The Room 28 Projects are more than just memories of a dark time

Helga Pollak-Kinsky’s Theresienstadt diary: a starting point for reflecting on the timeless themes of human freedom and the formation of human values.

Because of the diversity of the Room 28 Projects, it will be useful to comment on the genesis of the texts and their complex structure, and to outline the possibilities of their didactic use. The educational intention here is to reduce the access threshold for young people and increase the attractiveness and the “usable value” of the materials for users from other areas.

The aim of the memorial projects presented under the Room 28 Projects logo is to transport the memories of a special group of Holocaust survivors into the present time. This is achieved by offering written or oral reminiscences of the Nazi period to readers or audiences who can then keep these memories alive, continue to narrate them and to transmit them in some form. In this manner, these reminiscences will remain publicly accessible and never fall into oblivion.

Hannelore Brenner’s Room 28 Projects are an extraordinary undertaking that differs from most other documentaries or interview projects. Their multi-dimensionality and methodological treatment are what makes the story of the Girls of Room 28 an exciting process of discovery and understanding.

The special feature of the Room 28 Projects is that both memory and history are structured and presented in a narrative paradigm. In his 2005 book, French political scientist Enzo Traverso pointed out that this is a task which is not easy to accomplish, because history and memory have their own “time frames” that constantly intersect, collide, and disrupt each other. His central thesis is: “Memory is the bearer of a temporality that tends to question the continuum of history.” (italics in original text)

How do the Room 28 Projects deal with this? They try to set what happened then and what is being memorialized now into a nested, non-linear narrative structure and to place it in a broader historical context. At the same time, they offer a range of possible interpretations. The individual narratives and their possible interpretations are then what determines how the historical processes and facts are understood.

When we tell the story of the Theresienstadt Girls of Room 28 with the help of the multi-layered documentary material, we automatically structure all of its psychological, social, economic and historical “data” in a narrative pattern that we also use in everyday life: all of us want our narratives to be “well-rounded” stories that are only occasionally interrupted by a serial enumeration of mere facts. We “understand” stories of this kind if their structure resonates with us, if they are presented plausibly and if we can accept the interpretations offered.
This kind of “narrative historiography”, however, is not universally accepted as “academic”. Representatives of another academic paradigm see these narratives more as fairy tales than as serious historiography. Stories of this kind, they say, open the way for manipulative and suggestive influences, while they believe people should regard “history” as an objectively verifiable sequence of events.

The editor of the Room 28 Projects, Hannelore Brenner, prefers a different concept of “objectivity”. She lets personalities and events speak for themselves. And when the victims talk about the Holocaust, they do not only highlight aspects that provide information about the horror, the threat, the exploitation and the boundless fear: they also reflect on the “subjective” question of how it is possible to retain one’s humanity in these circumstances. In other words: their stories mostly touch on questions of humanity, empathy, solidarity and the development of social competence under the precarious living conditions of a concentration camp.

The Room 28 Projects can therefore also be read and understood as an “evolutionary tale” showing how people lived, felt and thought before the catastrophe of the Holocaust came crashing down upon them, and what they felt, wrote and wanted to remember as it was unfolding and later on.

Along the same lines, Raul Hilberg – in his 2002 book “Die Quellen des Holocaust” [The sources of the Holocaust]\(^3\) – distinguishes two types of sources of remembrance. He calls documents written during and before the Nazi period “documents”. These include, for example, Helga Pollak-Kinsky’s hand-written Theresienstadt diary entries, the notes in the calendar of her father Otto Pollak, the entries in the autograph albums of the Girls of Room 28, Handa Pollak’s notebook, Vera Nath’s album, the girls’ paintings and drawings created in Friedl Dicker-Brandeis’ art lessons, the pre-war photos from family albums etc.

Such collections of contemporary documents are only very rarely extant in their entirety. If documents are not dated, their chronology can be derived only approximately from their contents, provided that the events described can be placed on a timeline. In Helga’s diary, for instance, certain turning points, phases, or “epochs” in the Theresienstadt ghetto life can be identified that allow us to infer certain changes in and around the girls’ home. These are not only changes in the natural course of the year, but also illnesses, phases of heightened insecurity, curfews, transport announcements, loss of friends and relatives, but also happy highlights such as the secret concerts and birthday parties, the praise and affection of the carers, new friendships etc.

