operas. But they did not know that they too, as well as the grown-ups, had been used deceitfully, in an effort to convince a commission of foreigners from the Red Cross that Terezín was a place where adults and children alike could live. Secretly, they studied and they drew pictures. Three months, half a year, one or two years, depending on one's luck, because transports came and went continually, headed east into nothingness.

From these 15,000 children which for a time played and drew pictures and studied, only 100 came back. They saw everything, that grown-ups saw. They saw the endless queues in front of the canteens, they saw the funeral carts used to carry bread and the human beings harnessed to pull them. They saw the SS-men strolling on pavements and the men who had to raise their caps to them and the women who had to bow low to them. They saw the infirmaries which seemed like a paradise to them and funerals which were only a gathering-up of coffins. They listened to a speech made up of a hodgepodge of expressions like „bonke“, „shlajska“, „shahojista“, and they learned to speak this language. They heard the shouts of the SS-men at roll call and the meek mumblings of prayers in the barracks where the grown-ups lived.

But the children saw too what the grown-ups didn't want to see, the beauties beyond the village gates, the green meadows and the bluish hills, the ribbon of highway reaching off into the distance and the imagined road marker pointing toward

„Praha“, the animals, the birds, the butterflies – all this was beyond the village walls and they could look at it only from afar, from the barracks windows and from the ramparts of the fort. They saw things too that grown-ups could not see – princesses with coronets, evil wizards and witches, jesters and bugs with human faces, a land of happiness where, for an admission of 1 Kč, there was everything to be had – cookies, candy, a roast pig stuck with a fork, where milk and sodapop trickled. They saw too the rooms they'd lived in at home, with curtains at the window and a kitten and a saucer of milk. But they transported it to Terezín. There had to be a fence and a lot of pots and pans, because there was supposed to be food in every pot and pan.

All this they drew and painted and many other things besides; they loved to paint and draw, from morning till evening.

But when they wrote poems, it was something else again. Here one finds words about „painful Terezín“, about „the little girl who got lost“. These told of longings to go away somewhere where there are kinder people: there are old grandfathers gnawing stale bread and rotten potatoes for lunch, here was a „longing for home“ and fear. Yes, fear came to them and they could tell of it in their poems, knowing that they were condemned. Perhaps they knew it better than the adults.

There were 15,000 of them and 100 came back. You are looking at their drawings now after many years, when that world of hunger, fear and horror seems to us almost like a cruel fairy tale about evil wizards, witches and cannibals. The drawings and poems – that is all that is left of these children, for their ashes have long since sifted across the fields around Auschwitz. Their signatures are here and some of the drawings are inscribed with the year, their group and time. Of those who signed their names, it has been possible to find out a few facts: the year and place of their birth, the number of their transport to Terezín and to Auschwitz and then the year of their death. For most of them, it was 1944, the next to last year of World War II.

But their drawings and their poems speak to us; these are their voices which have been preserved, voices of reminder, of truth and of hope.

We are publishing them not as dry documents out of thousands such witnesses in a sea of suffering, but in order to honor the memory of those who created these colors and these words. That's the way these children probably would have wanted it when they overtook death.

JIRÍ WEIL

AT TEREZÍN

When a new child comes
Everything seems strange to him.
What, on the ground I have to lie?
Eat black potatoes? No! Not!!
I've got to stay? It's dirty here!
The floor-why, look, it's dirt, I fear!
And I'm supposed to sleep on it?
I'll get all dirty!

Here the sound of shouting, cries,
And oh, so many flies.
Everyone knows flies carry disease.
Oooh, something bit me! Wasn't that a bedbug?
Here in Terezín, life is hell.
And when I'll go home again, I can't yet tell.

"TEDDY"



VILÉM EISNER, 4.6.1931 – 4.10.1944

PAIN STRIKES SPARKS ON ME,
THE PAIN OF TEREZIN

Fifteen beds, Fifteen charts with names,
Fifteen people without a family tree.
Fifteen bodies for whom torture is medicine and pills,
Beds over which the crimson blood of ages spills.
Fifteen bodies which want to live here.
Thirty eyes, seeking quietness.
Bald heads which gape from out the prison.
The holiness of the suffering, which is none
of my business.

The loveliness of air, which day after day
Smells of strangeness and carbolic,
The nurses which carry thermometers
Mothers who grope after a smile.
Food is such a luxury here.
A long, long night, and a brief day.

But anyway, I don't want to leave
The lighted rooms and the burning cheeks,
Nurses who leave behind them only a shadow
To help the little sufferers.

I'd like to stay here, a small patient,
Waiting the doctor's daily round,
Until after a long, long time, I'd be well again.

Then I'd like to live
And go back home again.