

The Power of Art in a Struggle to Believe: A Story of Artistic Collaboration in Terezín

Autor: Linney Wix

Abstract

Moc umění v boji o víru: Příběh o umělecké spolupráci v Terezíně. – Tento text odhaluje podmínky života v Terezíně a vypráví příběh společně tvořeného uměleckého díla, které přežilo v Terezíně zanecháno příbuznému, zatímco autoři díla byli transportováni do Osvětimi v říjnu 1944.

Keywords: art, Terezín, holocaust, faith

Klíčová slova: umění, Terezín, holokaust, víra

“For those with faith there are no questions, and for those without faith there are no questions.” (Jakobovits 1988: 376)

Introduction

Just as it is astonishing that people survived the Holocaust, it is astonishing that art and writings made in concentration camps survived. Artists and writers saved their works by hiding them in walls, rafters, and beneath floorboards and by leaving them in the care of relatives or friends when called for transport to the East. This article tells the story of a collaborative work of art that survived by being left in Terezín with a relative when the makers were transported to Auschwitz in October of 1944. The story is of one man’s struggle to believe and, when his belief faltered, of creating faith through a day-to-day artistic collaboration with his daughter.

In the spring of 2014, I interviewed Helga Hosková, nee Weissová, about the novella written by her father Otto Weiss and illustrated by her when she was thirteen years old. When she learned that I had written about children’s art created in Terezín (Wix 2009, 2010), Mrs. Hosková suggested I write about her illustrations for the book. However, when I read the book, it became clear to me that writing about the drawings by themselves, outside the context of the book, would not suffice: The drawings illustrate the story written by Helga’s father and together, the story and drawings are part of yet another, larger story. This larger story is of art’s power in a crisis of faith during the Holocaust, of what writing and drawing in collaboration did for one family while within and around them faith fragmented. The story and drawings were created in a collaboration that took place in the Terezín ghetto northeast of Prague in 1943.

Background

Helga Weissová's drawings and diary from Terezín survived the war. *Draw What You See* (1998) presents more than 100 watercolor paintings made by Weissová between late 1941 and 1944. When her family was ordered to leave its home in Prague, she packed a set of watercolor paints, which lasted for her three-year internment in Terezín. Once in Terezín, her father told her to document what she saw happening around her. Thus emerged the drawings and paintings that comprise *Draw What You See* emerge. Her more recently published diary (Weiss 2013) documents the events and experiences of her life in Prague during the 1938 occupation and her family's deportation to Terezín in December 1941 until her and her mother's May 1945 return to Prague after surviving Auschwitz, Freiberg and Mauthausen and the travels between these concentration and work camps.

When called for transport from Terezín, the Weisses left their writings and drawings with an uncle who remained in the camp throughout World War II. One item entrusted to the uncle's care is the subject of this paper: the novella, *And God Saw That It Was Bad* (Weiss, 2010) written by Helga's father, Otto Weiss, and illustrated by Helga. Father and daughter worked secretly to create the book for Irena Weissová, Otto's wife and Helga's mother, for her 37th birthday. They presented the gift on 22 June, 1943. As Helga Weissová-Hosková (2010) writes in the book's foreword, "It is a personal account of one man's feelings of pain and disillusionment marked by the conflict of faith with doubt, of hope with anxiety" (p. 6).

To me, an outside reader and researcher, it is this and more. Weiss, in order to tell his story of faith corrupted, writes of a several days' long visit by God to Terezín. Using the visit of the Divine to a Nazi ghetto and transit camp, Weiss explores in story form, replete with dark humor, his views on the experience of residing in Terezín and his crisis of faith in God and in his people. Around him, he notices glaring inequities. The inequities, from his point of view as a Czech Jew, result from the actions of the Zionist Council of Elders, whose members were handpicked by the Nazis and who received special privileges within the structure of the ghetto turned transit camp.

This article explores the power of art behind the crisis of faith core to *And God Saw That it was Bad* (Weiss 2010). While the "conflict of faith with doubt, of hope with anxiety" is central to the story told, the story behind the story as well as the drawings are equally important in relation to my small exploration into art's power in facing the crisis of faith. The story behind the story is also one of faith and hope in the midst of "pain and disillusionment". (Weissová-Hosková 2010: 6) It is the story of the way one family used its faith in creative processes and responsibility to each other when the father was unable to muster faith in the Divine, in the camp structure, in the people in charge.

