

THERESIENSTADT: A STUDY IN DOCUMENTARY
FILM PRODUCTION IN OCCUPIED
CZECHOSLOVAKIA

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Abstract

This thesis looks at the Nazi propaganda film *Theresienstadt* as an example of filmmaking in occupied Czechoslovakia from 1939 to 1945. Though the lives of the filmmakers are looked at in a post-war context, a large focus is on the film itself and how it was developed, filmed and edited during the war, and how it reflected on the filmmaking community at large. A special focus is given on documentary filmmaking and newsreels, as the group that made the *Theresienstadt* film, Aktualita, was the only Czech-run news agency in Czechoslovakia at the time. Though they were heavily controlled and watched over by the Germans, the production crew involved in Aktualita did in fact claim some forms of resistance against the Nazis, though they were readily accused as conspirators after the war.

The goal of this thesis is to examine these filmmakers and see how Aktualita and those involved fared during and after the war in regards to their filmmaking, and how the films, or at least what remains of them, reflect on their lives during and after the war. For Karel Pečený, Ivan Frič, Čeněk Zahradníček, Iréna Dodalová, Kurt Gerron and others, the film showcases a multitude of both personal and social interpretations of their actions during the war. I intend to use secondary literature to help frame my argument, especially the research done both in film studies on documentary filmmaking and the development of the *Theresienstadt* film itself. Throughout my thesis I will continually refer to the German control over their production, as this seems to be the crux of their lasting remembrance; while some historians see Pečený, Frič, and Zahradníček as collaborators of the, others see them as parties who were under duress during a wartime period and had to act and do what they could to survive, all the while trying to keep some form of resistance alive through their own filmmaking and editing.

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Introduction

The documentary film *Theresienstadt* has become the focus of many studies over the past years as representing the concept of a constructed or falsified documentary film, which is considered both rare and contradictory to the idea of documentary filmmaking. Documentary film is generally seen as a paragon of truth and fact hood, though that is not always the case. The inherent bias, intended viewership and pre-planned plot of the film all create factors in which documentary cinema must be looked at with a critical eye.

Building on the discussion of documentary filmmaking, the development of the Czech film industry before and during the Second World War will play a large role in this thesis, at the examination of the control and power that the Germans had in occupied Czechoslovakia affected a multitude of persons including the Jewish population, many of whom worked in the film industry themselves, as well as the Czechs who now had to create and edit films which could only be approved by the Nazi officials who took over their industries and studios.

Those involved with making the film *Theresienstadt*, which included both a Czech production crew and Jews in the camp, creating a documentary film which is ‘inauthentic’. This readily plays upon the study of analyzing documentary in ‘the context in which the images appear, the type of image and the nature of its use, the difficulty of determining what images are evidence of.’¹ These three points as established by Carl Platinga are the main concepts for looking at documentary film critically. With regards to *Theresienstadt* and the other films made in the camp, the context is extremely important as it explains that this documentary was made with the intention

¹ Carl Platinga, “I’ll Believe it When I Trust the Source: Documentary Images and Visual Evidence.” *The Documentary Film Book*, Brian Winston, ed. (London: BFI, 2013), pg. 43

to deceive, and places the film in the unique realm of documentary cinema in the sense that it is recording real life events but they are falsified and presented as truth. Understanding the type of image and the nature of its use includes the actual intended audience of this film, which were the Danish Red Cross and other social groups who were looking out for the welfare of the Jews in the camp. By attempting to show them this falsified footage as well as made up camp, they intended to showcase a pretend city in which the Jews were happy and were left to their own devices outside of German influence.

The final point is arguably the most complex in talking about *Theresienstadt* as the filmmakers, including a Jewish actor by the name of Kurt Gerron tasked with directing the film, were forced to make a fake documentary, creating two levels of ‘evidence’ for the viewer. On the base level, one can look at the film as it was intended, a propaganda piece meant for non- Germans to be fooled into seeing how the Jews were living in the ghettos. On a more theoretical level, using the footage of the film, or at least what remains of the film, one can see the process of propaganda in play, as well as using the clips to analyse the underlying level of the ghetto and attempt to separate what was fact from fiction. Many modern historians do just that, seeing the faces in the film clips and trying to place them to names of those in the camp and how they fared during and after the production. Sadly, the ability to correlate primary accounts to the film footage itself is scarce, as most of the Jews involved with the development of the film were sent to Auschwitz shortly after the film was finished shooting and perished.

The ‘visual authenticity of the film must be noted’² as even though it is a propaganda piece,

² Peter Zimmermann and Kay Hoffmann. *Geschichte Des Dokumentarischen Films in Deutschland*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 2005. pg 567

it was filmed and edited by people who did not share the same sentiments as those who had commissioned the film, creating a unique narrative in which the actual creators did not have control and thus had to create a pre-approved piece of film. One must ask if they attempted to create some form of objection against their work which has been questioned in recent historic studies, by certain clips that had been filmed as well as ones that had been saved by the creators like Ivan Frič, since there was a questioning of whether they were accomplices or collaborators with the Germans to the extent that they were tried after the war with these charges.

I must emphasize that within this thesis, the concept of ‘propaganda’ will be looked at in the sense of it attempting to convince the viewer or reader of its method by appealing to their sentimentalities. As David Welch writes; ‘More often, propaganda is concerned with reinforcing existing trends and beliefs, to sharpen and focus on them.’³ This is reflected in the typical cinema of the Third Reich as reflected in films like *Triumph des Willens* (1935) and *Der Sieg des Glaubens* (1933) as well as the films that played on the ideologies that the Nazis wished to re-enforce among their populations like *Der Ewige Jude* (1940). As this form of propaganda developed within Nazi Germany, the film industry was fully incorporated, as were documentary films. Due to this, the documentary film *Theresienstadt* is a clear product of propaganda, as it appeals to the outsider's sentimentality of those in the camp living good lives and being treated well.

The history of documentary filmmaking is one that originates in attempting to tell a form of a factual story, as the first documentary *Nanook of the North* (1922) by Robert Flaherty,

³ David Welch. *The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda*. New York: Routledge 1998. Pg 5

explored the lives of Canadian Eskimos in their homes and communities.⁴ As the field expanded, with different filmmakers exploring subjects from cultural heritage to studies in humanity, documentary filmmaking cemented itself in the field of cinema as a creative approach to the real world. Due to this, the general perception of documentaries was that they held some form of truth, and it was expected that the audience would readily take the information that was presented as fact unless told otherwise. ‘Yet documentary film, in more obvious ways than does history, straddles the categories of fact and fiction, art and document, entertainment and knowledge.’⁵ This gives it the opportunity to be readily studied and criticized in the historical and social context it was created in.

With the rise in film being used for propaganda in Nazi Germany, documentary filmmaking was naturally brought into the fold. It not only served the purpose of bringing forth a specific idea to be presented as fact, but it also allowed the filmmakers or those who commissioned the film to push a specific agenda. In film studies, this is regularly seen as a critique when looking at documentary film, as creator bias is often seen as something prevalent in many films, and the original intention of the film must be identified before analyzing the film itself.

As this thesis intends to focus on the filmmakers and crew involved with the film, it is also clear that their influence on film must be paid attention to as well. Arguably as the work that these filmmakers made during the German occupation was subject to oversight, they couldn’t film in

⁴ Though considered the first official documentary film, *Nanook of the North* is not without its criticisms as Flaherty had been proven to have staged some of the scenes as well as having a romantic relationship with one of the women shown in the film. This is further discussed in Charles Musser, “Problems in Historiography: The Documentary Tradition before *Nanook of the North*” Brian Winston (ed), *The Documentary Film Book* (London: BFI, 2013).

⁵ Jill Godmilow and Ann-Louise Shapiro. *How Real is the Reality in Documentary Film? History and Theory*, Vol. 36, No. 4. Wesleyan University, 1997. Pg. 80

ways they would have liked and were thus subject to the demands of the Germans authorities. To add complexity to this matter, as Jewish people placed in the Terezín camp were forced to work on the film, there was an added element of people who were being persecuted having to work on propaganda that worked against them. After the war, this continued to affect them, as the Czechs who had worked in the production company Aktualita that was tasked with filming around Terezín were criticized, and the Jews who helped create the film were sent to their deaths because of their involvement in the film.

Previous scholarship surrounding the study of *Theresienstadt* and those involved is for the most part led by historians Natascha Drubek and Karel Margry. Their projects on the various facets of the film have allowed for great advances in understanding the process of propaganda filmmaking in an occupied setting, and how it affected not only those in the camp itself but also those who found themselves becoming part of the lasting memory of the camp and the films surrounding it. Drubek has led various conferences on the concept of propaganda film and *Theresienstadt* in particular, creating an opportunity to explore as many facets as possible within this film. Margry as well has done research in primary source material with interviews and by cataloguing the remaining memory of how the filming transpired during the period. Eva Strusková has released a complex and in-depth study into the paths the physical fragments of the film have taken around the world due to post-war crisis, and I have included her chart following the fragments in this thesis in order to give a better visualization and context for the reader. Adding to the studies of this film by Drubek, Strusková and Margry, I focus on the lasting effects of those involved with the production of the film instead of the film itself.

