

Sweet Theresienstadt (Sladký Theresienstadt)

Author: Arnošt Goldflam

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Translations:

Theatrical Adaptations: Prague, Theatre Archa (1996)

About the Author: Arnošt Goldflam (1946) comes from a Czech-Austrian-Polish Jewish family, his parents survived the Holocaust. He is a playwright, theatre director, novelist and actor. In 2007, he was appointed Professor at the Theatre Academies in Prague and Brno. Jewish topics and the Holocaust play an important role in his works. For instance, he adapted several Franz Kafka's works for theatre (*The Metamorphosis*, 1989; *The Trial*, 1989; and *The Judgment*, 1991). He also took part as a screenwriter in two documentary films which contained his interviews with Czech, Slovakian and German Jews who had emigrated from Czechoslovakia to Israel (*Lost Home and Found Home*, both 1996). Among the interviewees were also celebrities such as writers, journalists and researchers →Viktor Fischl, Erich Kulka or Ruth Bondy.

Further Important Publications: *Písek* (1986, Sand, play), *Smlouva* (1999, A Contract, play), *Osudy a jejich pán* (2005, The Fates and their Lord, short stories), *Doma u Hitlerů* (2007, Hitler's Kitchen, play), *Standa a dům hrůzy* (2008, Standa and a House of Horror, stories for children).

Content and Interpretation

The play consists of 17 scenes. Except for the first, all of them are set in the Theresienstadt Ghetto during WW II. The main character is a young Czech Jewish journalist Mahner. After a moving farewell between him and his Aryan girlfriend Maria (Mařenka), the play depicts Mahner's life in Theresienstadt. Because Mahner holds a prominent position in the ghetto, he has enough food and his own room. Therefore, he is an attractive partner for the young women. In the ghetto, Mahner lives first with Martha, later with Schura. Schura was deported to Auschwitz Birkenau and Mahner finds a new girlfriend, Tercha (Terča), and after Tercha's deporting he lives with Truda.

Mahner keeps telling each new girlfriend that Maria is his one true love, and "in spite of everything", he is being faithful to her in spirit. Maria appears to him as a vision and Mahner tries to explain his situation to her. At last Mahner is also deported from Theresienstadt Ghetto to a death camp. He leaves with the illusion he is going to a work camp, and believes in an early end to the war and that he will be liberated. He says that Theresienstadt "was not so bad" and he had had some "wonderful moments" there.

The second main figure in the play is Kurt Gerroldt, a German Jewish prisoner and actor who is filming a "documentary" in Theresienstadt under instructions of the Nazis. Gerroldt lives in the delusion that he has become an important and indispensable personality for the Nazis

(“today, when they need me, they cannot live without me”). The life of delusions that the protagonists create for themselves connects both characters, Gerroldt as well as Mahner. The perversity of Gerroldt’s filming is pronounced in some scenes. In a scene that should be reminiscent of slapstick, the prisoners kick each other on the backside. Gerroldt’s assistant is not satisfied with their performance, and he kicks one prisoner so hard, that he falls to the ground and does not get back up. The assistant laughs, while the prisoner is pulled away and replaced by another man. In the seventh scene there are shots of the children’s opera *Brundibár*, which was really played in the ghetto and recorded on film. There is a baker and a milkman in the opera. Child actors who are starving, become sick to their stomach. Later Gerroldt and his crew film in a hospital ward. Mahner’s father is also there. Gerroldt films a “visiting the sick” scene and does not stop, even when Mahner’s father dies. The fourteenth scene of the play shows a conflict between Gerroldt and Mahner. Gerroldt reproaches Mahner for his fickleness in love. Mahner was filmed two different times each with a different woman.

Gerroldt: I’m filming you once again for the café scene, this time please let’s keep the same lady.

Mahner: The last one went to the transport. [...] So you bring her back and I’ll sit in the café with her.

Gerroldt: I can’t do that. I’m only... just like you... a Theresienstadt prisoner...

Mahner: So why make such a big deal about morality? Why film in the café? Film the transport, for instance. Then you’ll have some testimony!

Gerroldt: Try to understand, Mr. Mahner, that the script is given to us and pre-approved before we get it. [...]

Mahner: So why make it? Here you are, trying to dictate the number of my partners, this is important for you. But the fact that people are being taken away [...] isn’t important? It is permitted to lie about these things?

Gerroldt: Please, I am only director of this film.

[...]

Mahner: All of us are trying to survive. I just pick up women, I sleep with them, give them and myself the feeling, that we’re at home, the feeling we’re living [...]. But I’m not lying, you know. I’m not lying to the entire world.

Gerroldt: Sir. Sir! You know what the title of the film will be? The Führer Gave a Town to the Jews! [...] It’s such an important film I’m making! Do you understand this? [...] Personal morality is something completely different from... public... presentation!

(Goldflam, 2001, p. 222–224)

Paradoxically, Ruhm, the Nazi commander of the ghetto also interprets the separation of personal and public morality. He doesn’t argue, however, about the meaning of the artwork, but about the national historical necessity. He had “nothing personally against the Jews”:

Ruhm: You still think that we Germans don’t like you. But it’s nothing personal. [...] No, this is not animosity, this is a historical necessity. [...] ... it’s about the mission, responsibility to our duty, to our Nation! [...] Don’t think that it’s easy when you see a pile of one hundred,

one thousand corpses. You'd be surprised [...] And to stay an honest man in spite of it... and an upright man! [...] It's hard. And that's why I like it when these cultural events are organised here, and sometimes I also like to come and watch and listen to nice music. It's uplifting. A person can take a rest from his hard work.
(pp. 216–217)

This reference to an allegedly higher moral duty can be understood as the wider and more general sense of Goldflam's play. Impersonal responsibility which refers to "higher interests", is a danger that threatens not only the executors of power and violence in a totalitarian society, but to a certain extent, every citizen in every society. According to the American reviewer Elinor Fuchs, Goldflam's play "lacks noble victims and obviously brutal persecutors" (Fuchs, 1997, p. 5).