When Otto Weiss, the head of the family, found himself struggling with God and the camp system that challenged his deeply-held beliefs in God and in the Jewish people, he turned to writing. He wrote poetry as well as the novella which was published in English in 2010 and provides evidence of one man's personal writing process and his creative collaboration with his daughter to create a gift for his wife. In being written, illustrated, and gifted, the book embodies one family's creative strengths during the Holocaust.

In his struggle to have faith Otto Weiss was not alone. His struggles were with God and with the Jews in power in Terezín. Stories of losing faith in Holocaust camps abound. In one book alone, entitled *Wrestling With God* (2007) there are at least 54 stories of Holocaust and post-Holocaust stories of faltering faith. Elie Wiesel (1960) tells of his crisis of faith in *Night* and in a short story, *Yom Kippur: The day without forgiveness* (2008). The story tells of Pinhas, a former rabbi who intends to not fast for Yom Kippur, saying he has “reached [his] limit” with God. The boy in the story thinks to himself, “How could I argue with him? I was going through the same crisis. Every day I was moving a little further away from the God of my childhood” (p. 191).

The Story

In the story told by Otto Weiss, God comes to earth from heaven after hearing a plea from Mr. Taussig, a hungry Terezín inmate. In response to the plea, God had sent a food parcel to Mr. Taussig, and when He was not thanked, decided the parcel had not been received. Thus does He travel to personally help Mr. Taussig. “He (...) packed some bare necessities into a small suitcase, sewed a yellow star onto his coat, and descended from Heaven” (p. 13). When asked his name upon arrival at the Bohušovice train station, having never considered the need for a name, God replies, “Aaron Gottesmann.”

The book’s first few illustrations show God’s arrival and escorted walk to Terezín. Arriving alone when transports carried thousands, Aaron Gottesmann’s arrival is already an anomaly. Traveling “incognito”, his clothing consists of a robe and a small hat, clearly setting him apart from other inmates! From the outset He has great faith in Himself and wants others to believe in Him as well. Thus does He remind a concerned Jewish policeman greeting Him at the station to, “Leave it to God. Have faith in Him, and He will not desert you” (p. 14). Upon arrival, God is certain of his identity as Divine, one in whom the people can have faith.

In Terezín, Mr. Gottesmann suffers in ways all the inmates suffer: He waits in lines; inherits a dead man’s bunk and eating utensils; sits middle of the night “latrine duty”, a duty whose purpose is unclear but is perhaps to make sure no one takes too long at the toilets (Bondy 1981). The duty, of course, also provides people someone to whom they might speak while waiting in line (Weiss 2010). Gottesman is scrubbed, shaved, and ostracized for having lice. Finally, he accepts Mr. Taussig’s suitcase when Taussig is selected for transport and offers it to him. For accepting the gift, the ghetto court sentences Gottesmann to three months’ imprisonment for embezzlement.

The unjust sentence causes a shift in Gottesmann’s consciousness and sense of identity: The lack of justice in the ghetto court brings him face to face with the suffering and the inequities rampant in the camp. He notices more clearly how some, those few privileged Jews chosen by the Nazis to comprise the Council of Elders, have plenty to eat while others are hungry; how those few have an entire room and sometimes two for themselves and their families while most inmates are crowded 30 or more to a room. He sees people desperate and afraid and feels “the helpless suffering of the humiliated”. (Weiss 2010: 52)

As Aaron Gottesmann, he has become so immersed in life as a Terezín inmate that only when a comrade wonders aloud how God can bear to watch what is going on, does God himself (as Gottesmann) begin “to realize His divine nature and how he ought to be judging

what He saw” rather than just living it (p. 52). Separating his identity as Gottesmann from his identity as God, he realizes that it is no surprise “that people no longer believe[d] in Him” (p. 52). Realizing the dilemma caused by the two roles—a man like all the others in the camp and God, in whom He initially thought the people should have faith—He for the first time feels his failure as God. At the same time, as a man, he is unable to figure a way out of his dual-rolled dilemma, to get back to Heaven to do his work as a just God without abandoning the other inmates. To solve the problem, He gives himself pneumonia, which leads to further camp errors (e.g., putting him in a typhus ward), and dies.

