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THERESIENSTADT IDEAL CITY

Yesterday, I walked those deserted streets. Yesterday, we arrived in Theresienstadt. I was part of a group of artists, researchers and journalists gathered for a conference. We were there to reflect on Terezin and its future and to generate ideas about the vocation of a cultural centre there.

This town, today empty, at one time was designed as an ideal city. We were meeting under the auspices of the Swedish Ministry for Culture, which could sponsor the initiative of local Czech artists to establish an Arts centre in Terezin. The Swedish government is here to carry out a work of memory beyond its borders hence this unique initiative.

Terezin, built in the 17th century by the Emperor Franz Joseph II, was designed as an ideal Renaissance fortress. The ground plan of the town is in a form of a star. Never besieged from the outside, it has been seized from the inside.

One day, a star appeared on the clothes of the people forced to live there. One day, this star-shaped city became the city for the star-bearing people. It became the ideal ghetto.

Painted on the vaulted ceiling of a hidden synagogue there are red stars of David and a written plea for mercy addressed directly to a wrathful God.

But the ideal beauty of this place surely possessed its inhabitants and took root in them when it had mutated into the ideal ghetto. The Nazis wanted to turn this ghetto into their "model camp". To Theresienstadt they deported Jews; mostly artists, people of influence, the elderly and ex-servicemen. All forms of artistic expression particularly music and theatre became in this survival situation much more than a question of entertainment.

The Nazis had thought out Theresienstadt as the theatre of their deception. They disguised the Jews as thriving townspeople and disguised themselves as kindly keepers. But behind the scenes they played out the tragedy of extermination. Each day, another convoy of Jews left for Auschwitz.

Today, one can find in the Ghetto Museum of Terezin works of art, which testify to the intense creative life of the city during that period. It is a museum almost like any other. On the way out of the exhibition, in the museum's bookshop we find children's drawings that remind us of everyday life in the ghetto; followed by a documentary film on the setting up of the ideal ghetto. Artists were taken hostage by a system but nevertheless managed to go on with their creative work. We came out deeply affected and frightened by such a successful use of propaganda.

Theresienstadt - a model camp. A lie used to generate doubt about the rumours of

extermination. The eye of the storm.

“Art is that which resists death”, said Malraux.
The Ghetto Museum is the graveyard of this resistance.

Terezin endures. Is it not a work of art in its own right? Was it not intended as one? In our heads, spin the whirlwinds of past nightmares, the vortex of the past. Why create an Arts centre in Terezin and dedicate it to well crafted work (glass blowing, etc...)? This place originated from concepts dating from different eras, going as far as the very negation of the human being by the concept itself. How is it possible to forget an artistic past subjugated by Nazi propaganda?

No more images are possible in Theresienstadt. The town speaks for itself. It holds in itself the lie of ideality and the ideal of the lie. It is inextricably linked to the effective and perverse propaganda machine of the Nazis. It will remain so. From this point of view, the town presents itself as a place for reflection on propaganda in all of its forms; a place for interdisciplinary exchange; a place for questioning, allowing us to decipher the mechanisms of propaganda at work. These questions are crucial in a world where the image is the principal means of communication. Theresienstadt provokes questions for the individual artist. How to treat History/ history in artistic work? How to treat propaganda documents? At a time when information sources are innumerable, how can we detect and decipher the strategies deployed by propaganda (time and space given to a subject, choice of sources, editing, etc...)? How is propaganda constructed? Above all, when does a work lose its integrity and veer towards the possibility of propaganda?

In the First World War museum in France (L’Historial de la Grande guerre) the war is shown through newsreels and films of the period collected from England, France and Germany and carefully restored. The sole subtitle missing is “Propaganda films”. Roman Karmen, the Russian documentary director reconstructed war scenes a posteriori which became iconic images of the real war. At the end of his life he dedicated himself to work on Russian propaganda films in which ecstatic comrades sang as they harvested. He calls for vigilance on the part of the spectator with his remark: “There is no cinema – vérité: a filmmaker only sees what he wants to show”.

How do we remain vigilant faced with the cold monster of propaganda lurking in wait for the artist? It is in the love of work well done, in the fascination for perfect beauty and the search for the ideal form, that we may lose the rigour of the concept, the “why” and “for whom” of artistic creation. We must keep our distance to avoid temptation. Moreover, one can appreciate that the project for a research centre in Terezin on past and present propaganda, should be initiated by a country such as Sweden.

Yesterday, I was there and had the impression that they had just left. In a cell, a table, some chairs...I could still feel their presence. I could see both sides of the cell-door. Yesterday I was there, they were there too. Me and my nightmares, they and their resistance. In Terezin a resistance to death was possible. One must keep that in mind.

Esther Shalev-Gerz, Paris 2002