The inner evolution can be deduced from our knowledge of the age group of the author of the document. Since the “forced community” of the Girls of Room 28 was structured from the outset so that girls of about the same age shared a room, we can assume that they also shared the basic state of mind of children of their age. This means that if we draw on our knowledge of the general developmental psycho-
logy of adolescents, we can deduce that these girls’ psychological balance was often still in some disarray. Their social relations with roommates or carers were as stable or unstable as they are for girls at puberty, the transition to adulthood. Developmental psychology sees puberty as the subject’s fragile attempt to establish his or her adolescent status between the no-longer (child) and the not-yet (adult). However – and this thwarts any schematic interpretation along the lines of the puberty paradigm – we need to take into account the extraordinary conditions in which the girls found themselves in the Theresienstadt ghetto. It is precisely these extraordinary, concentration-camp-like circumstances that complicate our understanding today of the evolution of the *Girls of Room 28*: these girls had to cope with their puberty – to the extent that we want to apply this developmental psychological category to this age group – in an extreme environment, often in the absence of one or both parents and within the walls of a fortified town. Even when we try to imagine a very strict boarding school, we think of the subversive attempts of young people to break out of such a “closed institution”, to survive it or, in the words of Erving Goffman (1973)⁴, to “live it down”. In this respect, we can hardly imagine what life in the ghetto or in a concentration camp meant for a 12 to 14-year-old girl. Let alone the concentration camp children, who had to cope with their existential fears and loss experiences in social isolation! They were completely alone, without a peer group and without pedagogical support, exposed to the madness of the pain and the whirlpool of their own emotions.

Readers can get an inkling of how these children must have felt by reading the last diary entry of young Dawid Sierakowiak, written on 6 September 1942 in the Łódź ghetto after his mother had been “taken away”:

> Laments, cries of madness, wailing and weeping are something so commonplace that you hardly pay attention. What do I care about the tears of another mother when my Mama has been taken from me? Surely there is no adequate revenge for that! (...) The people who have hidden their children in attics, in lavatories and other holes are beside themselves with despair. (...) Sometimes, my heart chokes up and cramps, and I feel as though I am sinking into madness or delirium. And yet I cannot turn my thoughts away from Mama. Suddenly I find myself, as if cut in two, inside her brain and her body. (...) Even the heaviest rain cannot soothe a broken heart, nothing can fill the infinite emptiness in the soul, brain, heart, and mind that comes from losing one’s dearest, who loves her own life as ... (Dawid Sierakowiak’s ghetto diary breaks off at this point.)⁵

Helga Pollak-Kinsky’s situation, by comparison, was reasonably “ordered”. Helga’s mother was able to flee to England just in time, and she had hoped that her child would follow. But then it was too late for that. Helga and her father were deported to Theresienstadt (Czech: Terezin). This is where Helga began to write her diary in January 1943: first as “letters” to her mother, later as communication with a virtual “dear little friend”, whom she then called “brother spider”.

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⁵ Dawid Sierakowiak’s ghetto diary breaks off at this point.
Helga’s diary does not contain any accusations against the perpetrators, even though 12-year-old Helga becomes more and more aware that, from the day she arrived in Theresienstadt, something had fundamentally changed. The clouds had darkened, her range of movement had been limited. She was no longer free! Only in her imagination and in her dreams was there something akin to her earlier “freedom”. The world outside the ghetto walls had become unattainable. Helga was imprisoned – so close to such magnificent nature! How happy I would be if I could live in a deep forest, in a cabin or in a tent, all alone, and experience freedom. (Helga’s diary entry of 8 March 1943)
Raul Hilberg calls all memories, records, essays, interviews, etc. that relate to the Holocaust and were made after the end of the war “testimonies”. Such testimonies can be found in various narrative structures and at many places in the Room 28 Projects.

