

## Art of the Holocaust as Spiritual Resistance

### The Ghetto Fighters' House Collection

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Art of the Holocaust is distinguished by the fact that the artists themselves were witnesses to the events and documented them from first-hand experience. The Holocaust artists experienced the daily barbarity and horror themselves and, while it was going on, they recorded it for posterity, in fulfillment of a basic need—to express themselves and to find refuge in their art, even if only for a moment.

There is tremendous richness and variety in the works of art that were produced in the ghettos, hiding places and camps throughout Nazi-occupied Europe. Art was produced in the extermination camps in Eastern Europe, such as Auschwitz and Buchenwald, in the Dutch and Belgian transit camps, such as Westerbork and Mechelen, the network of camps set up throughout France, such as Drancy and Gurs and in the model camp of Theresienstadt.

All these artists who were victims of the National Socialist regime, whether professional or amateur, man or woman, young or old, had one thing in common: they had been labeled undesirables, interned in the camps, cut off from society and designated to be victims of the Nazi final solution. The conditions varied in the different types of camps. In the transit camps there were no gas chambers, the internees were not sent to forced labour and there was less deliberate cruelty, although the inmates frequently died of starvation, neglect, lack of sanitation, and inadequate medical care. The entire mosaic of the world of the camps is portrayed in the hundreds of works of art that survived.

An important function of art of the Holocaust—the works done secretly in camps, in ghettos and in hiding places—might be termed *spiritual resistance*. The term was coined by Miriam Novitch, the first curator of the Ghetto Fighters' House, a mission she initiated in the early 1950s. Novitch, who had a vast knowledge

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of art and art history and had herself been an inmate in the French internment camp Vittel, understood the importance and uniqueness of the art created under inhuman conditions. It was the only weapon with which those inmate artists could resist. Since the Ghetto Fighters' House was founded in order to tell the story of all facets of the Holocaust, Novitch contended that without art, without the courageous and heroic manifestations of the human spirit produced in the camps and ghettos, the story would be incomplete. Moreover, since art is a self-explanatory medium and its appeal and communicative abilities are universal, it adds another dimension to accounts of the Holocaust, enabling people to visualize events that are frequently beyond human comprehension.

However, not all art made in the camps falls under the rubric of spiritual resistance. On the one hand there was the commissioned art, produced on order according to the camp commanders' instructions. On the other hand, there was the clandestine art, whose creators, had they been discovered, would have been severely punished.

This can be illustrated by the story of the artists in Theresienstadt, where as in many other camps and ghettos, a *Zeichenstube* (drawing workshop) was set up and artist internees were commissioned to paint signs, charts, draw diagrams and maps, forge money and famous works of art, or to paint portraits of SS men or their relatives from photographs. The artists were considered to be highly privileged. In Theresienstadt artists played a major part in transforming the ghetto into a model camp, as their talents were exploited to create a facade for the delegation of the International Red Cross, who visited the camp in June, 1944. Artists such as Leo Haas, Otto Ungar, Felix Bloch and Bedrich Fritta, who carried out the commissions, also managed to sneak paper and other materials from the workshop and used them to depict scenes of the cruel and brutal life in Theresienstadt, such as starvation and hangings. This was done in secret, in the barracks, while guarded by other inmates; they ran the risk of punishment or death if they were caught with "incriminating" pictures of camp life in their possession. After the famous visit of the Red Cross delegation the Nazis found out about the unofficial activities of the artists. Haas, Fritta, Bloch, and Ungar were summoned by the head of the camp, SS officer Karl Rahm, who was accompanied by three high-ranking Nazis, among them Adolf Eichmann. An investigation was held, during which they were presented with three incriminating drawings. One of them, *Hunger*, by Haas, showed inmates searching for potato peelings in the garbage, an image that especially infuriated the Nazis. The artists were sent to the cellars of the Gestapo, and they were tortured. Subsequently they were sent to the Theresienstadt's prison, the *Kleine Festung* (Small Fortress). Their wives and children (Ungar's daughter was five years old, and Fritta's son was three), were also brought there and tortured. Bloch could not withstand the torture and died after several days; Haas, Ungar and Fritta were transported to Auschwitz, where Fritta died eight days after arrival there. Ungar, despite being tortured with characteristic savagery (his right hand was crushed to a pulp with clubs and two fingers were amputated), survived the internment in Auschwitz and the Death March to Buchenwald. He had

