

WEDNESDAY OCTOBER 13, 1999
AFTERNOON SESSION B 16:30 – 18:00

We Are Children, Just the Same: The Boys of Terezín

by
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This curricular unit presentation will focus on *Vedem*, the secret magazine produced by teenaged boys interned in Terezín, a Nazi concentration camp in Czechoslovakia. The presentation will be in three parts:

- the history of writing as resistance in Home One, Terezín;
- a literary circle read-aloud of the works of the authors of *Vedem*;
- a discussion of teaching applications for the millennium.

The first activity will define resistance as having been manifested in the provision of education in banned subjects (in order to maintain cultural continuity); in the publication of a newspaper or the maintenance of a personal diary (in order to document the conditions and events being experienced); and in survival itself, and with it the survival of hope and of the Jewish tradition of respect for the sanctity of life. The writers, editors and artists of Terezín were teenaged boys who lived in Home One, House L 417 from 1941 until 1944 in the Terezín Ghetto. When the Council of Elders of Terezín established the separate Children's Homes within the camp, this decision was made with a mind to the future. Special care was given to the children in diet, in housing and in education. Fifteen thousand children passed through Terezín. One thousand and eighty-six were left in 1945 and at the end of the war 300 children returned to their homes.

Home Number One had a teacher, Professor Valtr Eisinger; a flag, an anthem, a government, and eventually a literary magazine, *Vedem*. The boys named their republic "Shkid", an acronym from the Russian phrase, *shkola imeni Dostoyevskovo*, or Dostoyevsky School. This was the name of a school for homeless orphans in post-revolutionary St. Petersburg. The boys established their government because "we no longer want to be an accidental group of boys, passively succumbing to the fate meted out to us. We want to create an active, mature society and through work and discipline, transform that fate into a joyful, proud reality. They have unjustly uprooted us from the soil that nurtured us, from the work, the joys, the culture from which our young lives should have drawn strength... Cut off from a well-ordered society, we shall create a new life together; based on organization, voluntary discipline, and mutual trust" (Ornest, p. 36).

The magazine of Home Number One, *Vedem* ("In the Lead"), evolved from a single read-aloud on a Friday night. Any piece the boys wrote during the week - prose, poetry, or an editorial - was read aloud by the boys seated in their bunks. Daily life for the boys adhered to strict schedule. Wake-up call was at 6:00 AM, followed closely by clean up, breakfast and then roll call. The older boys worked in the kitchen garden. After work, classes were held in the "homes", mostly in the attics in case of an SS inspection. The

teachers were part of a pedagogical council and lessons in math, history, geography and Hebrew were conducted for four hours a day. I.Q. tests were also given. Physical training was offered in the courtyard.

After supper, all boys went to their individual Homes. The pedagogues lived with the boys. As their stay lengthened, the importance of self-government increased. In Home One, each boy had a place according to his interest and abilities. They invented nicknames for one another and worked on their contributions for *Vedem*. They invented clubs and games. A youth care unit (Jugendfürsorge) looked in on their hygiene and medical needs. As the importance of *Vedem* and their Friday night readings grew, several guests joined in, including a Prague philosopher, Hans Adler, and Dr. Bruno Zwicker, a sociologist.

Life was highly structured and at times almost formal. When the Home Superintendent, Dr. Jachnin, suggested a dismantling of the shelves at the boys' headboards for supposedly hygienic purposes, the boys of Home Number One reacted with a formal proposal:

“We admit, Dr. Jachnin, that your proposal is the most practical and hygienically appropriate. On the other hand, you will admit that we are also entitled to a little privacy, which in any case is so very limited here. When children all over the world have their own rooms, we have bunks 70×30 cm. They have their freedom; we live like chained dogs. Truly, then, in place of their closets full of toys, you must allow us to have at least half a meter of shelf space behind our heads. You must realize that we are still only children like children everywhere else. We may be more mature, thanks to Terezín, but we are children just the same” (p. 51).

These children used *Vedem* as an outlet for all that they were feeling. Over the course of the two years of their internment, an issue of *Vedem* appeared every Friday. Petr Ginz, a fifteen year old from Prague, was the editor. The magazine was a matter of personal pride to him. Sometimes, when no one was writing, “...he wheedled out contributions in exchange for things he got in his parcels from home” (p. 64).

Petr instituted a regular column entitled “Rambles Through Terezín”. He interviewed the ghetto cops, the doctors, the nurses who cared for the young children, the barracks leaders and the keepers of the crematoria. He also wrote editorials encouraging his bunkmates to respect their comrades, themselves, and especially the elderly of Terezín. His motto was: “You are responsible not only for your actions, but also for your words.”

Vedem also covered reviews of the many cabarets, cultural events and musicals performed at Terezín. The literary magazine reported on lectures on textiles, economics, sports, psychology, Russian and Latin cultural circles, Mozart, the history of chess and the Magic Flute. *Vedem* also reported on new additions to the 2000 volume camp library. The boys often wrote about their feelings of being interned during the High Holidays. They recorded in detail the filming in 1944 of the Nazi propaganda film, “*The Führer Has Given Them a Town*”.

Vedem ceased when the boys were transported to Auschwitz on September 27, 1944. About one hundred boys had lived in Home Number One, but only fifteen survived to see liberation. One of these was Zdeněk Taussig, who was responsible for rescuing the magazine itself. In 1945, Taussig gave the magazine to George Brady, who later turned it over to Kurt Kotouč, who had been one of the leader's of the boys' self-government at Terezín. Kotouč later collaborated with Zdeněk Ornest and Marie Rút Křížková to produce a book based on the magazine. When, in 1972 and 1973, Ornest and Křížková attempted to publish the book in Czechoslovakia, they were first required to change the title from *Are Ghetto Walls My Homeland?* to *Small Lights in the Night*. A pre-publication review by the Director of the Czechoslovak Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, however, led to withdrawal of the book's publication contract. One of the reasons cited for rejection was that, "Since 1967, Israeli propaganda has misused the persecution of the Jews during the Second World War to provide some sort of 'moral justification' for Israeli aggression against the neighboring Arab nations" (Ornest, p. 197). Further publication attempts were viewed as socially harmful acts.

Vedem was finally published in 1978 in a well-received "samizdat" edition and ultimately in Czech- and English-language book editions in 1995.

Part Two: Readings

In this portion the participants will each be given a literary selection from *Vedem* to read aloud. We will simulate a classroom that is studying the children of Terezín. It is anticipated that this activity will broaden our definition of resistance during the Shoah and demonstrate classroom use of the literature of the Terezín ghetto and camp as reflected through the literary magazine *Vedem*. The readings to be used are:

1. Diary of Petr Ginz (excerpts)
2. "Rambles Through Terezín" (a weekly column of *Vedem*)
3. "Friday Evening", Zdeněk Weinberger
4. "The Cap", Jiří Bruml
5. "View From the Coffee House"
6. "Motto of the Week: Why? Because!"
7. "Preparing for the High Holidays"
8. "For Children", Hanuš Hachenburg
9. "We Old Heroes, Warriors for the Young"

Part Three: Applications

After the participants have read their literary pieces from *Vedem* we will discuss the theme of resistance in the writings of the children of Home One. We will brainstorm teaching methods we can apply in our diverse teaching environments. As Vaclav Havel states in the preface to the book, "Let us read carefully what the children of Terezín are saying to us through their poems, their stories, and their articles. Let us learn from them to have faith in truth, love for our home and homeland" (p. 11). Let us consider this proud testimony to values that transcend time, death and destruction.