

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

In October 1941, Hitler and the Germans began to enact "The Final Solution"—their term for the genocide of all Jews. Shortly into their plan, however, they discovered a slight complication: the "problem Jews." Exterminating Jewish scholars, doctors, musicians, composers, spiritual leaders, actors, and professors who were admired throughout the world would be challenging. And even though their movement was anti-Semitic from the very beginning, the Germans feared retaliation if suddenly the whole world knew what they were really doing.

Their solution? Terezin, a beautiful Czech town nestled between two rivers, set against gorgeous mountains; a peaceful town filled with lush gardens, serene meadows and summer butterflies. The plan was simple: transport all their "problem Jews" to a seemingly lovely town, tell the world of their generosity, and then let them die. And that's what they did. They filled this small village with rich arts and culture and even passed over the operations to a Jewish Council of Elders—acknowledging their faith and allowing them to practice (to an extent). They made sure that word got out—some Jews even willingly sold their homes and moved to Terezin. Imagine their surprise when they discovered this town of 4,000 suddenly had 60,000 inhabitants. Or when they watched as 33,456 of them died in the camp from sickness, brutality, and horrible living conditions. Or when they said goodbye to the 88,202 who were transported to death camps—whose numbers were chosen, not by the SS, but by the (forced) hands of their own Jewish Elders.

But the Germans were controlling the narrative, so the world didn't know. They even forced Kurt Gerron, a celebrated Jewish actor and director, to make a propaganda film, highlighting the generosity of the Germans. And because Gerron truly was a gifted artist, he made it work. The very next day, he arrived at Auschwitz, where he was immediately sent to the gas chambers. Chaim Potok said it best: "Auschwitz was the Kingdom of Death, but Terezin was the Kingdom of Deceit."

Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, an Austrian artist and Terezin prisoner, was not deceived. With no educational experience or training, she became a teacher, committed to her students' survival, and the survival in them of what was good. She helped the children create over 5,000 drawings and collages—rainbows, gardens, feasts, playgrounds, and butterflies. She helped them articulate their fears and nightmares through poetry and paint, opening them up so she could try to heal them. She gave them the arts, which gave them hope. And when her number was called to be transported to Auschwitz, she made sure somebody would continue protecting and teaching the children. Friedl not only gave her students hope, she encouraged them to become that hope for others.

And they did. Of the 15,000 Jewish children who were sent to Terezin, only 100 survived—none under the age of fourteen. Those 100 brave children continue to provide hope to anyone who hears their story. I hope you'll agree.