We find them

• in explanations of the historical context that leads to the establishment of Theresienstadt as a fortress and garrison town of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a place with a typical history of discipline: garrison site, barracks, military prison, ghetto and concentration camp (from 1941 to 1945), now a small provincial town with an international memorial site. In the historical context, we also understand why and how the ghetto was abused for Nazi propaganda as a “Jewish settlement area” and “embellished” for a short time to deceive a visiting delegation of the International Red Cross;

• in memorial literature created by former Theresienstadt concentration camp inmates; within the context of the Room 28 Projects, a book by Evelina Merová (2016)⁷, a roommate and fellow victim of Helga’s, is particularly recommended as supplementary reading;

• as evidence of the will to survive and of the cultural creativity of former inmates of Theresienstadt. Such testimonies include the travelling exhibition The Girls of Room 28, CDs and films, readings and other testimonies by the survivors of Room 28 and Theresienstadt within the context of the exhibition, of performances of the children’s opera Brundibár or of works of persecuted and ostracized musicians. These also include lectures and Helga’s participation in the European Commission’s Holocaust memorial ceremony in January 2013, where she read from her diary, and her memorial speech at the United Nations Holocaust memorial ceremony in Geneva in January 2014;

• as a reproduction of certain elements of Room 28, which are intended to provide the foundation for a “Room 28 Museum”;

• as an international network for the promotion and collection of memories of the Ghetto period and for the development and publication of related documents; as an offer of cooperation with like-minded artists (cf. the “Room 28 Forum”); and last but not least as an opportunity to present the exhibition The Girls of Room 28 and thus the Room 28 educational projects in other countries, as has already happened in Brazil.

Testimonies at each of the levels suggested here are referred to as reconstructions, making it clear that they are not about the presentation of original documents. One essential characteristic of reconstructions is that reflection on the validity of memory
is inherent in them. Indeed, anyone trying to reconstruct a social situation long past or some personal emotion is well aware of the fact that after 70 years and more memory fades and is superimposed and enriched by later information. In the reflective language, therefore, these memories appear as narrative variations of “This is how it might have been, but I am not sure.”

For instance: when Helga was asked in an interview what she remembers about her teacher Friedl Dicker, or what she now thinks about the paintings she did at the time, then these are questions about today’s memory of her feelings at that time, irrespective of whether or not they were the subject of a diary entry. The conversations that take place today sometimes include questions about a time when Helga did not keep a diary, but about which she can probably recall memories when asked. Some examples are: How was the farewell from your father when you had to leave on a “transport” to Auschwitz? How long did the journey last? What was it like in this freight car, were you afraid? – From her memory, Helga structures the statements about the feelings she had in the situations in question. Her utterances naturally follow a different pattern than the style of the diary. We see that everything she was consciously aware of as a child later somehow becomes a hidden, unconscious memory, a dark feeling of pain which, in spite of her survival, colours all her memories of Nazism, “accompanies” them somehow. Narrative “testimonies” therefore reflect all the feelings that adults have about the loss of their own childhood, but also all the feelings that children have for parents whose humiliation they were forced to witness and who were forcibly taken from them at that time. The unconscious traces of these emotions still transport to future generations a universe of emotional “testimonies” that have nothing to do with nostalgia or sentimentality. Often it is only this universe of barely imaginable personal feelings that survives the horrors of the Nazi era.

Ruth Klüger, who as a child survived the Theresienstadt concentration camp and the camps of Auschwitz and Gross-Rosen, is convinced that the opinion of many adults that children did not understand what was really happening in the concentration camps is wrong, a delusion to block away their own emotional reaction. She corrects this fallacy with the statement: We children did not spend our time in the concentration camp dozing away: we were wide awake, perhaps never again as wide awake as then! 8

There are no diary entries and no photos of Helga’s situation at the end of the war, when she was “transported” again – this time “evacuated” from the Öderan concentration camp – back to Theresienstadt, where she was reunited with her father, but only a few letters between daughter and father. Using the example of reconstructed memory in a later conversation about the happy reunion of father and daughter, we can see how the “remembered” blends with the “forgotten” in the narrative structure. Both follow an inner logic in which emotionality and sensory experience have precedence over rational memory.
Question: When was the nightmare over? Was there a perceptible moment of liberation? A moment when you thought: “Now I am safe”?