contracted tuberculosis and typhus, and after the liberation was sent to a hospital in Linz, where he died in July 1945. The only survivor was Haas, who was sent to Sachsenhausen, where the Nazis continued to exploit his artistic talent. They assigned him to a counterfeiting unit, where they created plates for British currency, which the Germans planned to use to destroy the pound. A previous team of skilled Jewish artists and engravers who had done this work had been executed. Haas and his colleagues were more fortunate and they survived the war. The wives and children, accused of treason, were kept in the Kleine Festung in Theresienstadt. Fritta's wife, Hansi, died of malnutrition and maltreatment. Ungar's wife and daughter survived the war, as did Haas's wife, Erna, but she never recovered from her long imprisonment and lived for ten more years as a semi-invalid. Haas and his wife Erna adopted Fritta's son, Thomas, who had been orphaned at age five. Haas subsequently settled in West Germany, and resumed his career as an illustrator and cartoonist.

The history shows not only the courage of the artists, who hoped to smuggle out some of their work in order to reveal to the world the true face of the Nazi regime in the camps, but also attests to the faith of this regime in the power of art. Knowing how well it communicated in its universal language, it instituted total prohibition of any artistic creation that was not controlled by it.

*I asked myself why I was drawing, when I was fighting day and night. This is something similar to biological continuation. Every man, every people, is interested in continuing his people, his family, in bringing children into the world for the future—in leaving this one thing. Another motivation was to get information to the so-called free world about the cruel, cruel actions of the Germans—so that there would be some documentation. To tell this to a world that was completely ignorant . . . . To be creative in the situation of the Holocaust, this is also a protest. Each man when he came face to face with real danger, with death, reacts in his own way. The artist reacts through his medium. This is his protest! This is my medium! He reacts artistically. This is his weapon. He must leave his mark as a 'mensch' on mankind. This is what shows that the Germans could not break his spirit.<sup>1</sup>*

The artist Alexander Bogen, who has written about the works he produced during the Holocaust, has suggested that art fulfilled several roles. It served as the fulfillment of the basic need of human beings and artists to leave their stamp on the world, especially when their lives are in danger. Art functioned as documentation, using a universal visual language to provide evidence of the forces of evil and the depths of inhumanity to which the human race. In a world where so-called undesirables were turned into subhumans, anonymous numbers with no individual identity, the creation of works of art was a kind of spiritual protest. It was one of the few weapons the victims had at their disposal to fight against their situation and to feel that they had even a limited amount of control over their it. As the Nazis aimed to

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reduce people to nothing, to the level of dehumanized creatures, artists could offer resistance, fighting with pencils and scraps of paper. They thereby bore witness to the human spirit, the spark of humanity which was not extinguished, even when they were subjected to physical torture and starvation, and the fear of death hovering constantly over them.

The works that survived had some common themes, regardless of whether they had been produced in Eastern or Western Europe, despite the fact that conditions were very different in the two regions. About a quarter of the works are portraits. Portraying a face or a figure was in itself an act of commemoration and defiance, and confirmed the existence of the individual in a world where one's very existence was so uncertain and arbitrary. Portraits were often used to send greetings to inmates' relatives, to show that they were alive and well. This explains why we frequently find the name of the subject of the picture next to the artist's signature, along with the date and place. It also explains why the figures in the portraits have a slightly better appearance than in reality, for the artists wanted to send a positive message and not show the misery of their situation. These portraits are in many cases the last record of people who soon afterwards were sent to their deaths.

A second central theme was the portrayal of the camps, particularly the barbed wire fences and watchtowers, which over time have become symbols of the Holocaust. They were part of the everyday experience of the prisoners, a constant reminder that they were confined in a closed camp, cut off from the society of which they had recently been an integral part. Some artists depicted the camps as places full of people while others depicted them as empty, without a living soul. In the first case the artist indicates that he has adjusted fairly well to life in the camps, whereas in the second case the artist has projected onto the scene a sense of isolation and alienation.

Daily life in the barracks also was a subject that artists often depicted. There are countless paintings that represent everyday, routine actions—bathing, washing one's hair, going to the toilet, standing in line for food, hunting for food, sleeping—as these basic human activities could no longer be taken for granted. Bathing was extremely difficult, as water supplies were inadequate for all the inmates and available only a few hours a day.