In this thesis, I intend to showcase the history of the film industry in Czechoslovakia and how it was changed after the occupation by the Germans in 1939 to frame how the Germans

controlled the industry and those involved. Giving this background, I will then continue with the *Theresienstadt* film itself and how it was filmed. Bringing in the visits of the Danish Red Cross which was the inspiration for the ghetto beautification and subsequent film, the clear lack of control and falsehood will explain how *Theresienstadt* reflected occupied cinema and what happened to those who were involved in post-war Czechoslovakia. The subsequent research should lead up to the explanation of how did working for and with German occupiers affect the local film production in occupied Czechoslovakia, what kind of effect did working on the film have on their careers and status as members in Czech society, and how is that reflected in the subsequent study of this documentary.

Chapter 1: The Film Industry in Occupied Czechoslovakia

The film industry in Europe was greatly expanding and flourishing before the Second World War. Even though there were definite struggles during the war due to lack of materials and funding, there was a continued growth of film industries in Europe as a whole. This was especially aided as governments and regimes realized the power that film had over audiences, not only as a political tool to enforce a message, but also to boost morale and keep people entertained in times of strife. The use of propaganda filmmaking and the belief that film would boost positive emotions by various groups was prevalent, and thus filmmaking was placed in great importance. As the development of these film industries continued, studios in areas occupied by the Germans remained open and they would both continue to create national films due to the increasing demand from the general public as well as make films for the groups who had taken over their country.

I will attempt to give a history of the film industry in Czechoslovakia before and during the war, in order to contextualize the agency those involved in the film industry had at this time. I will rely heavily on the research of Ivan Klimeš, who has described the history of German cinema in the Czech region between 1933 and 1945.⁶ This chapter will also explain the path that these groups had to take in order to get films approved in a local context, as well as how the Germans used their newfound power and influence in the country in order to create films for their own interest. As the film industry continued to operate during the war, its production method completely changed, due to the great loss of employees through the expulsion of the Jewish population in Czechoslovakia, as well as the closing of smaller studios and the unification of

⁶ Ivan Klimeš. "A Dangerous Neighbourhood: German Cinema in the Czechoslovak Region, 1933-45" *Cinema and the Swastika: The International Expansion of the Third Reich Cinema*. Vande Winkel and Welch ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

German and Czech studios. Due to this decrease in employees, many filmmakers still active in the industry had to take on different jobs and positions, as well as take jobs for the Germans unless they wanted to face some form of retribution.

In this Chapter, there will be both an exploratory and factual element in order to establish the state of the Czech film industry during the time of the Second World War. While it is clear that there were various ways in which the Germans controlled the film industry, the role that the development of the Czech industry plays is greater than one might think, as its clear success in a national scale as well as with international agreements made it a force to be reckoned with while dealing with production and film releases. The factual element in this chapter will be looking into how exactly the film industry in Czechoslovakia changed with the occupation, providing direct information. The exploratory element will be an attempt to analyze how this occupation affected the filmmakers and crews in the film industry, and how this projected in the overall atmosphere of cinema in the country.

Before delving into the film industry itself during the pre- and post-war periods, one must look at the reasoning behind the creation of films. The Czech film industry was readily expanding in the pre-war period, with many different studios and companies being formed in order to supply the growing demand for enjoyable film. In Czechoslovakia, there were multiple studios running at the beginning of the Second World War, the most notable of them being Barrandov Studios based in Prague. These studios released not only Czechoslovak films but due to the size of Barrandov, various other filmmaking companies from around the world used the studios as the set for their own films, giving Barrandov the “Hollywood of Europe” label, which is still true today.⁷ Within

⁷ Though the title was not as prevalent at the time, today Barrandov is seen as synonymous with Hollywood due to its size, frequent collaborations with American studios as well as its longstanding stronghold as one of the most

the studio and others in the country, there was a great prevalence of both Jewish and Czech filmmakers, who specialized in various film styles. With the increasing demand for news and reported style films, there were also companies being formed which would have filmmakers travel and report on actual events, leading to the creation of documentary and news studios like Aktualita in order to bring news to the general public.

Not only the increasing audience for cinema grew, but the potential power that film held for various groups, political and not, grew as well. During the time of the Third Reich, Hitler eagerly embraced the concept of using film as a political tool. Though while he wished for the films produced by the regime to be overtly political in nature, Joseph Goebbels, arguably the face of Nazi German cinema, instead wished to keep the more subtle and artistic forms of the industry alive. ‘For, unlike Hitler, Goebbels believed that propaganda was most effective when it was insidious, when its message was concealed within the framework of popular entertainment. Goebbels therefore encouraged the production of feature films which reflected the ambience of National Socialism rather than those that loudly proclaimed its ideology.’⁸ This led also to the continued support of films which were arguably more artistic and creative in nature rather than overtly nationalist and political. Due to this, ‘only about one-sixth [of the films] were straight political propaganda. But every film had a political function,’⁹ showcasing the importance of having some sort of political message in the film was still prevalent, whether direct or indirect.

powerful studios in Europe. The previous title of ‘Hollywood of Europe’ in the pre-war period was due to its large size and production scale. Martin Hrobský “Barrandov Studios: Hollywood of the East,” Radio Praha Czech Radio, May 29 2003.

⁸ David Welch. *The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda*. Pg 48

⁹ Erwin Leiser. *Nazi Cinema*. Trans. Gertrud Mander and David Wilson. New York: Macmillan, 1974, pg. 12

Though this was not the case for every film industry, this sort of nationalist thinking and ideology grew to great importance during the war period.

With the connection that many studios had with one another during the development of the film industry in the 1920s and 30s, Czech companies also worked with international studios in order to get films made as well as bring international films into their cinemas. Czechoslovakia, like other countries, began creating regulations and rules on how films could be distributed in an international and national context. This is why a quota system was introduced in 1932 asking the American film industry to limit its export of American films to Czechoslovakia and to help produce Czech language films in order to help the Czech film industry grow. This in fact backfired and caused the American companies like Fox, Paramount and others to refuse ‘to produce Czech films and stopped the import of American films into Czechoslovakia.’¹⁰ This caused the flourishing international film market in Czechoslovakia to crash, but at the same time gave Czech films the opportunity to begin to be produced even though on a much smaller scale due to the loss of the international funding from the American export and import agreements. Still, the loss of having the American income was not felt as strongly as it might have been because the Germans decided to enter into the agreement that the Americans had backed out of and provided a large number of German films to Czechoslovakia. This was also in German interests due to the fact that there was a large German population in Czechoslovakia around the Sudetenland who would in turn give great profits to the German films imported into the country, even when they were obligated to produce Czech films.

¹⁰ Ivan Klimeš. “A Dangerous Neighbourhood: German Cinema in the Czechoslovak Region, 1933-45.” pg. 113

This situation shows that the German takeover of Czech cinema was not only beneficial to the Germans due to the fact that they had occupied the country and thus would readily take over Czech owned businesses, especially that of the film industry which was held in such high regard by the Germans, but also due to the fact that an increase in German films would lead to a larger audience for their propaganda and nationalist cinema to be released to the Sudeten and other ethnic Germans in Czechoslovakia. Though this was not the initial plan from Goebbels and other Germans within the film industry, it was quickly clear the great opportunity they had been handed, and thus they greatly strengthened the hold they had on the Sudeten population through a now direct access to their cinemas and social centers where movies were shown.

Due to their own nationalist tendencies, and the large influx of German films, Czechs in the film industry, including those who owned cinemas, had earlier fought against the quotas and in 1934 the quota system was dismantled, though this did not mean that the trade and agreements between the Czech and German industries ceased. They continued to make negotiations until an agreement of an 'exchange of films between the two countries in the ratio of 1:15, with the stipulation that no more than five Czech films in a German version would be exported to Germany per year.'¹¹ This benefitted both industries as the Germans could continue to export their films to a very large and profitable market, while the Czechs could expand their own film industry and gain support from a country with a financially larger film industry. Presumably the Czech films were not expected to be great hits within Germany by either the Czechs or the Germans, as within my research I found little on the viewing patterns of Czech films outside of Czechoslovakia. Even though both countries were accepting to increase their wealth and prowess in film, they still held

¹¹ Ivan Klimeš. "A Dangerous Neighbourhood: German Cinema in the Czechoslovak Region, 1933-45" pg. 115

nationalist regulations in which certain terms and policies were not allowed to be brought into the films, such as harming state interests or jeopardizing public law and order.¹²

With the growth of film industries in various European countries, this increased national view of film was becoming more and more prevalent, even as the general public would see films from many different countries when offered in the cinema. American and German films were still greatly popular, but as film associations and groups formed, there was a definite rise in the idea of each country's film industry being run and controlled by people from that country. It was because of this that there were some tensions between the Jewish filmmakers in various countries and the filmmaking community they were entering, either by being seen as an 'other' or by having to deal with the by-product of pre-war tensions from Germany. As the Nazi occupation and invasion of various countries began, many Jewish filmmakers and others involved in the film industry escaped to other countries which were still either relatively free or completely independent of German control.¹³ As the war progressed this became steadily more difficult and resulted in Jewish members of the industry being captured and sent to ghettos and camps or escaping to the United States and Switzerland.¹⁴

After the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Nazi Germany in 1939, there was an upheaval in how films were approved and placed into production. While most of the staff in Czech studios

¹² Ivan Klimeš. "A Dangerous Neighbourhood: German Cinema in the Czechoslovak Region, 1933-45" pg. 116

