

What Would the Jews of Terezin Say?

by WILLIAM A. COOK

I saw the pictures children drew at Terezin last March when I delivered a paper at a Prague conference. Yesterday I saw a picture of a Palestinian woman, old and bent, weeping as she watched Sharon's bulldozer demolish her home. The children's pictures jumped to mind; the thousands of drawings, hidden in Terezin, are the only evidence of their existence. Mothers, the old women lured to Terezin by the Nazis on the pretext that it was a care facility for the elderly, and the Nazi Commandery allowed the children to draw, a way to express how they felt about being herded like cattle, crowded into dark attics and cellars, separated from their parents before they were transported to Izbice, Maly Trostinec, Sobibor, Majadanek, Treblinka or Auschwitz. For Terezin was a transport town.

It occurred to me that Sharon's savagery against the Palestinians mirrors the plight of the Jews in Terezin. Consider the woman weeping for her home. What would the women of Terezin say as they watched Sharon destroy this woman's home? How they would share the anguish of being driven from their home as they had been and confined, as the Palestinian woman was confined, in squalid conditions, in a refugee camp under the booted foot of their oppressor. What would the Jews of Terezin say as they watched their sons, daughters, nieces, and nephews corral the indigenous people of Palestine into ghettos, packed into cement bunkers not unlike the cells at Terezin, or crammed into ancient towns where the walls are falling down or bulldozed into oblivion?

What would the Jews of Terezin say as they watched Sharon build walls around the ghettos? How like the walls of Terezin that rose before those locked in waiting the day they would be transported to their death. How like the Gestapo the IDF looms before the Palestinians as they crouch locked in their homes under curfew, unable to get to the market, unable to play in the streets, unable to work; dependent on the oppressor's will to get to UN food supplies, the only defense against their impending death.

What would the Jews of Terezin say as they watched Sharon circle their temporary homes with search lights from towers and trucks, hemming them in behind barbed wire, suffering the indignity of caged animals? What would they say as they watched the Palestinian family wait hours in line before they could pass through the gate, derided and mocked by the soldiers who laughed at their plight? What would the Jews at Terezin say as they witnessed their own kin steal land and homes from those who owned them on the pretext that they were animals and did not deserve the land given to Sharon by G-d? Had they not lost all to their oppressors?

What would the Jews at Terezin say to those imprisoned behind the walls unable to till the fields taken from them, unable to move from one city to another to visit relatives, friends, neighbors, unable to survive without the largesse from nations beyond the walls? Would they not understand those who tried to resist? Had they not tried to resist? Would they not understand that what desperation breeds is desperation? Had they not seen themselves as David against Goliath? Would they not see this David, the imprisoned Palestinian, as their brothers and sisters throwing stones at tanks weighing tons, scattering shells from Kalashnikov rifles at F-16 Fighter Jets and Apache Helicopters, and standing defiantly in front of bulldozers while Goliath dispatches some of his 134,000 troops into the ghettos, sends a few of his 32,000 air force to shell homes and factories, and drives his 3,900 tanks into the ghetto cities and refugee camps? Would they not grasp the metaphor of the Biblical story that graphically illustrates the consequences of the strong, willingly and mercilessly, attempting to destroy the weak? And would they not know that David will triumph because David has nothing to lose, his cause is just, and his God has promised him victory? But the strong have everything to lose, and the fear that they will lose it. As Israeli Professor Martin Van Crevold stated: "He who is wise should never engage the weak for any length of time."

When at Terezin, I saw the drawing of a hearse, the only means of transportation in the ghetto, by Ferdinand Bloch, Alfred Kantor's picture of a police patrol controlling women returning from work, and Bedrich Fritta's black drawing of cramped life in the attic, and others, others by children and I thought of the old woman kneeling in the street watching her home demolished. That, too, is a drawing that captures forever the fear of those who live without hope, without dignity, without respect. What would the Jews of Terezin say? Perhaps they would speak through me:

THE GHOSTS OF TEREZIN

I saw the pictures children drew at Terezin
As they clustered in the attic's closing darkness, --
Pictures of the sun beyond the rain,
Of Mothers muffled in scarves and solemn dress,
Of Fathers proud beneath their yarmulkas, --
All waiting patiently the promised day
When they would board the silver train
And flee to the Holy City.

And I wept at their plight,
The silent, unknown, gnawing fright
That burned within their Ghetto of sin,
This Terezin.

And then before my eyes there came
Another scene, so strange, as if incarnate in the first

That burst untimely before my weeping heart;
A scene more ravaged than Terezin,
Of streets and alleys swamped in sewage and despair
Where children breathed the fetid air of hate
That smoldered like steaming ashes there.

Suddenly appeared above the graves, the ghosts of Terezin,
Arising like mist around the crematorium;
Fathers and Mothers, in their promised land at last,
Grasping children to their breasts.
Silent as sentinels they stood,
And there they wept as they watched in vain
The wardens wander through the camps
Like Gestapo agents of old,
Stark, cold, indifferent to the pain
Of those who huddled beneath the tin roofs,
Encased like the dead in cement boxes
As the acrid stench of lingering sewage
Flowed through the alleys and the homes.

They saw the tanks rattle through the streets
With ranks of soldiers scurrying behind,
Seeking the vermin that infested this place,--
Homeless, nameless, without a face, --
Sneaking through this ghetto in the dark of night
To drive the children from this transport town,
This resurrected refugee camp, this new Terezin,
Where the new Jew wanders the world
Like the Jews of Terezin,
Joined in their loneliness and despair
As they watch their children there
Become the walls of Terezin!

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