Answer: When I was with Papa. I ran to him immediately. But I can’t remember all the details. I do remember exactly how Papa threw my dress into the stove and burnt it, and how he said: “A gypsy is a queen in comparison to you.” I don’t remember anything more. (...) Then I remember lying in a real bed with fresh white linen and how I slowly regained strength.

This detailed but selective memory leaves a wide scope for interpretation. The situation is clear: Helga Pollak-Kinsky, a mature woman of more than 80 years, reconstructs in an interview the situation in which she – a teenage girl in the throes of puberty (or had Helga long passed the pubertal phase when the camp was liberated?) – could finally sink into the arms of her father, who had likewise survived the Holocaust. How can this memory of strong feelings be reconciled with the banal memory of the burnt dress and the fresh white linen? Or is this apparent inconsistency a typical feature of memory that fits exactly into the phase of female puberty? Or is this story a reference to these very central body-related memories, comparable to the memory of having body hair shaved on entering the concentration camp or the concentration number tattooed to one’s forearm? Maybe such “bodily memories” of the deepest humiliations inflicted on human beings are compensated, perhaps even eradicated, by the first blissful relief after liberation, clean linen on a real mattress in a real bed – or rather even strengthened because they are so complementary?

Many testimonies of survivors show that it is often the subtle sensory experiences that have permanently inscribed themselves in the emotional memory of the former prisoners. Aharon Appelfeld, two years younger than Helga, is another Holocaust survivor. He gives the following testimony about his memories:

More than fifty years have passed since the end of the Second World War. I have forgotten a lot, especially places, dates and the names of people, and yet I feel this period with my entire body. Whenever it rains, when it is cold or stormy, I return to the ghetto, to the camp or to the woods where I spent so much time. The memory has apparently long roots in the body. Sometimes the smell of rotting straw or a bird screeching, (...) sometimes the smell of a meal, dampness in my shoes or a sudden sound are enough to take me back to the middle of the war. Then it feels as if the war had never ended, as if it had gone on without my knowledge, and sometimes when I wake up, I know: it has never stopped.

These examples show what treasures of information can be found in the Room 28 Projects and what challenges the different interpretations offer. The documents and testimonies packaged in the projects have to be untied and interpreted. The narrators must be respected, as it is their narrative reconstructions that allow us to fathom
this “counterfactual life”: they lived in inhuman times on the basis of the values of freedom and humanity. They broke the silence and gave their life-affirming attitude a voice.

We can agree with Geoffrey Hartman when he says that such testimonial projects can mean a complete break with “book knowledge”. And this could mean that the people who hear these testimonies can also agree “that for those who were subjected to such dehumanization, it is a life-affirming step to break the silence, in part also precisely because of their willingness to use ordinary words, words whose adequacy or inadequacy we must accept”.

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Helga with Peter Gstettner and the Austrian artist Manfred Bockelmann at the Austrian premiere of the documentary film “Zeichnen gegen das Vergessen” [Drawing against Oblivion]. The two friends presented her with a gift from students of the Lerchenfeld secondary school in Klagenfurt.
Bibliography

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2 Traverso, Enzo, p. 37


8 Klüger, Ruth, Commemorative address to the Austrian Parliament, Parliamentary Correspondence No. 447, Vienna, 5 May 2011, p. 7

9 Pollak-Kinsky, Helga, Mein Theresienstädter Tagebuch 1943–1944 und die Aufzeichnungen meines Vaters Otto Pollak. p. 254


12 Bockelmann, Manfred, Zeichen gegen das Vergessen /Drawing Against Oblivion. This is the title of the Holocaust art project of Austrian artist Manfred Bockelmann. The catalogue was published for the opening of the exhibition in Vienna in 2013. There, Peter Gstettner, p. 74–85.

In the context of the art project Drawing against Oblivion, Manfred Bockelmann also portrayed a “Girl of Room 28”, Ruth Schächter, and Helga appeared in the documentary film of the same name about the artist and his work. Cf: http://zeichnen-gegen-das-vergessen.de/