¹³ Ivan Klimeš. "A Dangerous Neighbourhood: German Cinema in the Czechoslovak Region, 1933-45" pg. 116

¹⁴ This is also what brought forward many great Jewish filmmakers like Ernst Lubitsch, Fritz Lang and Henry Koster to come to Hollywood and create world famous films like *Ninotchka*, *To Be or Not To Be*, while other non-Jewish directed films also used exiled actors and crews to make overtly anti-Nazi films like *Casablanca* and *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*. Admin, "Jews who fled the Nazis to make films in Hollywood" *The Jewish News of Northern California*. November 27, 2014

continued to work as normal, it was clear that the SS Officials newly stationed in the country controlled the media and film industry. Now, not only were Czech filmmakers and crews expected to work alongside German officials, but the Jewish workers were steadily removed from their positions and placed in camps and ghettos throughout Europe. Some of these workers would even end up in Terezín and would help the crew of the *Theresienstadt* film in the production of the film. This removal of Jewish workers was part of an ‘Aryanisation’ process prompted in 1938 in Germany and then moving on to Czechoslovakia and other occupied areas in 1939, led by SS Officer Göring. This meant that anyone with any Jewish heritage was barred from working and having any sort of company, firm or public contract with anyone.¹⁵ Members of the film industry had to come forward with specific papers proving their Aryan or Jewish heritage. Everyone from studio executives to cameramen had to bring in documentation proving their Aryan heritage and only thus could they continue working in the film industry. By 1940 no Jews would remain active in the Czech film industry.

Previously Jewish involvement in the Czech film industry had been substantial. Directors, and more significantly editors, screenwriters and producers were all active in the industry and created films like *Velbloud uchem jehly* (Camel Through the Eye of a Needle) (1936). After their expulsion from the studios in 1939, there was a definite shortage of people in the film industry, to the point where they had issues with filling positions that required previous skill and training.

With the fusion of German and Czech film associations, in 1939 there came about the Českomoravské filmové ústředí or ČMFÚ,¹⁶ which worked in occupied Czechoslovakia as the

¹⁵ David Welch. *The Third Reich: Politics and Propaganda*. Pg. 75

¹⁶ Ivan Klimeš. “A Dangerous Neighbourhood: German Cinema in the Czechoslovak Region, 1933-45” pg. 117

authority in Czech film production and industry. It placed both a German and a Czech in positions of leadership, in order to showcase that it wasn't simply a German takeover of another country. Even so, there was an obvious German control over the ČMFÚ as it readily expanded the German film industry in the country. As the ČMFÚ developed it created various regulations for the Czech film industry, including holding Czech films to a certain linguistic standard as well as requiring films to be at maximum lengths. These regulations did in fact boost the Czech film industry to a certain level on par with that of the German industry, and Czech filmmakers 'gained considerable experience with the central direction of the sector as a whole'¹⁷ with which they could continue to develop their industry in a post-war setting.

Arguably the most influential figure in charge of the film industry in Czechoslovakia was Karl Schulz, who was largely supported by Joseph Goebbels, a leading figure in the Nazi empire of filmmaking. His purchasing of various companies and studios in Germany paved the way for the propaganda machine that was the German film industry during the Second World War. Similar to Goebbels' path to the control of the German media industry, Schulz and his German compatriots used the same techniques in order to gain control of the Czech film industry. First they took over Barrandov studios in Prague, and then slowly pressured or bought out smaller Czech studios like Bat'a Film Studios and AB Company. Eventually, the entire film industry in Czechoslovakia was completely under German control.

Once they had a strong control over the film studios in Czechoslovakia, it was clear that they could regulate the production of the films in the country. Through their control, they managed to produce many wartime films, both for entertainment and propaganda purposes for various

¹⁷ Ivan Klimeš. "A Dangerous Neighbourhood: German Cinema in the Czechoslovak Region, 1933-45" pg. 119

audiences. Because of the disdain the Germans had for the Czechs, many of these films were for German audiences; though Czech filmmakers did have the opportunity to keep producing films, they simply had to be German productions. The continued production of films in Czechoslovakia allowed for various filmmakers and crewmembers to continue their craft in the realm of filmography, though most crewmembers from smaller studios outside of Barrandov were laid off or not given work, as the Germans were limiting the amount of Czech films produced by great numbers. In 1939, 41 Czech language films were produced but by 1941 this fell to only 9.¹⁸ The decrease in the number of Czech films did not diminish their popularity among the Czech population, however they were easily the most popular films in Czech dominated areas, readily beating the more numerous German films in terms of the number of viewers, even as the German productions had arguably better production and design. This continued popularity of Czech films in occupied Czechoslovakia shows that even though there was now an influx of German films and their own releases had to be severely limited, there was still a strong sense of national and cultural identity among the Czechs.

Interestingly, though the Germans were saturating the Czech film market with their films, taking up over half of the new releases in Czechoslovakia per year, there were still restrictions as to what could be shown. Films that had an anti-Czech message or held a strong German nationalist sentiment were excluded from being premiered, such as the film *Die Goldene Stadt* which showcased a German girl's downfall due to her relation with a Czech boy from Prague.¹⁹ Clearly, though the Germans had an obvious understanding of the film industry and what made popular

¹⁸ Ivan Klimeš. "A Dangerous Neighbourhood: German Cinema in the Czechoslovak Region, 1933-45" pg. 120

¹⁹ Ivan Klimeš. "A Dangerous Neighbourhood: German Cinema in the Czechoslovak Region, 1933-45" pg. 121

wartime cinema, they also understood that national sentiments did not disappear with the occupation of a territory, and instead of creating a possible crisis of some sort, evaded it by keeping the population generally happy and occupied with their own releases.

Not only were Czech film studios being readily taken over, but newsreel agencies like Aktualita Prag were taken over by German companies to produce specific news messages inundated with German propaganda. Though before the occupation there were multiple news companies, many closed or were enveloped into the larger German media machine that took over the media industry in Czechoslovakia. Focusing on giving information to the public both in Czech and in German, it was clear that there was a necessity by the Germans to produce content that both groups would be interested in. The releases for Aktualita were produced in both German and Czech and continued to have a successful production throughout the war. It was clear that their method of production was the most valid for the Germans and they were tasked to film important events in occupied Czechoslovak history like Goebbel's visit to Barrandov and others. They were also tasked with filming reels which would not be released under the Aktualita name and instead be given to specific members of the Nazi party for review.²⁰ These internal newsreels included filming camps like Terezín and the Lidice bombing to give to SS Officials to review what was happening and see if it met their standards.²¹ On top of the internal reels and the reports for the Czech and German population in Czechoslovakia, they would film the general lives of the Czech people to give to the German and international populace to the idea that they were being treated humanely. These films could be seen as the pre-cursor to the development of documentary

²⁰ Ivan Klimeš. "A Dangerous Neighbourhood: German Cinema in the Czechoslovak Region, 1933-45" pg. 122

²¹ Ivan Klimeš. "A Dangerous Neighbourhood: German Cinema in the Czechoslovak Region, 1933-45" pg. 122

propaganda, as they were exploring the concept of showing the ‘truth’ under a specific message they were trying to impose.

The development of occupied cinema under Germany in Czechoslovakia was a stilted and constricted one. As Czech filmmakers continued to create films, they had little control over their own craft and were thus forced to create films which either would barely be seen by their usual core audience, or was heavily regulated to the point where tactics had to be used in order to pass German censorships in order to be made. This clearly shows that the filmmakers would be affected during and after the Second World War, as their craft which had previously been extremely open to things like heritage and cultural sentiments had to now form a regulated piece of media in which there was little freedom of expression.

While the influence of Czech nationalism and identity had to be muted during this time, it was prevalent in Czech cinema by filmmakers who wished to keep some form of dissent alive. While they knew outright nationalist imagery was not allowed, by keeping to cultural and historical events related to Czech history, they managed to produce films which could be released under German regulation and gave the general population some form of Czech sentiment to relate to. While this was not always successful and many scripts and movies were barred from production by film councils and studios, there were still striving Czech directors and cinematographers working under the radar. This was not the same case in the news agencies, as their smaller production schedule led them to a more intense scrutiny as well as the fact that they were expected to appeal to purely German propaganda stories and methods, leaving little to no room for an alternative perspective to be presented in the documentaries and news reels being produced.

Chapter 2: *Theresienstadt*'s Development in Nazi-Occupied Czechoslovakia

The Nazi film *Theresienstadt* is prevalent within film studies as a prime example of a propaganda film created in the height of the Second World War. Though the concept of making a documentary film enforcing a specific ideology was not new to either sides during the war, the extent in which the SS Officials in charge of the Theresienstadt concentration camp, and those in charge of the 'Jewish Department' in Prague went in order to push for the farce of the 'documentary' film *Theresienstadt* has made it infamous as a film to study. It was the byproduct of a successful attempt to show the Danish Red Cross proof that concentration camps were in fact simply areas in which the Jews were happily living in communities with complete freedom and openness, and they were placed there for their safety during the war by the Germans.²² Though this trip by the Red Cross was so late in the war, in 1944 to be exact, this visit and previous visits from other groups were effective enough to inspire SS Officer Hans Günther to give funding for various films to be made in a similar fashion as for the Red Cross visit, which they also recorded. These films would be spread to various groups to reinforce the idea that concentration camps were not death camps.

