

# Pedagogy in Purgatory

*Ellen Handler Spitz*

## **Terezín: Voices from the Holocaust || by Ruth Thomson**

Through a Narrow Window: Friedl Dicker-Brandeis and her Terezín Students || by Linney Wix

INVITED TO THE Hebrew University in Jerusalem for spring term as a visiting professor of art history, an American scholar travels to Israel. She sends her ten-year-old daughter to a Hebrew day school in the neighborhood known as French Hill. She makes plans to visit Yad va' Shem. But her husband vehemently opposes this: their little girl is too young, she must be protected a while longer. The parents debate, discuss, and, in an uneasy compromise, they go to the memorial but show her just the children's drawings from the concentration camp of Terezín.

Those are images made under the tutelage of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis (1898-1944), a Bauhaus-trained artist and art teacher who was incarcerated there for two years before being murdered at Auschwitz on October 9, 1944, and who, knowing her end was near, packed nearly four thousand of her pupils' pictures into two suitcases in the hopes of preserving them. Standing in the hushed gallery, the American child reads the names and numbers under the drawings. Subtracting each date from the one that follows it, she slowly realizes that the people who made these pictures must have died at just about her age. She turns questioning to her mother and father, and they nod silently in shared acquiescence.

By now, hundreds of children's books about the Holocaust have been published—fiction and non-fiction, as well as hybrids of varying quality: books about hiding, about substitute parents, about successful and failed escapes, attempted rescues, and resistance. We have allegorical books, books about daily life in the camps, books that treat the aftermath in postwar times, books featuring double time-frames, and recently ones dealing with the effect of the Holocaust on German as well as Jewish youth. Eminent children's authors such as Eve Bunting, Lois Lowry, Claire Huchet Bishop, Michael Morpurgo, Anita Lobel, and Roberto Innocenti have contributed to the genre.

Moving, informative, well intentioned, and often artful (some adorned with beautiful illustrations, itself a kind of problem), there remains something awry in each of them. The Jewish protagonist may seem unrealistically virtuous, or merely a cipher; the plot, overly predictable or trite; the tone heavy-handed or saccharine; the truth subtly distorted (as in Carmen Agra Deedy's touching story, *The Yellow Star*, which alleges—despite a lack of historical corroboration—that King Christian X of Denmark wore a yellow star to show solidarity with the Jews of his country and asked his countrymen to do the same); or just an overload of data crammed between the covers of a book, so that readers feel bombarded and overwhelmed. Parents struggle year after year: when to bring this history to their children, and how?

Two recent non-fiction books, one for children and the other only indirectly so (I recommend it highly to parents), reveal that the choice of any particular book—and, similarly, the decision to visit a memorial or a museum—may be less important than what surrounds the experience whenever it does occur. Ruth

Thomson's *Terezín: Voices from the Holocaust* and Linney Wix's *Through a Narrow Window* eschew commentary. These books, principally factual, quietly ask their readers to perform their own private acts of imagination and empathy. They teach by implication that what matters is the commitment of parents and children to the supremely uncomfortable task of finding their own unique paths, emotional and cognitive, into this terrible history. For the purpose of understanding the Holocaust, no single cultural object will suffice, a point that was made eloquently by Ruth Franklin in her splendid book *A Thousand Darknesses*.

Terezín was a small fortress built by the Hapsburgs in the eighteenth century. Designated in 1941 as a detention camp for Jews, the Nazis re-named it Theresienstadt. Evacuating its indigenous population of five thousand Czechs, they crammed into the same space over fifty thousand Jews—men and women of all ages, and children. Evicted from their homes and transported to Terezín with luggage weighing not more than fifty kilos per person and only enough food for a fortnight, none of them knew what was to come. Of the fifteen thousand children who passed through Terezín between 1941 and 1945, less than one hundred survived. As for the elderly population, large numbers died of neglect, starvation, and untreated illness even before the deportations to the gas chambers were underway.

Upset at first by the starkness of *Terezín: Voices from the Holocaust*, and by what I initially took to be an abdication of responsibility for explanation and reflection on the part of its author, I eventually came to appreciate that, by forbearing to interpret, Thomson bravely and wisely shifts the task of commentary onto the young reader and her family. On page after page, the reader is confronted with selected facts—brutal facts—in the form of documents, photographs, quotations, and drawings made by artists and children who lived in the camp. Formatted in an elaborately designed manner, with colored inserts, captions, varied fonts, and text blocks, there is no pretense at providing a continuous narrative. No significant character appears to follow from start to finish. Topics surface in no apparent order.

Disease and death, for instance, take up two consecutive pages in the middle. Sick children lie in rows of hospital beds in a picture painted by an inmate; a small sketch on the same page portrays a mumps victim with his distorted face tied up in a scarf. A quotation from an inmate tells us that the dead people were taken out into the streets every day and covered so that you could see only their feet. A text bar reminds us of overcrowding in the camp, its unsanitary facilities, contaminated water, vermin, and the perpetual lack of food. In this piecemeal way, Thomson replicates (but only superficially, of course) some of the chaotic, fragmented existence that her book describes. Her book does not dictate how to think or what to feel. It trusts its reader. In this way it is itself a small blow against the authoritarian temper.

*Through a Narrow Window* is distinctly not a children's book. It was written to accompany an exhibition featuring the art of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis and drawings made by children she taught in Terezín, and it offers rich background material that parents can draw on. Friedl taught art at a time when the Nazi authorities had proscribed all academic subjects. But by means of art and craft and music, which the Nazis must have considered insignificant enough to permit, the illegal teaching of other subjects surreptitiously continued. One Terezín survivor reports that children took turns alerting their teachers to the approach of guards or SS men. This practice reminds me of a midrash pertaining to Lag b'Omer, in which Rabbi Akiba, at the time of the Bar Kochba rebellion (132-135 C.E.), went into the wilderness with

his students and taught them Torah while pretending to play games and hunt, lest the Roman soldiers apprehend them.

Scrounging and hoarding materials as soon as she was brought to Terezín with her husband Pavel, Friedl began at once to gather the children and give them lessons in drawing, painting, and collage. Undeterred by the conditions, she engaged them individually and in groups, in classes and exercises consonant with her Bauhaus training. Seamlessly blending the roles of artist and teacher, Friedl enabled the vulnerable children of Terezín, at least momentarily, to evade their anxiety and dodge their terror. Friedl was a taciturn teacher who made demands, set limits, and passed judgments, but all the while nourished children's inner worlds. While maintaining order and discipline, and thus providing, by means of structure, a safety net, she at the same time elicited the maximum freedom of expression from her children. By these means, she created conditions under which children felt free even as they were prisoners.

Friedl's passionate conviction about the value of art offered the children of Terezín weekly experiments with choice—an element banished by the Nazis from their lives. As we contemplate the delicate, crude, wistful, sometimes frightening drawings that remain, we expose ourselves to the untapped potentialities of the victims: a little blond girl in a field of drooping flowers with a sparkler and rows of stars overhead; a large family gathered around the fondly remembered Pesach table set with a candelabrum and a segmented seder plate, its mustachioed leader under a brimmed hat, his haggadah wide open; a camp matron seated at the feet of several bunk beds where children climb and one boy reads under a blanket. In these images we can find not only a struggle between tyranny and a blossoming human spirit: we find joy.

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