Goldflam managed to connect the authenticity, the tragic hopelessness and the grotesque. The grotesque is often associated with brutality. The very first scene of Goldflam's text begins with the joyful chorus "Let us rejoice" (Proč bychom se netěšili) from the famous Czech opera *The Bartered Bride* (*Prodaná nevěsta*). Mahner and Maria dance on the stage in folk costumes. This first scene ends with the song from Franz Lehár's operetta *The Land of Smiles*. Later the storyline shows that both funny and carefree songs are cruelly ironic.

Main Topics and Problems

The play *Sweet Theresienstadt* subtitled *The Führer Gave a Town to the Jews* (Vůdce daroval Židům město) is based on documents about life in the Theresienstadt ghetto, the biggest Nazi concentration camp in Bohemia. The main inspiration for the play was the Theresienstadt diary of the former journalist Willy Otto Mahler (1909–1945, named Willy Mahner in the play). Willy Mahler was a distant relative of the well-known composer Gustav Mahler. This diary has not yet been published for ethical reasons. Mahler had a privileged position among the prisoners in Theresienstadt. He worked at the post office and was a member of the Jewish administration in Theresienstadt. He had a separate room from May 1944, which was a luxury in Theresienstadt where there were only two square meters per prisoner. He could participate in various cultural events and, in contrast to the other prisoners, he was never hungry. Mahler narrates, often sardonically, many events in his diary including his egoistic behavior and his erotic adventures.

Girls who fell in love with him had also privileged positions in Theresienstadt. However, each new girl only lasted a few months as she was destined to be transported. Only his last girl remains in Theresienstadt while he leaves on one of the last transports. At the end of September 1944, Willy Mahler was transported from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz. During selection in Auschwitz, he was chosen for forced labour and sent to the concentration camp in Dachau where he died in January 1945.

Goldflam originally wrote the play inspired only by Mahler's diary. In the second version of the play there was also another source of inspiration: the story about the filming of a propaganda documentary in Theresienstadt. The film was prepared after the so called "beautification" (Verschönerungsaktion) of Theresienstadt, which was associated with the visit of a Red Cross delegation to Theresienstadt in June 1944. Unlike the first attempt to create a film in 1942, called *Theresienstadt Ghetto*, which featured some shocking scenes

(therefore was never completed or shown in cinemas) the film *Theresienstadt* from 1944, known also as *The Führer Gave a Town to the Jews*, completely falsified the situation of the Jews in Theresienstadt. Their life was arranged to give the appearance of a happy, idyllic community: work in workshops and gardens, along with concerts, a café, library, bank, football matches and swimming in the river... The famous Jewish German actor Kurt Gerron (Kurt Gerroldt in the Goldflam's play), who was also a prisoner in Theresienstadt, was chosen as the film's director. Gerron had been arrested in exile in the Netherlands and deported to Theresienstadt in February 1944. The Nazis promised him that both he and his family would live. However, shortly after he finished the filming in October 1944, Gerron, his family and the other film actors were transported to Auschwitz and gassed. The film was edited and produced in a Prague studio at the beginning of 1945 but the rapid progress of the war made it impossible to use for propaganda. It was destroyed. Only about 30 minutes remain today. Other figures also had real prototypes: the commander of the ghetto, Ruhm (Rahm), head of the Jewish Council in Theresienstadt, Eppstern (Paul Eppstein) etc. Ruhm's quoted speech is an allusion to Heinrich Himmler's addresses in Posen in October 1943 (Himmler 1974). Gerroldt's film hints on the Nazi propaganda.

While the Jews in Theresienstadt sit in the café with their coffee and cakes, dancing the Negro's swing for the film camera, our soldiers carry the entire burden of this terrible War, misery and self-sacrifice to defend their country, and their homeland on their shoulders. (Goldflam, 2001, p. 235)

In fact, it is a quote from the German film weekly added to shots from the café in Theresienstadt in Autumn 1944 (Adler, 1958, p. 325).

Sweet Theresienstadt premiered in Prague's Theatre Archa in November 1996. Theatre Archa cooperated in the preparation of the play with the New York non-profit organization En Garde Arts. The play was directed by an American, Damien Gray. The composer, set designer and light designer were also Americans, John Hodian (Emmy winner 1992), Richard Dennis and Christian Method. In the theatre performance directed by Damian Gray, the plot is shown with more brutality.

Unlike most plays which thematize the Holocaust, Goldflam's work doesn't present victim's suffering, resistance against Nazism or great conflicts. Goldflam's figures have no choice between good and evil. They want to survive. On the one hand, *Sweet Theresienstadt* is close to so called *docudramas* (for instance Peter Weiss, Rolf Hochhuth, to some extent Thomas Bernhard or Joshua Sobol). They put for the question of the responsibility not only of perpetrators, but also of the ordinary citizens or even of the victims. Nevertheless, on the other hand, Goldflam's play shouldn't be an indictment like these works. Common and bizarre situations, grotesque, exaggeration and irony are presented here. In this sense, Goldflam's presentation of the Holocaust is close to plays of George Tabori and his black, sardonic humor (*The Cannibals*, 1968). Among Czech authors with Jewish roots, → J. R. Pick or in part → Ota Pavel can be designated as Goldflam's predecessors.

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