Death was his only way to escape. He died without privilege and thus without notice. “He was just an ordinary ghetto inmate, the sort nobody took any trouble over, and whose only right was the right to die.” (Weiss 2010: 69) Mrs. Hosková told me that in the story God was a Jew and died as a Jew. “His funeral was a Jewish one because he came as a Jew” (personal communication, April 25, 2014).

Near the end of the novella, Weiss (2010) addresses the common, lasting belief among inmates that they would return home, writing, “To the last breath they believed it, and yet they were not rewarded” (p. 70). Suggesting his own longing for faith, he ends the book sending God on his way back to Heaven “to take things properly in hand” (p. 70), admonishing others to forgive God for what took place in the camp.

Bondy (1981) addresses the general belief of Jews in Terezín that they would return to their homes at the end of the war, writing: “Many, many Jews never knew of such a plan [to annihilate the Jewish people] not even during their last moments... even [then], the Jews continued to believe that they still lived in the familiar world of yesterday—of riots, hunger, anguish, persecution, and hope of a better tomorrow. The idea that people could be gassed to death like insects never crossed their minds.” (p. 214)

I asked Mrs. Hosková what she thought her father meant by the final lines: “Be patient a little while longer, wait quietly, and you will soon be rewarded. And then forgive Him, please, because He didn’t mean it to be like that” (p. 70). She responded, “A lot has been written about this. He [God] doesn’t decide everything that happens. He gave the people [free will] (...) to make their order. He is not to blame for what happened. The people are to blame for what they did” (personal communication, April 25, 2014). In a similar vein, Edmund Fleg (cited in Dillard 1999) wrote: “For the Jew the world is not completed; people must complete it.” (p. 196) Weiss concludes that: “No, indeed, this was not God’s work... He had seen the sufferings of his People (...) and it made him miserable.” (p. 70)

When I commented on God’s shift in subjectivity when He realized His divine nature and His need to do more than feel betrayed by His sentence for a crime He did not commit, Mrs. Hosková continued, “He didn’t know all that was going on. He was sitting in heaven and (...) [only] after He came to learn it [firsthand] [did] he recognize the mistakes He made” (personal communication, April 25, 2014). Mrs. Hosková’s words support the felt sense of betrayal core to the novella.

As Weissová-Hosková (2010) says in the Foreword, the novella was not intended for publication. It was a gift. In our interview, Mrs. Hosková discussed her hesitation to include the Terezín inmates’ grave disappointment in their own people in the book when it was

published. Her concern lay with the Czech Jews' disappointment in their Council of Elders. While disappointment is evident throughout the book, it is especially poignant when Mr. Winter's son, Pavel, who has lived a life of faith in others, takes his own life. Pavel expounds on the evils he sees in the camp; he expresses his dismay at the deception in what had been promised as a model Jewish city; finally, he speaks of his astonishment at the greed of the "representatives", the Elders, before saying, "I'm (...) unhappy to have lost the last thing I had—faith in mankind and a better world!" (Weiss 2010: 60) Mrs. Hosková said:

"He was so disappointed by the people that he [committed] suicide... I wanted to show the people better than they were. But the situation *was* bad. People acted badly in this situation (...) the son always believed in good and he learned how people would be bad to each other and he was so disappointed... [that he took his own life]." (personal communication, April 25, 2014)

In the end, she decided to keep the pages to illustrate the keen discouragement and betrayal felt by the inmates. "It was real," she said, just as it was also real that, "The stronger tended to care for the less strong. Many inmates were good to each other" (personal communication, April 25, 2014). And while the narrator's struggles are with the Jewish representatives—Elder Jakob Edelstein and the Council of Elders—Bondy (1981) reminds readers more than once that Edelstein did not know that transports to the East were transports to death in Auschwitz.