What made this propaganda film also unique from others done in the same time period, was the intended audience. As most were typically made for those within the group that the film was made, the *Theresienstadt* film was instead intended to be shown to those with a direct concern for the Jewish populace in the ghetto.²³ This makes *Theresienstadt* and the other footage filmed

²² Leo Baeck, Aldred Meissner, Heinrich Klang, Eduard Meinz "Männer und Frauen von Theresienstadt!" *Official Decrees and Notices Guide to the Theresienstadt Collection*, Center for Jewish History. 1945

²³ Natascha Drubek. "The Three Screenings of a Secret Documentary: Theresienstadt Revised." *Ghetto Films and their Afterlife* (ed. by Natascha Drubek). Special Double Issue of *Apparatus. Film, Media and Digital Cultures in Central and Eastern Europe* 2016. Pg. 2-3

in the camp also quite unique compared to the typical Nazi cinema, as the representation of ‘the Jew’ was often something dark and sinister, in line with Nazi ideology. Instead of having the typical recurring theme of ‘the Jew is crafty but not clever’²⁴ which was prevalent among many German productions like *Robert und Bertram* (1939) and *Leinen aus Irland* (1939), *Theresienstadt* took on the task of showcasing the Jews in the camp as regular people living their lives, with little national agenda or political undertone in the film itself. Of course comparing a cinematic film and a documentary film cannot be easily done, but it is still clear that the *Theresienstadt* film and the other short films done at the same time were set to a different tone to those done for a German audience.

Though the final film was ultimately not shown to a large audience, or even managed to be spread to a significant population, the small group who had the opportunity to see the film, some of which included Jewish community leaders from other areas of occupied Europe, had mixed perspectives on the success of its intended propaganda.²⁵ There are multiple arguments as to why this was so. The late stage in the war in which this film was made meant that many of these Jewish community leaders were already knowledgeable of the true nature of the camps. Another reason was that the well-known use of propaganda film by the Nazi party made the film seem illegitimate in the eyes of the viewers.²⁶ Either way, the final film and the news reels done before it were still seen as a great success by the SS Officials themselves, and one can only assume that had the film

²⁴ Erwin Leiser, *Nazi Cinema* pg. 75

²⁵ Natascha Drubek, “The Three Screenings of a Secret Documentary: Theresienstadt Revised”

²⁶ The historical argument on whether or not the film was successful is mainly due to the limited screening of the film. While those who saw the film had mixed reactions, some agreeing with the film and believing that the Jews were being treated well while others continued to fight for the Jews to be released from the camp. As it was such a small group who saw the film, there doesn’t seem to be a conclusive answer.

been made prior to 1945, it would have been readily spread throughout Europe in order to push their propaganda ideology.

Also due to the late stage of the movie being produced, it was sadly the byproduct of post-war pillaging and destruction, not only by Nazi officials but also by various means in the 1950s and 60s in Czechoslovakia, and thus only 20 minutes of the full film remain.²⁷ The path with which the film and its copies were distributed and which led to the discovery of the remaining reels was painstakingly researched by historian Eva Strusková, who tracked bits of the reels down to various archives and personal collections throughout Europe and Israel.²⁸ The amount of times this film was copied and attempted to be saved showed that those involved in the film industry understood its importance, and fragments are still thought to exist undiscovered in other archives around Europe.

The surviving reels are of musical performances by famous Jewish musicians in the camp, as well as a small play done by the children. Though most of those shown in the film were sent to Auschwitz once the filming was done, a few did survive and also provided invaluable firsthand accounts of what both the camp and filming was like. Rabbi Leo Baeck, a survivor of Terezín, describes how Karel Ančerl, the composer in charge of the music played by the orchestra in the film talked about the film: ‘They see the musicians and I wearing all black suits, but what they won’t see us in is our wooden shoes.’²⁹ What was most prevalent among accounts was the falsity of the ghetto which was in the fortress city where Theresienstadt was, and how the houses and

²⁷ Natascha Drubek, “The Three Screenings of a Secret Documentary: Theresienstadt Revised”

²⁸ Natascha Drubek, “The Three Screenings of a Secret Documentary: Theresienstadt Revised”

²⁹ Leo Baeck, *Das Dokument eines Falsifikats (Documenting a falsity)* Prague. Leo Baeck Institute. 1964. Web. Pg 2

gardens in the town square were painted to look like new and flowers were planted throughout the streets.³⁰ This was seen as the ‘beautification’ of the ghetto by German officials, and Jewish Elders such as Dr. Eppstein being tasked to oversee it.³¹ Similarly those in the film were given clothes to wear and were prompted with lines to speak in the documentary, about how idyllic and great this town was.

Karl Rahm, the SS Officer in charge of the Theresienstadt camp, chose Kurt Gerron a Jewish director and actor who was already in the camp, to direct the main film, as he was both a member of the community and had experience in film.³² Gerron, who before the war was a well-known actor in German who starred in films opposite the likes of Marlene Dietrich and Max Reinhardt, was considered an obvious choice in the Nazis eyes with his extensive acting and directing career spanning the 1920s and even continuing in the camp where he was forced to act in several plays. When he was tasked to create the film, there was a general sense of surprise among the people in the camp, as it was such a large duty in order to completely remodel the town and create a “make-believe” Theresienstadt.³³ Gerron was one of the many Jews involved with the film who were promptly sent to Aushwitz and killed after the production of the film was finished. Even so, his contribution to the film is readily recognized and though he was tasked with such a difficult subject, he took on the task and worked with the many artists in the camp in order to create

³⁰ Karel Margry. “A False Start: The Filming at Theresienstadt of January 20, 1944” *Ghetto Films and their Afterlife* (ed. by Natascha Drubek). Special Double Issue of Apparatus. Film, Media and Digital Cultures in Central and Eastern Europe 2-3

³¹ Karel Margry. “A False Start: The Filming at Theresienstadt of January 20, 1944”

³² Karel Margry. “A False Start: The Filming at Theresienstadt of January 20, 1944”

³³ Rena Rosenberger. *Theresienstadt: wie ich es sah... 1944-45*. Rena Rosenberger collection. Amsterdam, 1945. Pg 21

the film.

While the film has multiple titles, the one listed in order to be spread as propaganda to the Red Cross viewers was *Der Führer Schenkt Den Juden Eine Stadt* (The Fuhrer Gifts the Jews a City).³⁴ Interestingly, it was mostly Czech Jews within the camps who worked on the films development; Jindřich Weil and Manfred Greiffenhagen were tasked with writing the preliminary drafts to the script of the film as they too had experience as men in the theatre industry prior to their expulsion into the camp as directors and managers. The people in the camp who worked on the film had to get special permission from the Jewish Elders, with a written permission slip giving them the opportunity to both work in the camp and travel freely out of hours and places they wouldn't otherwise be able to go.³⁵ Similarly, famous actors and musicians were told to be in the film, including Martin Roman, Pavel Haas and Karel Ančerl due to their experience with performances as well as their notoriety within Europe.³⁶ Though most were almost immediately sent on a train to Auschwitz and were executed upon arrival, some did survive leading to the few primary sources available to those wishing to study the film.³⁷ With the remaining accounts about the film's construction, the biggest repetition among the survivors seems to be the disbelief at how quickly and effectively the Germans brought materials and products for them to beautify the city and themselves with.³⁸ They were given food which had been previously non-existent, new

³⁴ Peter Zimmermann and Kay Hoffmann. *Geschichte Des Dokumentarischen Films in Deutschland*. Pg 91

³⁵ Zidovske Muzeum V Praze, Praha, Fischgrund, Hanuš/Jan: propustka a pozvánka k natáčení v terezínské kavárně (Fischgrund, Hanuš / Jan: pass and invitations to shoot in Terezin Café), 1944

³⁶ Natascha Drubek. "The Three Screenings of a Secret Documentary: Theresienstadt Revised."

³⁷ Eva Strusková. "'The Second Life' of the Theresienstadt films after the Second World War." *Ghetto Films and their Afterlife* (ed. by Natascha Drubek). Special Double Issue of Apparatus. Film, Media and Digital Cultures in Central and Eastern Europe 2-3. 2016.

³⁸ Alfred Meril and Kurt J Herrmann and Charlie Ross. "A Trip to Ghetto Theresienstadt" Military reports on

clothes, instruments, paint, and much more. Though there were still issues with the beautification, it was clearly enough to shoot the film footage as well as to deceive the Red Cross visitors.

Of the film itself very few of the actual footage remains. The fragments that still survive mainly pertain to the theater show produced by the actors and children in the camp, titled *Brundibär*, as well as some audio from an orchestra and footage of the recreated town. The following quote describes the film in its assumed entirety, as pieced together by fragments of stills, audio and video found in various archives.

The film, the structure of which can be reconstructed on the basis of film fragmentation and sketches, portrays the Theresienstadt Concentration Camp as an idyllic city in the form of conspicuous city pictures. This representation was fostered by the fact that the old fortified town, with its historic buildings, parks and streets, full of shops and cafés, was an ideal setting for a ghetto life of a pleasant nature. One could walk along a promenade of the fortress walls, listen to a jazz band or visit the theater. In a series of informative sequences the city council would be presented along with the local businesses: the Jewish Council of Elders, the bank, the post office and the hospital will be presented. The viewer will gain insights into artisanal and agricultural businesses as well. The film ends with the end of the day and scenes of evening leisure.³⁹

As shown in Zimmermann's description of the film, it was meant to show a picturesque and perfect town in which everyone was happy and life was idyllic. This was readily shown by the filmmakers and scriptwriters through their development and editing process. Though there were many people involved with the film, the strong narrative of created space and home was supposed to be re-

Theresienstadt and correspondence from Sergeant Eric Lipman asking for assistance. Guide to the Theresienstadt Collection. Center for Jewish History. 1945 pg. 3-4

³⁹ Peter Zimmermann and Kay Hoffmann. *Geschichte Des Dokumentarischen Films in Deutschland*. pg 567

enforced.