*We desperately wanted to have a wash, but how could we do that outside, in front of everybody? We organized ourselves into small groups . . . and stood in line at the eight taps. The system was first of all to strip off and wash yourself above the waist and then wash the rest of the body. The guards seemed to enjoy watching the "show" from a distance. The older women were more careful, washing bit by bit, in an attempt to maintain their modesty.<sup>2</sup>*

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Going to the toilet was no less embarrassing. The most intimate bodily functions had to be done in public, adding to the dehumanization of the inmates. This may seem trifling compared to the acts of mass murder that were taking place at that time. But we must remember that the daily life of the inmates was made up of trying to meet the numerous “mundane” needs that are basic to civilized human life.

The inmates suffered constantly from hunger, which weakened them both physically and mentally. Hunting for food was one of the main occupations of the camp inmates. Many paintings portray the subject of food, or the lack of food, ranging from lining up to obtain the daily rations and guarding a scrap of bread as though it were a treasure, to rummaging through the garbage to find a bite to eat that might ease the pangs of hunger. Pictures of the latter serve to illustrate again the degradation that was forced on the camp inmates.

The barracks were so crowded that privacy was inconceivable. Everything took place in front of all the occupants of the barrack. The German-Jewish writer Lion Feuchtwanger, who was imprisoned in a camp in Southern France, describes this phenomenon, which also appears in many paintings and drawings:

*We worked it out that each inmate had been allotted a space 70 cms. wide. This meant that there was absolutely no privacy. We were constantly on top of one another . . . and saw everything that happened, whether we wanted to or not . . . you could not get away from other people. You were together at night, at meals, and when tending your bodily functions. We were constantly present in the lives of other people whose company had been forced on us completely arbitrarily.*<sup>3</sup>

The daily life of the inmates was totally divorced from everything they had known in their previous lives and even their most basic human needs were not met. It is no wonder that so many pictures depict this subject.

Artists often completed works requested by other inmates or camp administrators and guards usually portraits of themselves or their families from photographs. This work frequently gave the artists some advantages, such as better food rations and painting materials, which they used for their own work also. For some artists, being commissioned to paint a work of art helped prolong their lives, or even saved their lives altogether, but not in all cases. For example, Jacques Gotko, an internee in Drancy used to make portraits in return for a piece of bread or a little money, which he would send to his wife through the underground. Gotko was deported to Auschwitz and soon afterwards, another artist, Georges Wellers was sent there too. Wellers hoped to find Gotko still alive:

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*As an artist, particularly a portrait painter, he could have saved his life, for the “powers that be” in the camp liked to have their portrait painted. For a good painter this could tip the scales between life and death.*<sup>4</sup>

However, there was no hope for Gotko or for hundreds of other artists, or for the thousands of people depicted in their paintings. His artistic talents could not save him. The same officers who so enjoyed his portraits did not hesitate to send him to his death.

Artists arrived in the camps from all over Europe. Despite the artistic variety of their work, one unifying factor was common to many of them—they portrayed the grim reality and their cruel experiences with a sense of longing for their former world which had entirely disintegrated.

Along with these brutally frank portrayals of life in the camps, there are many landscapes. The camps were often situated in beautiful areas, with snow-covered mountains in the distance, or picturesque seaside villages, which were in sharp contrast to the misery of life within the barbed wire fences. Many artists’ views provided them with a kind of connection with the outside world. The colors of a beautiful sunset, while serving to remind them of ordinary life, also brought home the indifference of nature to their suffering.

In various states of hunger and destitution, with death a constant part of their daily existence, hundreds of artists did not allow the spark of human spirit to be extinguished. In the universal language of art they portrayed the images of one of the darkest periods in human history for all the world to see. This was their mission, to record these terrible events for posterity.

*We saw abandoned children. We saw people being led to the slaughter. I did not lay down my pencil for a moment. An artist condemned to death portraying people condemned to extermination. Is my conscience clear? Was I right to make a bereaved mother, an abandoned little girl or an old man starving to death into artist’ models?*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Bogen, as quoted in an interview with Mary S. Costanza, in Mary S. Costanza, *The Living Witness: Art in Concentration Camps and Ghettos*. (New York 1982) XVIII.

<sup>2</sup> As quoted in Hanna Schramm and Barbara Vormeier. *Vivres à Gurs: Un camp de concentration français 1940-1941*. (Paris, 1979) 14-15

<sup>3</sup> Lion Feuchtwanger and Jean-Claude Capèle, *Le diable en France*. (Paris, 1996) 28, 29, 54.

<sup>4</sup> Georges Wellers, *Un juif sous Vichy*. (Paris, 1991), 151.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Bogen, *The Revolt*. (Jerusalem, 1974).