When I mentioned her father's own apparent disillusionment as it came through in the story, Mrs. Hosková interjected, "He was not disappointed (...) he wanted (...) to be a believer like others." She fetched a book of her father's poems and translated aloud from Czech to English the one called *Prayer* which begins, "My God do you hear me? I am a heretic." Throughout the poem, Weiss asks questions of God in his struggle to believe and writes,

I would give everything I could give if I could be different, if my heart could be more believing and find peace...

How glad I would be to taste a piece of this hope...

I am in love with life. I would like to be happy... to laugh again...

So God, give me the belief... that in the end you will let us survive.

(personal communication, April 25, 2014, Helga Hosková translating from *How the Stars Were Hurting*, in Czech)

In the poem, Weiss directly addresses God through Buber's (1923) I-Thou relationship while in *And God Saw That It Was Bad* he uses the figure of God to address issues of faith the poor quality of life in Terezín. While in the story, people starve, betray one another, and are shipped off in transports, in the poem, Weiss himself is the I who wants desperately to believe, to laugh again, to taste hope, to believe that God will let the Jews survive.

In her Afterword to *And God Saw That It Was Bad*, Bondy (2010) counts Otto Weiss among the Jews of yesterday, one of the "Czechs of the Mosaic Faith", descendents of nationals of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Bondy describes both here and at much greater length in *Elder of the Jews: Jakob Edelstein of Theresienstadt* (1981), how the Czech Jews were not Zionists like those who led the camp and against whom the Czech Jews expressed

anger and bitterness. Bondy points out that the SS controlled decisions made by the privileged Zionists, who appeared to inmates to have the power in the ghetto, when in fact the power was in the hands of the Nazis.

In fall of 1944, when Weiss himself was called for transport, “He made no attempt to evade his fate, saying, ‘If I don’t go, somebody else will have to go instead.’” (Weissová-Hosková, cited in Weiss 2010: 7) While men were told that their going would spare their families, Helga and her mother were taken to Auschwitz just four days after Mr. Weiss was transported. While mother, Irena, and daughter, Helga, survived the war, they never again saw Otto Weiss.

The Drawings

Helga Weissová contributed 26 drawings to the book, each confined to the approximately 3x2 inch space saved for her in the lower right hand corner of the page. (The English version of the book maintained neither the size nor the cornered format of the original Czech version.) Fifteen drawings contain the image of God himself, either alone or engaged in camp activities with others. When I asked Mrs. Hosková where she got the image in which she presents God, she laughed and said: “It’s very funny but people suppose that God is an old man with a long beard so I created this. It was my image (...) how my father described him in this novel. He came incognito. He should have to look like the other people (...) men dressed in trousers. But he never had such clothes...” (personal communication, April 25, 2014). (Fig. 1)



Figure 1: God soon after His arrival at Terezín

Various drawings show God as Aaron Gottesman looking for Mr. Taussig in order to straighten out the problem with the food parcel, trying to climb to the upper bunk, receiving the verdict of guilty from the ghetto court, being examined and then bathed for lice, lying in his sick bed with pneumonia.

The remaining drawings are of individual items and other characters in the story, e.g., a box of name cards arranged alphabetically, a thermometer held in a hand, a meal table scene

in the room of one of the privileged, Mr. Taussig packing for transport, a crowd of people seen from the back in the Hall of the Dead bidding farewell to those they loved. As Mrs. Hosková and I looked at the drawings, she expressed her surprise at just how good they are, saying:

“Today when I make an illustration, I make sketches. This was a space left for me and I painted directly on it... I had no problems. Today I have to think about composition, anatomy, perspective, everything. Now I look and [see that the drawings are] good—the perspective. I wasn’t taught about it at all and it is perfect. What is also interesting is that the drawings are very small and when you make them bigger you (...) [see] there are no mistakes... [Now] I would not be able to do it... There are so many things and (...) it is difficult to get it perfect. It is difficult to create such a thing.” (personal communication, April 25, 2014)

She said that the drawing of God climbing to the upper bunk, which according to the text took more effort than “to rise to the upper Heavens”, (Weiss 2010: 38) is her favorite from this book’s drawings (Fig. 2). As we thumbed through the pages, she noticed the drawing of vehicles in Terezín and said she wished to show the variety of vehicles and their uses (Fig. 3). She pointed out that funeral carts were used to carry everything except bodies. In the drawing, the cart carrying coffins is the only one drawn by a horse. All other carts, usually funeral carts carrying bread, were pulled by people; small carts for babies or goods were made from found wood and wheels.

