

Hannelore Brenner: Opening Words

The exhibition *The Girls of Room 28, L 410 Theresienstadt*

June 7, 2019, 18h

I am more than happy to be here on the side of Tomáš Hanuš. But also sad. Sad that Tomas' mother Anna, whom her friends called Flaška, did not live long enough to be with us here. She would be so happy about this event, happy that the exhibition is here on the initiative of her son. And certainly proud that it is her son who is directing the opera *Brundibár*, an opera which meant so much for her; an opera in which she had taken part in the Theresienstadt performances many years ago, when she was 12-13 years old .

I met Flaška in September 1996 in Prague and soon after visited her in home in Brno, in the Czech Republic. And there all started, what eventually led to the book and to the exhibition and to many more projects, events and publications. - In Brno, 23 years ago, Flaška showed me her "poetry-album", a scrapbook, in which friends write dedications as a little souvenir. Many of the dedications in Flaška's album are farewell-words written by friends a day before they had to leave on a transport to Auschwitz. From many girls, these words are the last testimonies of their lives.

Dear Flaška. Will you always remember who lay beside you? And was your good friend? ? ? ? ? Don't forget the girl who wrote this, and lovingly stuck by you.

Ruth Schächter wrote these lines. Ruth's nickname was Zajiček, which is Czech for a little rabbit. Ruth painted a rabbit and bunnies along her words.

And her friend Eva Fischl wrote:

When the day comes that you are back in Brno and you are eating a fish, remember that in Theresienstadt there was also a little fish. Your Eva Fischl.

It is Flaška and her cherished album that made it all happen. And it is her friend Helga Pollak-Kinsky and the diary she wrote in Theresienstadt too. This diary made it possible to tell the story of these girls. It is an amazing story; more than a story of the Holocaust. It is also a story of the importance of culture, art and education in terrible times.

This is why Flaška's words are written here: ***We wish that by remembering our friends of Room 28 and all the wonderful people who took care of us, the human values and achievements will live on which became so important to us: tolerance, empathy education culture, friendship and love.***

The exhibition sheds light on these aspects. It is quite a simple exhibition. It focuses on life in Room 28. About 25-30 girls lived together in a room of about 30 square metres, in the concentration camp Theresienstadt. They were taken care of by adults. The main carer in Room 28 was Ella Pollak, called Tella. She was a music teacher and pianist. This is why music played a special role in Room 28. The girls formed a choir and sang many songs especially Czech and Hebrew songs. In April 1943 they founded an organization and called it: Ma'agal, a Hebrew word for circle, a symbol for perfection. They created a flag and a hymn. And some of the girls took part in the performances of *Brundibar*. There were teachers and all kind of classes in Room 28. In the upper floor you will see paintings created in the art lessons with Friedl Dicker-Brandeis. These paintings by the children of Theresienstadt belong to the most touching legacy we have of them. Hundreds were made in Room 28. They can be seen on the first floor upstairs.

Helga once referred to this room as an “island in a raging Sea”. The reality can be felt only between the lines. The whole story, also what many of them experienced in Auschwitz, is told in the book *The Girls of Room 28*, which you can get here in the Millennium shop. The exhibition was made to give more space to the authentic documents and testimonies, and to have a medium that reaches young people; a medium also that fosters the dialogue between the survivors and young people.

In 2005 we were invited to take part in a Brundibár project in a town on the Lake of Constance. The manager of the project wanted, as she put it, “embed the women in a living process.” *Our generation has repressed and forgotten so much. This was a unique opportunity to create a bridge between generations.*

Over the years this bridge was developed and many people have taken part in it and made this possible; also my Brazilian friends who created, in 2014, a new exhibition in Brazil, where it was shown in major cities and locations and where it enjoyed an outstanding success.

There are many motives underlying our project. Handa Drori, who lives in Israel, once put it this way:

As one of the girls of Room 28, I hope that our project achieves its objective. This is important for us for two reasons. Firstly, because we want to save from oblivion the girls who lived with us in our room and did not come back from the concentration-camps. And secondly, as a warning and as an example how easily a Holocaust could happen if well-meaning people are too unconcerned and allow fanatics to come to power.

Indeed: Room 28 was like a cell of humanity within a world of inhumanity. The spirit that reigned in this little society can be felt in many testimonies that you can find here. And in the scrap-book of Flaška.

Dear Flaška, never forget what we experienced together how we sang and dreamed, and the concerts with Baštik. Never forget what was beautiful about our Home. A kiss for you from your Maria Múhlstein. October 13, 1944

Human beings are in this world to do good. If you want to fulfil your mission on this earth, act accordingly and live by the principles that Tella has taught us. (...) In memory of my sweetheart, Lenka Lindt October 15, 1944

Just as this mushroom protects the little one, our room protect us. But one day, it will be us who will have to protect others. Therefore, prepare yourself for the day when it will be us to repay the gift. Never reflect long if you can do a good deed, and never lose hope. Without hope you cannot exist. And never forget those you loved.

Yours Fiška

Thank you! I am grateful to the *Welsh National Opera House* for including the exhibition in the frame of their Brundibár production, and happy, that it is conducted by musical director Tomáš Hanuš, mother of Flaška who started the project and whose soul lives on with it.



Stones of Remembrance



Our friends from Theresienstadt and all those we loved and lost in the Holocaust have no grave where we can leave a stone in remembrance. That's why we wanted the book, and that's why we wanted this exhibition – as our 'stones of remembrance'.

We also wanted to help ensure that what happened under the Nazi regime will never happen again. So we shared our experiences, talked with young people, met people who care and found new friends. All of this has filled us with the hope that remembering our friends from Room 28 will help promote those human values that were then – and still are – so important to us: tolerance, empathy, education, culture, friendship and love.

Helga Kinský, née Pollak | Anna Hamsová, née Flašková

How it all began

It all began with words and pictures once left by children in two precious books – the autograph book treasured by Anna Flašková and the Theresienstadt diary kept by her friend Helga Pollak. It began with the desire of these two women to commemorate the children of Theresienstadt who were murdered in the Holocaust and to honour the adults who had given them trust and love in the darkest of times and shared with them values that inspired their young lives.

My involvement began with Hans Krása's children's opera Brundibár. Research for a radio documentary about the story of its first performances in Theresienstadt had led me to the survivors of Room 28, and to Anna and Helga. We became friends. I felt I had to help them make their wish come true. So we made common cause. Most of the survivors from Room 28 joined in.

In September 1998 we all met at the Czech mountain resort of Spindlerův Mlýn and our work of remembrance began. We met again every year in September, until in 2004 the book and the exhibition were ready to tell their story.

Hana Dore Benet-Wonschick | Berlin