

Brief History of the Ghetto of Terezin

The events which unfolded in the ghetto of Terezin between 1941 and 1945 form part of the darkest chapter in the history of modern Europe in which Germans murdered millions of innocent people for seemingly no reason other than that they were Jewish. This fact is not easy - but essential - to confront. The irrationality surrounding the persecution and systematic physical destruction of European Jewry presents a major challenge to historical understanding.

Faced with the gruesome evidence, one feels helplessly inadequate in one's attempts to comprehend the enormity of the crime. Neither the suffering and trauma of the victims of the persecution, nor the cruelty, inhumanity and sheer barbarism of the perpetrators of the crimes, can be adequately conveyed in words. It is impossible, in the provision of what amounts to little more than a brief descriptive narrative summarising the main features of the history of the Terezin ghetto, to do justice to the theme. Nor does the overview provided here permit one to set the development of Terezin into the larger context of the historical events which surround the mass murder of European Jewry or to pursue the debate concerning the genesis and nature of the Holocaust between the supporters of the "intentionalist" and the "structuralist" (or "functionalist") interpretational schools.

The decision to use Terezin as a transit camp for - in the first instance - the Jewish population of Bohemia and Moravia was basically reached at two conferences held in Prague on 10 and 17 October 1941. Called to discuss "the solution of the Jewish problem" in the "Protectorate", the records of the first conference noted "the need to consider the possibility of ghettoization in the Protectorate", while the minutes of the second conference included the following lines: *In the meantime the Jews of Bohemia and Moravia are being gathered in a transit camp for evacuation. For this purpose, the representative of the Reichswehr assigned to the Reich Protector has cleared Theresienstadt (Terezin) completely of all units of the German Army ... Theresienstadt can comfortably absorb 50-60,000 Jews. From there they will be transported to the East"*

The choice of Terezin appears to have been determined by the SS and the head of the "Central Office for Jewish Emigration for Bohemia and Moravia" (re-named the

"Central Office for the Settlement of the Jewish Problem in Bohemia and Moravia" in 1942), SS-Sturmbannführer Hans Gunther. The latter's order to representatives of the Jewish Religious Congregation of Prague to submit the names of several towns situated in the "Protectorate" which might be suitable for transformation into a "Jewish ghetto" was little more than a sham. The suggestions of the leaders of the Jewish Religious Congregation were ignored: Terezin was not on the list submitted by them to Gunther. The choice of Terezin by the Germans is understandable, given its suitability for their purposes. Lying some 60 kilometres to the north of Prague it was known to the SS because the fortification complex known as the "Little Fortress" - not far from the main fortress of Terezin - was already being used by the Gestapo as a prison. Built in the late eighteenth century during Joseph II's reign as a garrison town, the ramparts of the fortress - which resembled a twelve-pointed star - enclosed a small town dominated by huge barracks which could be used for housing large numbers of people. The indigenous population which was small, numbering around 3,700 in 1940, was ejected from Terezin at the end of 1942, when the ghetto was expanded to cover the whole of the town. Terezin was little more than a huge prison, easily sealed off (access to the town was via six gates which punctuated the ramparts) and controlled by a small squad of SS assisted by a detachment of Czech police. The latter controlled the gates and was assigned various guard and escort duties by the SS.

To prepare Terezin for the arrival of the Jews of the "Protectorate", two Aufbaukommandos (construction details), composed of young, able-bodied individuals, were transported to the town from Prague in late November 1941. Before these could do much to make the allotted barracks fit for habitation, three further transports - totalling 3,000 people - arrived from Prague and Brno. By the end of the year some 7,365 Jews from the "Protectorate" (some 2,000 from Brno, the rest from Prague) had been transported to Terezin. Given the total inadequacy of the water supply, sleeping accommodation and kitchen facilities of the Terezin camp (all of which were to be improved dramatically by the hard work and ingenuity of the inmates in the course of 1942), the situation in the camp was one of confusion and distress. Adding to the material deprivation faced by the inmates was the brutality of the regime imposed by the first SS camp commander Dr Siegfried Seidl (a native of Vienna). All sorts of petty restrictions were imposed at first - such as the

separation of the sexes, the prohibition of smoking and of the mail service and ruthlessly enforced (the ban on smoking was in force until 13 April 1945). In January and February 1942 a total of 16 Terezin inmates were hanged for transgressing such "prohibited" activities.

Although the exact number of people transported to Terezin between 24 November 1941 and 15 April 1945 (when the "official" transports ceased) will never be known - given that the SS destroyed virtually all the documentation relating to the camp in 1945 - there is general consensus among the historians who have written accounts of the Terezin ghetto that the figure of those deported stands around the 141,000 mark. Added to this were another 13,500 or so prisoners and concentration camp inmates (a small percentage of these were non-Jews) who were sent to Terezin by the SS between 21 April and 6 May 1945. Thus approximately 154,500 people were - for shorter or longer periods - imprisoned in Terezin between 1941 and 1945. The statistics relating to these victims of German racism suggest that just over half of the Terezin inmates came from Czechoslovakia (75,700), of which approximately 73,600 came from the "Protectorate" of Bohemia and Moravia. Out of the 46,170 Jews registered with the Jewish Religious Congregation in Prague on 1 October 1939 (which accounted for 51.2 percent of the Jewish population in Bohemia), some 40,000 were transported to Terezin.