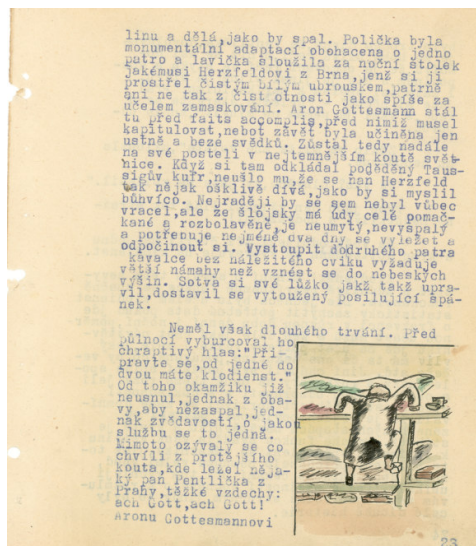


Figure 2: God as Aaron Gottesman climbing to the upper bunk

In Terezín, Helga Weissová saw her parents regularly, even daily during some parts of their internment. Usually the family met at her mother’s room for visits. Since the book project was a secret, however, father and daughter walked together. “We took a walk, and he taught me something about what was in it, then he left me the pages. I took them home to my room. I always sat on my bunk to draw. I showed him the drawing the next time [we met]” (personal communication, April 25, 2014).

I commented on father and daughter’s faith in the other and she responded: “I believed in everything he said. Today when I write or speak about him I say that I so believed in him that still, in difficult situations, I ask him what he would do (...) what he taught me I took as fact” (personal communication, April 25, 2014.) Her trust in her father, and his in her, was unshakeable even when within and all around them, faith was disintegrating.

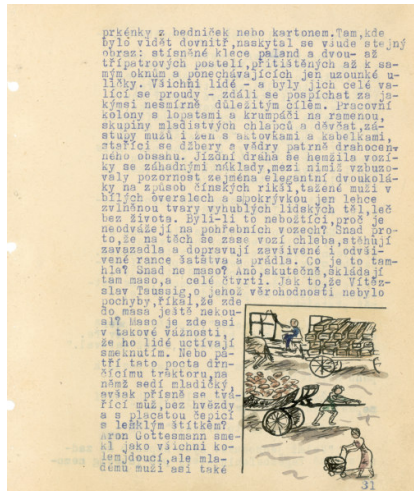


Figure 3: Vehicles in Terezín

The Story Behind the Story: The Power of Art

While Weiss himself struggled with believing and not believing, he realized that it was people’s decisions, not God’s hand that determined the outcomes in Terezín. There, a few real people—Zionists led and misled by the SS—made the decisions for everyone. Lawrence Kushner (cited in Dillard 1999) wrote, “God does not have hands, we do. Our hands are God’s. It is up to us, what God will see and hear, up to us, what God will do... Without our eyes, the Holy One of Being would be blind” (p. 196). Weiss and others believed that decisions made by Council members favored their own families and friends rather than the interned masses. For instance, each representative, called an Elder, could at least in the beginning save 30 people from transport. And while Otto Weiss saw the representatives receiving privileges denied the majority of the inmates, in the end, even the privileged ones did not escape the gas chambers. Bondy’s (1981) views are that the members of the Council of Elders did their best to be fair to all. For instance, Edelstein worked tirelessly to save children and youth from transport to ensure continuity of Jewish ethnicity.

In the midst of his struggle with God and others, Weiss acted upon the small bit of faith left to him—his faith in himself and his family, and he did this through creative acts. Using art he created opportunities to maintain his faith in his own small personal world. He initiated a process that involved him and his daughter creating a gift together. His actions spurred the power of art in two forms—writing and drawing—within an extraordinary process of collaboration.