Jindřich Weil and Manfred Greiffenhagen's scriptwriting process has proved an interesting study as it seems that their scripts were both edited and filmed at different times. Weil had been a scriptwriter at Barrandov studios in Prague before the war, and his scripts involved showcasing Theresienstadt as a Jewish haven for those who came, highlighting a strong Jewish tone with images of the Star of David, a wedding, and other events.⁴⁰ In addition, daily life interactions with guards and each other was highlighted, attempting to showcase that it was a normal and safe place to live. This was at times considered almost too Jewish by the Germans and was edited out, either in the cutting room of the footage or in the scriptwriting process. The script was developed over a long period of time, with multiple editions being found in the papers of Weil's archive. At the same time, research done by Drubek shows that Weil was actually under the management of Iréna Dodalová, a Jewish Czech filmmaker with a strong personality and presence. Drubek's research seems to show that Dodalová's input into the film was much greater than previously expected, and was a reason why Margry's earlier research on the film underestimated her importance.⁴¹ Similarly there was a sort of development of this script, as it was in production during the visits of the Danish and Swiss Red Cross who came to check on the ghetto, showcasing the evolution of the ghetto as it became both fuller and had more people to account for and justify.⁴² Even so, the tone of a communal, happy and ethnically Jewish town was at the forefront for each versions of

⁴⁰ Karel Margry. "A False Start: The Filming at Theresienstadt of January 20, 1944"

⁴¹ Natascha Drubek. "The Three Screenings of a Secret Documentary: Theresienstadt Revised."

⁴² Karel Margry. "A False Start: The Filming at Theresienstadt of January 20, 1944"

his script. Even as he continued to work on the script, it was clear that at a certain point his writing had grown seemingly ineffective according to the Nazi bureaucrats and they began to edit the script for the film themselves, showcasing a clinical and descriptive text typical of Nazi filmmakers.⁴³

The only non-members of the camp to take part in the production of the film were a group of Czech production workers from Prague who worked under the studio Aktualita Prag. This company was created prior to the German invasion of Czechoslovakia as a result of the ever growing need for news and videos to show to the public what was happening within its own country.⁴⁴ It was funded by the Czech Foreign Ministry in order to also be shown abroad to the rest of Europe portraying what they were going through and their worries about the ever growing Nazi German threat even though the studio was privately owned by Karel Pečený. Though the studio managed to stay open and active during the war, they were largely left to the whims of the Nazi Officials who now controlled most official positions within the city. SS Officer Hans Günther, who was in charge of the *Zentralstelle für jüdische Auswanderung* or Central Office for Jewish Emigration in Prague, commissioned Aktualita Prag to do the technical portion of the *Theresienstadt* film, from filming, production and editing, and thus the Czech involvement was formed.⁴⁵ Ivan Frič was involved with the filming and he and Čeněk Zahradníček had the task of editing the film. They also attempted to take copies of the film themselves, though sadly, most those reels of the film were lost.

The crew of Aktualita were in fact chosen multiple times to film Theresienstadt prior to

⁴³ Karel Margry. "A False Start: The Filming at Theresienstadt of January 20, 1944"

⁴⁴ Karel Margry. "Newsreels in Nazi-Occupied Czechoslovakia: Karel Peceny and his newsreel company Aktualita" *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 2004

⁴⁵ Karel Margry. "A False Start: The Filming at Theresienstadt of January 20, 1944"

the filming of the full length documentary *Theresienstadt*. They had to go and film when the Danish Red Cross came to visit and showcased the ‘beautification’ of the town, and once again filmed when a Dutch large train of Jews came in 1943 to showcase their treatment and status.⁴⁶ The footage from those visits were internal for the Nazi party, they were sent immediately to Berlin and disposed of after being watched by SS Official Adolf Eichmann, who largely supported the idea of the films as propaganda.⁴⁷ Each time Pečený and Frič documented the experience of filming as a controlled and harrowing one, since anywhere not being filmed was flooded with Nazi soldiers and officers making sure every scene was shot perfectly and without issue. They were also watched closely in order to make sure there was no form of deceit or anti-German message being filmed and produced by them since they had the unique opportunity to experience a camp and ghetto firsthand with materials to record what was happening.⁴⁸ Due to their seeming professionalism, they were continuously chosen to be the ones to film in Theresienstadt and were thus the natural first choice as a production crew for the *Theresienstadt* propaganda film. This was not completely the case, as Frič had hidden and saved multiple stills and clips from his footage in order to save in order to keep some form of what was happening there alive.

Frič’s snippets of the documentary itself have been lost, but due to his being the main

⁴⁶ Karel Margry. “A False Start: The Filming at Theresienstadt of January 20, 1944”

⁴⁷ Karel Margry. “A False Start: The Filming at Theresienstadt of January 20, 1944”

⁴⁸ Eva Strusková. “‘The Second Life’ of the Theresienstadt films after the Second World War.”

cameraman in the previous trips and projects in Theresienstadt, he had other shots hidden away,



FIGURE 1: ARRIVAL OF DUTCH JEWS TO TEREZIN CAMP

showcasing the true nature of the ghetto and what it was like for the people living there.

Figure 1 is a still from a film shot by him in 1944 showcasing the arrival of a group of Jews from the Netherlands being fed. This still and others from the same series caused Frič to be considered problematic by modern researchers, as it was revealed that he had claimed that these shots were from the behind-the-scenes of *Theresienstadt* when in fact they

were from one of the trips taken in order to give footage to Nazi German headquarters on

the status of the camp.⁴⁹ Historian Karel Margry theorizes that the reasoning for his deception was Frič's guilt of his and the *Aktualita*'s involvement with the filming of the ghetto, and attempting to show that he secretly filmed it during the filming of the documentary and keeping those stills around would somehow assuage him of this guilt.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Eva Strusková. “‘The Second Life’ of the Theresienstadt films after the Second World War.”

⁵⁰ Eva Strusková. “‘The Second Life’ of the Theresienstadt films after the Second World War.”

Contrasting to the still from Figure 1, Figure 2 showcases footage from one of the propaganda reels, showing the difference in the staged productions and those intended exclusively for Nazi officials. The clear difference in staging and the people in the film is striking, as one is clearly a wartime reel showing hungry and tired masses while the other could be from any place in Europe, with people sitting at a restaurant and having a jovial time. This staged scene and many



FIGURE 2: JEWISH GROUP SITTING IN FAKE CAFE STAGED FOR THERESIENSTADT DOCUMENTARY

others that were done for the film and the visit of the Red Cross were very much a farce, as people were only allowed to access certain parts of the town when they were visiting. Even the restaurant itself ‘which was only used during the time of the commission’s visit ... All of a sudden the “big city” had a

restaurant where you got hardly any food.’⁵¹ The Jews in the camp looked on in amazement as the ghetto was suddenly a flourishing town with food, flowers, music and freedom which was otherwise completely impossible to them in any other form. The extremes in which the Germans went to in order to fulfil that created image of community in the ghetto is reflected here, and also shows the extent they were willing to deceive the Red Cross visitors previously and similarly, how

⁵¹ Rena Rosenberger. *Theresienstadt: wie ich es sah... 1944-45*. Pg. 20

easily they were deceived if they were greeted with such normal views. Even when the camp was freed and Russian and American soldiers started coming into the camp to attempt to find Jewish survivors and to give them aid, the falsehood of the town was noted; ‘The whole city is supposed to look nice and neat towards the outside, ever-thing is artificially made up’⁵² and they saw right through the ruse due to the chaos they saw after the war and the ability to actually go into the buildings and barracks which were hidden at the time of the Red Cross visit.

The editing process was done in Theresienstadt, leading Pečený and Frič to work there together with Jews who had become technical assistants in the film production, as there were many there with filmmaking experience. This is how multiple copies of clips were smuggled out of Nazi hands and were found at later dates in various places, as people in the ghetto would take advantage of having the opportunity to handle such footage.⁵³ The finalization of the film was done in Prague in Aktualita’s office, giving Rahm the opportunity to have final say with what was the end result of the film.⁵⁴ In a memoir on her experiences in Terezín, Rena Rosenberger, a Jew of Dutch descent placed in the camp, cheekily notes that ‘SS Officer Rahm, the German Commander, had to keep himself busy, otherwise he would have had to leave for the seat of war. For him and his hangmen Theresienstadt was really an El Dorado.’⁵⁵ This implies that not only did Rahm see this as an opportune way to continue the ruse of the Red Cross and other international groups interested in the camp, but also a way to seemingly keep himself out of the brunt of the actual war and use the

⁵² Alfred Meril and Kurt J Herrmann and Charlie Ross. “A Trip to Ghetto Theresienstadt” pg. 3

⁵³ Eva Strusková. “‘The Second Life’ of the Theresienstadt films after the Second World War.”