If up to the end of May 1942 all the inmates of Terezin were Czechoslovakian Jews, Jews transported from Germany and Austria (the latter deported predominantly from Vienna) came in large numbers from 2 June 1942 (just short of 48,000 were sent to Terezin in 1942 alone). From 1943 to 1945 Jews from the "Protectorate" and the "Greater German Reich" came in roughly equal numbers (though at a vastly reduced scale, given that most had already been transported from their pre-war place of residence by the end of 1942). Accounts from survivors of the Terezin ghetto suggest that the influx of German Jews created tension with the resident Czech Jews: the hatred of the latter for all things German rebounding on their fellow sufferers. Jews transported from other parts of Europe also formed a small percentage of those transported to, and imprisoned in, Terezin (around 7,500). Of these some 4,800 came from Holland, just over 1,200 from Poland, 1,000

or so from Hungary, and the rest from Denmark.

Jakub Edelstein, the first chairman of the Council of Jewish Elders (which was notionally responsible for the administration of the Terezin ghetto), hoped at the time of the formation of the Terezin ghetto that it could be transformed into a self-governing Jewish community which - by following the dictates of the SS camp commander (to whom Edelstein and his successors reported daily) and by providing a workforce to be exploited by the Germans - would allow the survival of the Jews from Bohemia and Moravia until the defeat of the Nazi regime. The hope to keep the community intact was very quickly shattered in that as early as 9 January 1942 the first transport of 1,000 inmates - bound for the Baltic region - left the ghetto, followed by another a few days later. The history of Terezin until October 1944 is punctuated by the deportations "to the East" at irregular intervals of around 87,000 people in sixty-three transports. Although at first no one knew the fate awaiting those demanded by the SS for transportation (the Jewish leaders of Terezin were usually forced to be involved in the composition of the transports), there was a general assumption that the conditions awaiting those despatched by the SS would be even worse than those prevailing in Terezin. The first reports of the mass murder of Jews who had been sent to Auschwitz (which appear to have reached the Jewish leaders in Terezin in February 1943) seem not to have been believed. Those who could imagine the "realisation of the unthinkable" in German-controlled Poland kept their knowledge to

themselves. The continuous comings and goings of transports, which was unabated until February 1943, disrupted the Terezin ghetto in the first year of its existence by creating constant anxiety among the inmates. Added to the fear of deportation were constant problems such as hunger, lack of hygiene, and the general material deprivation allied to the often severe overcrowding and the arbitrary brutality of the SS. The fact that the SS demanded that each transport to the East had to include young able-bodied males depleted those left to work in the ghetto (there was especially a growing shortage of artisan skills by late 1942). It also pushed the percentage those inmates over 65 years of age, placing a greater strain on those able to work in the various communal services and camp workshops (by May 1942 some 27 per cent of the ghetto's population was aged 65 and over, as against the figure of

roughly 6 per cent in January).

A few marginal improvements to the austere system imposed on the ghetto by the SS came in the course of 1942. At the end of June when the indigenous population of the town was removed and housing vacated by them was allocated to the ghetto inmates, some of the petty restraints on mobility within the ghetto were allowed to lapse (moving from one barrack to another to make a visit had required an official "permit" before mid-1942), making it possible for family member or friends to meet more easily and frequently. In September another restriction was removed: a limited postal service was permitted (needless to say, the 30 words allowed per card were subjected to SS censorship). A major change in the life of the ghetto came in the summer of 1942 with the influx of tens of thousands of predominantly elderly Jews from Germany and Austria. At the Wannsee Conference in January 1942, at which the Germans reached the decision to exterminate European Jewry, Terezin was singled out as a possible centre to transport Jews above the age of 65, as well as Jews who had been seriously wounded fighting for Germany in the First World War and those holding high military decorations (it seems that well-known, prominent Jews - about whom enquiries might be made from abroad - were also sent to Terezin). The first transports of elderly Jews from Berlin, Munich, Cologne and Vienna reached Terezin in June 1942, creating major problems for the Council of Jewish Elders and their administration running the ghetto. Since the average age of the 4,000 German and Austrian Jews brought in the first transports was around the 71 mark (many of these unfortunates were in their eighties and even nineties, totally bewildered and unprepared for the horrors that awaited them at Terezin), and since only 4 per cent were capable of working, the influx of these aged Jews placed a great strain on the very limited resources of the ghetto. As more and more transports brought tens of thousands of German and Austrian Jews to Terezin in the course of 1942 (including younger age groups from late 1942), the problems of acute overcrowding and of serious food shortages intensified. Between July and September the population of Terezin increased from 20,000 to 60,000. The SS response to the situation was to deport around 18,000 old people to the East in September and October. If the conditions in Terezin were terrible for the younger, fitter inmate, for the elderly they were disastrous: the monthly death-rate in the ghetto climbed from 1,000 in July to 4,000 (with an average age of

76) by September 1942, with enteritis and pneumonia the most common causes of death. This period represents one of the most horrific phases in the ghetto's terrible history.

The influx of German and Austrian Jews in the course of 1942 altered the composition of the population of the ghetto as Czech Jews lost their numeric dominance. This fact in turn occasioned a change in the structure of the leadership of the Council of Jewish Elders in January 1943. In line with an SS order, Dr Paul Eppstein replaced Jakub Edelstein as chairman, the latter being "demoted" to the position of first deputy, while Dr. Benjamin Murelstein (of the new leadership he was the only survivor of the Holocaust) became second deputy of the triumvirate which was now in charge of the ghetto's Jewish administration. The tensions between these leaders in part mirrored the occasional friction between the Jews from Germany and Austria on the one side, and the Jews from the "Protectorate" on the other. Jewish survivors of Terezin, and Jewish historians of Terezin, also point to a number of socio-political cleavages which fractured - and worked against the realisation of - the total unity of the ghetto population.