While Otto Weiss struggled with faith, he trusted his daughter. Each time he finished typing a page or two or three, he handed them to Helga, who took them to her bunk in room

24 in the girls' house L410, to complete a drawing. Every few pages her father demarcated the lower right hand corner of the page for her; she sat on her bunk to read the story (this after her father's explanation of what was happening in the book) and with paints and a small brush, rendered an illustration in the small space in the lower right corner reserved for her by her father. Father-daughter trust was mutual. While he questioned his relationships with those in power and with God, Weiss did not question his relationship with his daughter. In fact, this is the relationship he cultivated through the creative processes of writing, drawing, and collaborating to create something good for another.

This is the faith core to the story behind the story told in *And God Saw That It Was Bad*. While God saw that it was bad, Weiss engaged his daughter in an extended act of goodness. Working together, they created the book for their wife and mother, Irena Weissová. He saw the injustices all around him: Jews in leadership positions were granted special privileges. He wrestled with the God in whom he so longed to believe, struggling with his own failing faith. And as he struggled, he took artistic action: When all else failed, he turned to creative processes of writing, drawing, collaborating: making something work by working together.

The father-daughter working relationship between Otto and Helga Weiss embodies Levinas's (1979) ethic of infinite responsibility for the Other. In creating this lasting work of art, responsibility to each other was through the mutual engagement in artistic process. In creating *And God Saw That it was Bad*, father took responsibility for daughter, enacting his responsibility by engaging her in collaborative efforts to create something for his wife, her mother. This was the power: the power of art, writing, working together, of taking responsibility for each other. Surely God saw that this was good.

All images are from Weiss (2010) *And God Saw that It was Bad: A Story From the Terezín Ghetto*, published in Jerusalem by Yad Vashem Publications. They are used with permission of Yad Vashem and Helga Weissová-Hosková.

The author wishes to thank the Czech Fulbright Commission for funding the research making this article possible.

SEZNAM LITERATURY

BONDY, Ruth. Afterword. In WEISS, Otto. *And God saw that it was bad: A story from the Terezín Ghetto*. Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2010. ISBN 978-965-308-346-2.

BONDY, Ruth. *Elder of the Jews: Jakob Edelstein of Theresienstadt*. New York: Grove, 1989. ISBN 0-8021-1007-X.

BUBER, Martin. *I and Thou*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923.

DILLARD, Annie. *For the Time Being*. New York: Vintage, 1999. ISBN 978-0-375-40380-4.

JAKOBOVITS, Immanuel. Faith, ethics and the Holocaust: Some personal, theological and religious responses to the Holocaust. *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 1988, vol. 3, No. 4, pp. 371–381. ISSN 8756-6583.

KATZ, Steven, BIDERMAN, Shlomo, GREENBERG, Gershon. (eds.). *Wrestling with God: Jewish Theological Responses during and after the Holocaust*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. ISBN 978-0-19-530015-4.

LEVINAS, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. The Hague/Boston/London: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979. ISBN 90-247-2288-8.

WEISSOVÁ-HOSKOVÁ, Helga. *Draw What You See*. Gottingen, Germany: Wallstein Verlag, 1998. ISBN 978-3-89244-783-2.

WEISSOVÁ-HOSKOVÁ, Helga. Foreword. In WEISS, Otto. *And God saw that it was bad: A story from the Terezín Ghetto*. Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2010. ISBN 978-965-308-346-2.

WEISS, Helga. *Helga's Diary: A Young Girl's Account of Life in a Concentration Camp*. London: Penguin, 2013.

WEISS, Otto. *And God Saw That It Was Bad: A Story From the Terezín Ghetto*. Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2010. ISBN 978-965-308-346-2.

WIESEL, Elie. *Night*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1960.

WIESEL, Elie. Yom Kippur: The Day Without Forgiveness. In SHAWN, Karen, GOLDFRAD, Keren (eds.). *The Call of Memory: Learning about the Holocaust Through Narrative: An Anthology*. Teaneck, New Jersey: Ben Yehuda Press, 2008. ISBN 978-0-9789980-0-4.

WIX, Linney. Aesthetic empathy in teaching art to children: The work of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis in Terezín. *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association*, 2009, 26(4), pp. 152–158. ISSN 0742-1656.

WIX, Linney. *Through a narrow window: Friedl Dicker-Brandeis and her Terezín students*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2010. ISBN 978-0-8263-4827-2.

(Linney Wix is Professor of Art Education at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.)