⁵⁴ Eva Strusková. “‘The Second Life’ of the Theresienstadt films after the Second World War.”

⁵⁵ Rena Rosenberger *Theresienstadt: wie ich es sah... 1944-45*. pg 21

filming and official visits as an excuse.

The sound editing was also a tricky matter, as many important Jewish figures had been told to act in the film. A Jewish Elder Dr Eppstein was a prime person of interest not only to the Germans who wanted to have a Jewish community leader in their documentary, but also because there were many inquiries as to his status, especially by the Danish Red Cross.⁵⁶ Eppstein was killed after his involvement with the film ended, causing issues for the Germans and the Jews in the ghetto, since they would be angered by the murder of one of their Elders, as well as the continued inquiry of international groups as to his status in the ghetto. Due to this, his subsequent removal as *Judenälteste* or Jewish Elder was unknown to most of the camp, though they ‘could hear rumours going around.’⁵⁷ The Jewish Elders in Terezín were oftentimes well known members of not only Jewish communities but also internationally, so they were typically left to run the camps on the communal front, and largely left alone. That is what made Eppstein’s subsequent murder quite a shock once it was revealed. Since the filming took place over a long period of time, and oftentimes those involved would either be sent to Auschwitz or killed soon after, there ended up being quite a few problems when it came time to screen the film to those not involved with the production and creation of the film.

With the film finally being completed in mid-1945, tensions between Germans and virtually every other outside force was extremely high. This resulted in the audience for the film screening to be severely limited to outsiders, with only 6 non-Germans being invited to see the

⁵⁶ Natascha Drubek. “The Three Screenings of a Secret Documentary: Theresienstadt Revised.”

⁵⁷ Rena Rosenberger, *Theresienstadt: wie ich es sah... 1944-45*. pg. 25

film.⁵⁸ Dr. Benjamin Marmelstein and Dr. Rezső Kasztner were the only two Jews invited to see the film, Marmelstein was an Elder in the Theresienstadt ghetto and Kasztner was a Hungarian Jewish community leader who was invited to see the film in Theresienstadt itself by SS Officer Adolf Eichmann. Marmelstein had been invited as he had been one of the people placed in charge in aiding in the ‘beautification’ of the ghetto (he had replaced Dr. Eppstein as a community Elder, the major focus in the film and was of great importance to the Red Cross), and the Germans wished to show him the end result of their ‘successful’ film. Kasztner was invited in order to be manipulated by the piece of propaganda into believing that the camps that Eichmann had been attempting to persuade him to send his Jewish community members back in Budapest were not in fact terrible and could lead to good ways of life for them.⁵⁹ Of course, this late in the war it was extremely difficult for Kasztner to be convinced and it is believed that he did not fall for the piece of propaganda, since he had already seen the strange silence of those sent to Auschwitz throughout 1944, and his own attempts at getting specialized trains directly to Switzerland filled with Jews in early 1945.⁶⁰

The other four people who saw the film were Swiss nationals, some working for the Red Cross. They were invited to Prague by Eichmann and other SS Officials, and were treated with great respect and given a lavish treatment, being shown the film in a palace as well as having grand meals, Dr. Otto Lehner readily fell for the propaganda, calling it a “great idea for the future of a

⁵⁸ Natascha Drubek. “The Three Screenings of a Secret Documentary: Theresienstadt Revised.”

⁵⁹ Paul Sanders, “The ‘strange Mr Kasztner’ – Leadership ethics in Holocaust-era Hungary, in the light of grey zones and dirty hands”, *Leadership*, Vol 12, Issue 1, pp. 4 – 33, First published date: November- 03-2015

⁶⁰ Natascha Drubek . “The Three Screenings of a Secret Documentary: Theresienstadt Revised.”

Jewish state.”⁶¹ Paul Dunant, a co-worker of Lehner’s also fell for the propaganda seeing it as a valid way to deal with Germany’s tensions with the Jewish populations. The two Red Cross representatives were accompanied by a Swiss diplomat, Buchmüller, who seemingly also approved of the propaganda presented to him. There was also a screening for interestingly enough Benoît Musy, a Swiss racecar driver. It is believed that he was given a screening due to his having previously negotiated the release of 1,200 Jews out of Theresienstadt and into Switzerland.⁶² His screening was attended with SS Official Franz Göring, presumably because they were attempting to, similarly as with Kasztner, to convince him that there were in fact no atrocities being committed in the ghetto, and that he wouldn’t need to keep trying to get more Jews out of camps and into Switzerland. It is unclear as to whether this screening attempt was successful or not, though Musy did continue to be actively against the camps and the displacement of Jewish populations.

For the Germans in attendance to these three screenings, it was largely simply to see their efforts be paid off and to see propaganda films in action. It could even be thought that they were simply there to see if the guests would be fooled by the film and thus could congratulate themselves on continuing to use Theresienstadt as their ‘Potemkin Village’ for foreigners still attempting to plan ways to get Jews out of the camps and ghettos and into neutral territory. SS Officers Eichmann, Rahm, Göring and others were happy and ready to send this film out to other offices throughout Germany in order to hold more screenings, but because of the late time period of the completion of the film, the copies that were sent off were either destroyed, lost or left to the actions

⁶¹ Natascha Drubek. “The Three Screenings of a Secret Documentary: Theresienstadt Revised.”

⁶² H. G. Adler and Belinda Cooper and Amy Loewenhaar-Blauweiss. *Theresienstadt, 1941-1945: The Face of a Coerced Community*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2016. Pg 669

of different studios and film companies who had been given copies.

Though there were multiple copies of the official documentary released and sent out to various groups within Germany, most were destroyed in the post-war chaos of people attempting to rid themselves of Nazi titles, as well as attempting to prove their innocence by having no recorded attempt at working with the Nazis.⁶³ The copies which remained in Czechoslovakia were thus left to the decision of whoever found them. Because of the incoming Soviet regime, many studios had to give up their film archives, as they would become state owned and some of the copies were lost there. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s fragments of the film would surface, and Czech filmmakers would take them and either sequester them for their historical importance or use them in their own projects. A film titled *So schön war es in Terezín* by Michael Bornkamp, a West German journalist, was the end result of him finding *Theresienstadt* footage in the Prague Film Archives, and to this day remains one of the largest and most complete fragments of the original film remaining.⁶⁴ Czech filmmakers also made short films using the clips found of *Theresienstadt* though they are also incomplete due to missing sound or the film reels being badly preserved.

⁶³ Eva Strusková. “‘The Second Life’ of the Theresienstadt films after the Second World War.”

⁶⁴ Michael Bornkamp, “Correspondence concerning propaganda film *Der Führer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt*” Guide to the Theresienstadt Collection, Center for Jewish History, 1964.

Chapter 3: Effects of the Film on the Lives of the Film Makers

Having a film that the end result was ‘90% lies and 10% fact’⁶⁵ was a clear complication for those who had been involved with the filmmaking. Though they were a production crew, the control and artistic liberty which would typically have been granted them was completely absent, and thus they had to take responsibility for something they seemingly had little control over. As the country began to settle into a post-war state, the future of those involved with the creation of *Theresienstadt* and the film itself was up in the air. Even as the film was being both destroyed, reproduced and salvaged in various parts around Europe and even in Israel, the Czech filmmakers remained in their country so they had to face the consequences of their involvement in both their personal and professional futures.

This chapter will look at the lives of those involved with the filmmaking in a post-war context, and when possible analyze their own thoughts and experiences on the film. Through their development as filmmakers in a post-war setting, it is clear that the after effects in a national or social context wasn’t immediately felt, though on an emotional and personal level it maybe a different matter. As stated previously, the aspect of guilt with having worked on this film and other projects from the Germans is a current discussion amongst historians in regards to Frič. Though there are disagreements, I have found Strusková’s arguments on Frič, especially wherein she states that there is his own ‘testimony of an effort to actively resist the Nazi plans for the film of 1942’⁶⁶ as especially compelling, as he had actively attempted to hide footage he had shot from the Nazis. At the same time, Margry, who was the historian who interviewed Frič, states that he had

⁶⁵ Leo Baeck. *Das Dokument eines Falsifikats (Documenting a falsity)* Prague. Leo Baeck Institute. 1964. Pg 1

⁶⁶ Eva Strusková. “‘The Second Life’ of the Theresienstadt films after the Second World War.”

conflicting reports about his own footage, wherein he stated that some of the clips he had were secretly taken when in fact all of his footage was reviewed and planned by the Germans.⁶⁷ Though this does shake his credibility somewhat, there is still the overall agreement on his efforts to save some of the footage for after the war.

Though various groups were involved with the development of the *Theresienstadt* propaganda film, from the Germans assigning the cast and crew, the Jews in the Terezín camp assigned with the development and support of the film and the Czech filmmakers and editors placed with the eventual creation of the film itself, this chapter will focus mostly on the Czech filmmakers involved. The Jews who were involved with the production will be discussed as well, as the post-war lives that many of these people led were varied and complicated. Due to the different positions of power that the members of the cast and crew held with members of the Nazi party, there were various repercussions after the war. Some managed to escape any form of indictment, others like Karel Pečený were charged with aiding the Nazi party due to his high position as owner of *Aktualita* and his frequent projects with leaders of the SS in Czechoslovakia.

Karel Pečený's trial represented the classic post-war practice of going after anybody who worked with the Nazi invaders of many European countries. Since his position as both the leader of *Aktualita* and an active member of the Prague film community, he was targeted as a conspirator with the Nazis. Using the films he produced for the Germans as prime evidence, the courts decided that Pečený willingly worked with the Nazis and did little to fight against them. Also seemingly his silence on the Terezín concentration camp as well as his lack of forwarding this message to any party readily framed him as a conspirator. He was guilty as charged and had to let go of his

⁶⁷ Karel Margry, "A False Start. The Filming at Theresienstadt of January 20, 1944"

company and was sent to prison for five years.⁶⁸ Research done by historians like Margry has attempted to refute the claim that he was completely working with the Germans through small attempts done during the filming and editing of various projects he did for them. Extending the film and editing process so the film could be finished at the end of the war, as well as not discussing so often with SS officials led some to believe that he was resisting in his own way against the Germans, while at the same time still trying to hold on to his company and position as a person of importance in the Prague film industry.⁶⁹ This supposed ‘silent sabotage’ which he said he did was not taken seriously by the courts, as ‘by the summer of 1944, the Nazi authorities in the Protectorate had come to regard Aktualita as a ‘politically reliable’ company that could in all safety be entrusted with confidential film projects.’⁷⁰ Of course after the war this all fell apart and his company was nationalized by the Soviets along with every other production company.

Ivan Frič, the other notable worker in *Theresienstadt* who did the bulk of the recording as the cameraman, was also condemned in post-war Czechoslovakia and was also put on trial for collaboration with the Germans. Due to his status as a cameraman, he wasn’t as scrutinized as Pečený, but he was still largely condemned by the general public. This was because he and his fellow crewmembers had lost paperwork that showed they were forced into working with the Germans in Terezín, and since the paper was nowhere to be found their innocence was considered incredulous.⁷¹ Interestingly, before the war he worked in children’s cinema produced in Bat’a

⁶⁸ Karel Margry, “A False Start. The Filming at Theresienstadt of January 20, 1944”

⁶⁹ Eva Strusková. “‘The Second Life’ of the Theresienstadt films after the Second World War.”

⁷⁰ Karel Margry “Newsreels in Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia: Karel Peceny and his newsreel company Aktualita”, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 24:1. 2007 Pg 98

⁷¹ Karel Margry “A False Start: The Filming at Theresienstadt of January 20, 1944”

studios, and after the war he continued working as a cinematographer, helping produce many Czech films like *Malý Bobes* (1962) and *Prehlička* (1951) until the 1960s. While he still had work, his credibility had suffered after the war and he was not regarded as highly among those in the film industry. The move towards news reels and documentary film during the war is an interesting diversion from his specialty, and though there is not much secondary information on why, it can be assumed that this is because there was a lack of work in children's cinema during the war and thus the best option was to go to a company which was receiving work during the war like Aktualita.

Though there is a collection of the photographs Frič took within archives today, his experiences on shooting the film and other reels is difficult to find. Karel Margry in his essay 'A False Start. The Filming at Theresienstadt of January 20, 1944' has managed to source direct quotes from an interview she conducted with him in 1989. In these quotes he states how it was 'a secret mission' when filming in Terezín and implied that anyone involved in the filming would not be allowed to speak of it to anyone or else they 'would be punished together with [our] relatives.'⁷² This overt pressure from the Germans explains at a certain level the complicity that many Czech filmmakers had during the occupied period. They directly saw the tactics the Germans were using on those who opposed them and thus readily feared repercussions, though not all readily worked with Aktualita and were in turn fired from their jobs.⁷³

As stated in the previous chapter, Frič seemingly, like Pečený, suffered from a kind of guilt

⁷² Karel Margry. "The Second Life of the Theresienstadt Films after the Second World War"

⁷³ Natascha Drubek. "The Exploited Recordings" *Electrified Voices: Medial, Socio-Historical and Cultural Aspects of Voice Transfer* (ed. By Dmitri Zakharine, Nils Meise). Göttingen: V&R unipress. 2013. pg 261

after the war and Margry's attempt at showcasing Frič in a more sympathetic light brought forward the idea that he resisted the Germans in his own way, by collecting and hiding footage that he shot in Terezín for the various film reels they had to do, attempting to keep those moments alive. While editing the film Frič smuggled this footage into his own private ownership, leading to some of the only remaining footage available of the filming done in Terezín. This is still contested though, as some historians believe that this was simply Frič keeping his work in a wartime setting, and that his guilt with the involvement of the production of making Nazi propaganda films during the second world war was the reason for his keeping the saved film reels of what he shot in the Terezín

camp.

As can be seen in Figure 3, Frič's saved reels are not the only ones that have surfaced or have been

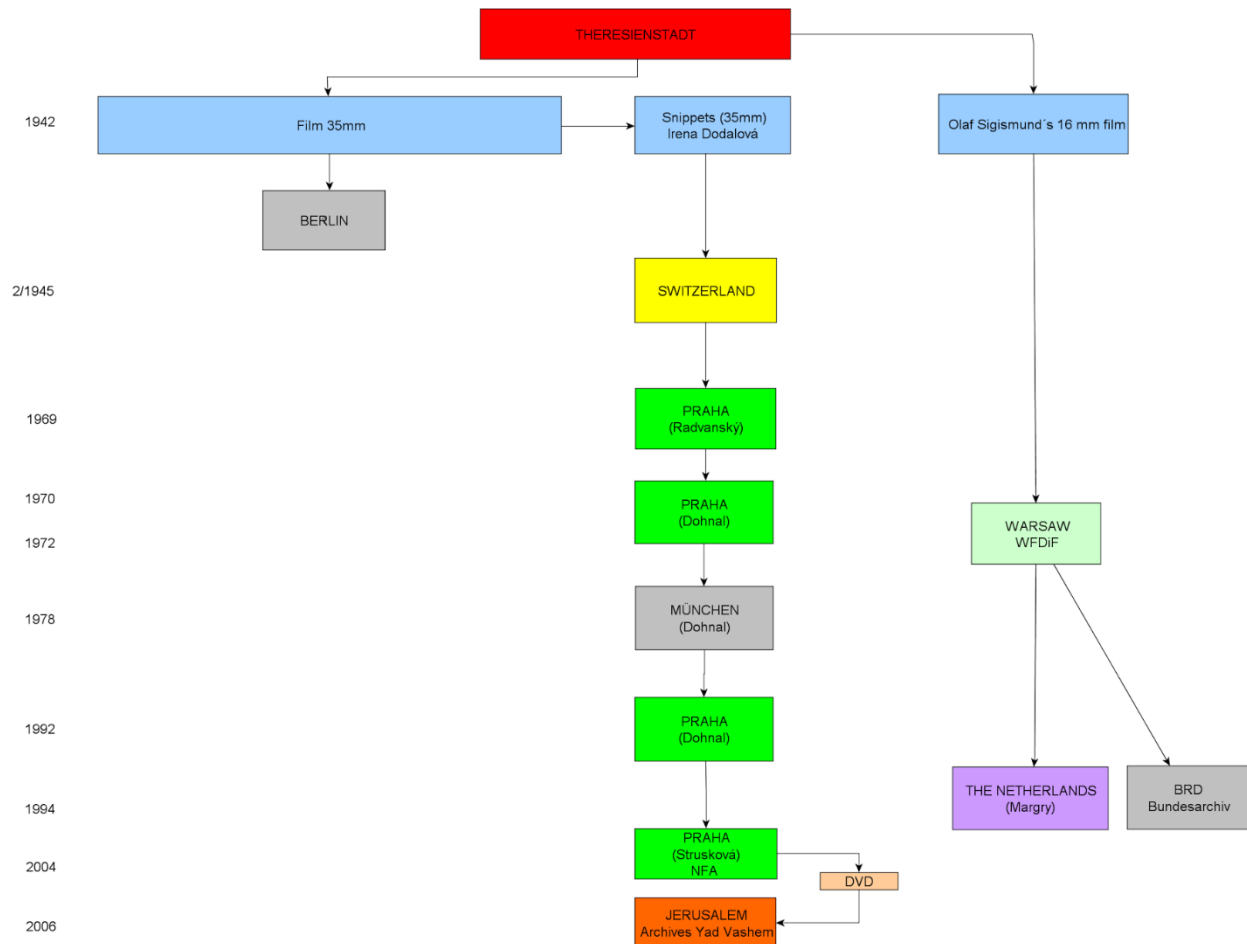


FIGURE 3: PATH THAT THE FOOTAGE OF THE THERESIENSTADT DOCUMENTARY TOOK AFTER THE WAR. COLLECTED AND MAPPED BY EVA STRUSKOVÁ

heard of while researching *Theresienstadt*. This chart, compiled by Eva Strusková involved tracking every known fragment or lost fragment of the film known currently. As it can be seen, the footage not only got passed around to different film studios like Favoritfilm, FAMUJ and Filmoteka, but it was also passed around by individuals who attempted to save the film in their own way. The two most direct lines from the official film footage are from Frič and Zahradníček,

the editor who worked with him on the film. There is also a fragment from Irena Dodalová, a Jewish woman in Terezín who helped edit the film and smuggled some of the footage out into the ghetto itself.⁷⁴ Though these are also fragments, they are some of the few that survived and resurfaced in Prague. The unique case of footage that was found in Israel is still unknown, only that it was presumably donated by someone in Haifa to Yad Vashem at some point.⁷⁵

Interestingly, when it came to the rest of the crew for the film, there have been conflicting reports on who helped Frič, though it is undeniable that he had support in the editing process of the film. The Czech avant garde filmmaker Čeněk Zahradníček, who previous to the war made well regarded films like *Máj* (1936) and *Atom vecnosti* (1934), is someone who worked for Aktualita. He also went to trial and was ostracized for working with the Germans on filmmaking. After the war he retired from filmmaking and instead went to work for the Central House of Folk Art.⁷⁶ Even so, it seems that Frič and Zahradníček did have some sort of rapport with the *Theresienstadt* film, as seen with the fact that Frič and Pečený claim that he had footage of the film as well as gave it to Aktualita studios, though he claims he had lost the footage.⁷⁷ Another filmmaker who seems to have been involved with the production of filming in Terezín was Nazi filmmaker Olaf Sigismund, though his involvement with the film is unsure and there is no real confirmation as to why the footage he shot, which was discovered in Poland in the 1970s seems to

⁷⁴ Karel Margry. “The Second Life of the Theresienstadt Films after the Second World War”

⁷⁵ Karel Margry. “The Second Life of the Theresienstadt Films after the Second World War”

⁷⁶ ‘Čeněk Zahradníček’, Monoskop: August 2, 2015

⁷⁷ Karel Margry. “The Second Life of the Theresienstadt Films after the Second World War”

exist.⁷⁸

Iréna Dodalová's contribution to the saving of the footage cannot be downplayed either, as she was a powerful force in cinema both before and after the war. Coming into the camp as a very experience filmmaker, Dodalová readily took over some aspects of filming in Terezín, which in fact made her a bit of an outlier in regards to the rest of the crew. 'Dodalová's impeccable German idiom and her role in the film apparently led to strain between her and other ghetto inhabitants, who were surprised that SS officers would smile in her presence: she must have looked to them like a Protectorate version of Leni Riefenstahl.'⁷⁹ Her initial role in helping create the film presented by Margry is heavily criticized by Drubek, stating that he had 'shifted the authorship for the film's concept to Dodalová's male assistants ... further obfuscating her unique role in the Theresienstadt film.'⁸⁰ This research allowed for a new level of complexity in those who helped the Czech crewmembers, as the Jewish community involved clearly knew it was a farce and a propaganda piece and yet Dodalová seemingly went along with the filming with little hesitation.

What also cannot be forgotten is the fragments of audio footage that have been found separate to the film. These audio clips provided another depth of the surviving memory of not only the camp itself but those who worked on the film. The Jewish members who worked on the film but then were sent to Auschwitz - like Kurt Gerron, Karel Fischer and Karel Ančerl, along with the Czech crew as well including Čeněk Zahradníček, Ivan Frič and Karel Pečený⁸¹ - can all be

⁷⁸ Karel Margry. "The Second Life of the Theresienstadt Films after the Second World War"

⁷⁹ Natascha Drubek, "The Three Screenings of a Secret Documentary: Theresienstadt Revised"

⁸⁰ Natascha Drubek, "The Three Screenings of a Secret Documentary: Theresienstadt Revised"

⁸¹ Natascha Drubek, "The Exploited Recordings" pg. 258

heard both during filming and also during B-roll of the footage. This part of the footage references the three points of Plantinga in regards to documentary film. Due to the fact that this film is a fragment, the initial context in which it appears in is lost, as it is instead trying to tell an authentic story of the lives of those involved with the film.

One can argue that if the entirety of the film remained, the contexts of the images and its nature would have produced a completely different study, as the large questions and mysteries that remain would be answered. Instead this film would take a similar study to that of *Der Ewige Jude*, as it is seen as a propaganda piece attempting to portray an ideology through false means and framing itself as an ethnography. Instead, with the footage that remains historians and researchers use the footage to attempt to look at the reality of Terezín, and see past the falsehood presented as fact. With this footage it can also be seen that the production crew used it to re-enforce their own ideologies towards the film, and how it was forced upon them. By appropriating the images and original message of the film, they can instead adapt it to something they wish to showcase.

Contrastingly, the Jewish survivors have used this footage in a completely different context, instead attempting to gouge out their real lives from behind the created images, as well as find links to their own history and heritage in the people they see in the video. The audio, especially that of the ardently pro-Jewish messages, also offers a unique opportunity for Jewish viewers to appropriate the messages as their own, even if the origins are Nazi propaganda in the first place.⁸² As the continued search for more footage from *Theresienstadt* develops, it is interesting to see the two unique facets of its remaining legacy to those who worked on the film from two different sides

⁸² Natascha Drubek, “The Exploited Recordings” pg 263

of the camera and development stage.

With the Czech crew having obvious sympathies for the people in the Terezín ghetto, the film does seem to take on a new role, as something to be looked at as a forced piece of media. This is another aspect that makes Theresienstadt such a rare piece of cinema, as it is completely constructed, but in a medium which is otherwise typically seen as authentic and natural.⁸³ As a viewer one must question with which attitude and stance to watch it, as each viewing gives way to a completely different interpretation.

While this chapter cannot go fully into the detailed lives of the filmmakers after the war, it is clear that there was a definite challenge for the Czech filmmakers who had worked on *Theresienstadt* and other German funded propaganda films during the war period. The trials showcased this fate, and though they were charged with conspiracy, they largely continued their lives as filmmakers after the war, though to no great notoriety. In the same way, the Jewish persons in the camp who had worked on the film and managed to survive continued on with their lives, though notably many of the survivors have offered invaluable primary source material on the filmmaking from their perspective.

⁸³ The Romanian Communist film *Reconstituirea* filmed in 1959 is often compared to this film, as both had prisoners being forced to act in a staged fashion in order to showcase a specific viewpoint of those making the film. Though *Reconstituirea* was meant to showcase the ‘proof’ of a crime committed, the way the actors were treated during and after the filming was extremely similar. This breakdown of creating a falsified documentary creates a unique situation where the viewer must either accept the film as it is or instead take apart the film and see the film for what it is trying to hide, or what it is not.

Conclusion

As the study of *Theresienstadt* continues to develop and gain deeper levels of historical research, it is clear that the most complicated aspect is that of the filmmakers and those involved with the production of the film. Through various actions and choices, their lasting influence on the film is completely dependent on what fragments have been found and are yet to be found. The study of singular people within its history is also evolving as historians develop more complex theories and histories for those involved. Even looking past the focus on specific people, the influence that the Nazi authorities had during the occupation on singular lives is difficult to track, as every person has a differentiating experience. Even so, it is clear that the film industry in Czechoslovakia was heavily impacted by the occupation.

As the Germans both developed and transformed the Czech film industry to one that was both more modern, but also more dependent on German aid and influence, it affected the people involved the most, as while they continued working and did arguably better their craft during the occupation, their reputations were irrevocably tainted, especially when working as close with the Germans as the people in *Aktualita* did. At the same time, there is that underlying element that the Czechs saw the occupation as a force against their will and community, and as such not every person who worked with the Germans was an overt collaborator. There are opposite sides of a similar story, wherein Frič was ostracized but could continue to work, and Pečený lost his entire media company as well as was ostracized and charged with conspiracy. Zahradníček as well is an interesting case wherein he was a well-respected avant-garde filmmaker before, but afterward he quit filmmaking completely in order to run an archive.

On the side of the Jewish part of the film crew, their lasting effects of the occupation are very different, as most did not survive to see the end of the war. While attempting to compare the

effects of it to two different groups, ones who survived and ones who didn't, there is clearly a difficulty which cannot be easily answered. The desperation of war as well as attempting to keep one's community safe led to many of those involved be killed, and it was largely due to the fact that the film was being developed so late in the war that there could luckily be more survivors to give the crucial Jewish perspective on the *Theresienstadt* film.

The documentary itself plays a large role in analyzing the study of those in Terezín and those making the film. As it transformed from a piece of propaganda, to a lost film, to samplings of footage of the overall film, it shows that 'the status and character of particular archive films [are] not fixed but also change over time.'⁸⁴ This developing nature of the film has allowed for a deeper understanding of the working of the crew at Terezín, and at what level it affected the Jewish community in the ghetto.

While looking at the ethnographic tone of documentaries, it is clear that this film has a multitude of levels. There is the creation aspect, wherein the filming and staging of Terezín creates a false community which is being filmed, but is still valid to be researched, as it represents the German idea of valid propaganda towards non-Germans. At the same time, looking at the film in the perspective of the Jewish community, one must try to pick apart the falsehoods and find the genuine moments of history underneath. As Drubek states; 'If we ignore these rare original sounds from a concentration camp we would repeat the annihilating gesture of Nazi ideology towards their victims.'⁸⁵ Which brings in the final level of the analyzation which is the Czech filmmakers. The

⁸⁴ Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann. "Three Dimensions of Archive Footage: Researching Archive Films from the Holocaust." *Ghetto Films and their Afterlife* (ed. by Natascha Drubek). Special Double Issue of Apparatus. Film, Media and Digital Cultures in Central and Eastern Europe

⁸⁵ Natascha Drubek, "The Exploited Recordings" pg. 270

analysis of their choices in making the film and what was kept and what was cut provides a context for a group who were also being oppressed, but had the freedom and opportunity to leave the ghetto, and experience the fact that they were the ones making the beautification and ruse a reality.

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