

## Even SS-Officers Applauded the Jewish Players of the Soccer League in Terezin

In ghetto Terezin a soccer league existed for 3 years, both for youth and adults; thousands of fans watched and the stars were adored. A few of the players survived, they relate about the sportive atmosphere: even SS-officers who watched the matches, were caught in the excitement and encouraged the Jewish soccer players. The Nazi propaganda machine made good use of the pictures.

By Dahlia Karpel



Photos from a Nazi propaganda film, courtesy of the German film archives Transit Film GmbH, Munich

Franta Mayer celebrated his 20<sup>th</sup> birthday in May 1942 in ghetto Terezin. There was no great party in his living quarters, two months after he was brought there, together with 45 orphans from Brno. They came into a children's home, one of three in the ghetto; in each of them there were about 350 Czech speaking children, aged 11 – 17. The children lived in a communal framework; they studied and worked in vegetable gardens. The aim was to isolate them as far as possible from the horrible reality of the place and to prepare them for a pioneering life in Palestine, in the spirit of the pioneering youth movements.

The group of orphans lived in room no. 7. Their councilor, Mayer, instilled in them discipline and order but made it a point to surround them also with paternal warmth. He did not make do with a value-oriented education. He made them perform theater plays but his wards became best known in the ghetto for their soccer team, called "Nesharim" [eagles in Hebrew]. Their dresses were in red and white. Three sport publications came out in room 7, but only one of these was preserved "Rim-Rim-Rim". This was their encouragement shout during the soccer matches and tournaments: "Go forth, nesharim, rim-rim-rim!" The editor was one of the soccer players (he perished in Auschwitz in 1944); the reporters were aged 13 to 14. The newspaper was typewritten in 6 copies and focused on wide-ranged reportages of soccer matches, both of

youth and of grown-ups in Terezin. There were also articles about famous Jewish sportsmen living in the ghetto.

In issue #18, in an article written by him, Mayer chided his wards that – in addition to daily activities like washing, eating, roll calls, playing and study, they do not invest enough in the newspaper. “Is it not a sign of incompetence in 14 years old boys? Free yourself finally from your childhood nappies, your toys and make an effort to do something seriously”, he wrote and concluded with the recommendation to start writing “to cleanse your way of thinking”.

Franta, today Francis, Mayer, lives in Los Angeles and will be 87 soon. On the phone he sounds sharp and lively. He was born in Brno to well-to-do parents, the middle child of three, he studied in Jewish schools and was a goalie at age 19, an enthusiastic Zionist, he taught at the Jewish orphanage in the city. When he arrived in Terezin with the children, Otto Zucker, chairman of the Brno Jewish community, who was a central personality in the ghetto charged him with the collective education of the children.

In one of the remaining photographs Mayer is shown entering what was used as soccer field, there was no lawn there. On his left in the picture is the goalie Jirka Taussig – Tesar, behind them the player Pavel Breda forges ahead. The photograph, Mayer says, was shot at the start of the opening match of the league, “Moravia” against “Bohemia”, which took place on the square opposite the Magdeburg barracks, where the Jewish “autonomy” leadership of the ghetto was located; today it serves as a branch of the ghetto museum. “I was the goalie and got a goal but in the end we won 6:1”, he relates. “Among the audience there was a young girl I courted for a long time and only after the victory romance blossomed between us and she found it hard to give me up”.

Mayer did not only play he also trained the “Nesharim” team, but soccer, he says, was not the center of his life. “We played soccer twice a week and that was nice. Many, many spectators came because the matches provided a short interlude from the daily hardships. We were adored like soccer players and rock stars are adored today. When you boast impressive physical achievements and you succeed to entertain and to excite, this is only natural. But in the ghetto I was worried most of the time by totally different problems. I had sick children in the hospital, there were horrible diseases and uncounted meetings and in any case, when you work with children, there is no free moment”.

Mayer relates that the soccer uniform was provided by the ghetto administration. “In Terezin you could get everything”, he says. “That is the tragedy. Everybody remembers the wide-ranging cultural activities and the operas but that was a cover and camouflage for the fact that all the time people were sent to the East. When I once asked, what happens to them in the East, I was told to mind my own business. I lost 15 members of my family, including my parents and my younger brother. People think that Terezin was a model ghetto but the place was horrible and you struggled to survive. I did all I could to distance the children from reality.

More than 15.000 children went through ghetto Terezin (known also as Theresienstadt), of these about 1100 survived. Mayer’s boys were sent to their death in a transport of September 1944 and he arrived in Auschwitz-Birkenau together with them. Because of his physical fitness he was deported from there to another place and en route, near to the river Ohre (Eger in German), he succeeded to jump from the railway car and to reach Budapest. In May 1945, at the end of the war, he returned to Czechoslovakia. His elder brother, who succeeded to leave

Europe and to enlist in the British army, returned too. In 1952, when Mayer and his wife had already left the country for New York, he learned that his brother was murdered in Czechoslovakia for political reasons. During the epoch of the show trials in Prague, 14 leading members of the Communist party and the regime, 11 of them Jews, were accused of banding together to overthrow the regime, most of them were executed. Mayer succeeded in New York to found a business exporting and trading with paper, which today is managed by his son.



המשחק האחרון, אוגוסט 1944, קסרקטין דרזדן, משמאל: איגנץ פישר (בחולצה הכהה) מקבוצת "מחסן הביגוד" לוחץ את ידו של נציג "דאגה לילדים" לעיני השופט פאול הלר

The last match, August 1944, Dresden barracks, from left: Ignaz Fischer (dark shirt) from the "Kleiderkammer" team, shakes hand with the representative of "Children's Care", in the presence of the referee Pavel Heller

### **The "Kleiderkammer" (clothes store) Team**

Four years ago, Oded Breda, today director of Beit Terezin in kibbutz Givat Hayim Ihud, went with his family for a "roots trip" to the Czech Republic. Following this he started to research the fate of his uncle Pavel Breda, shown in the photograph together with Mayer. He found that this was the last time his uncle entered the soccer field with his team.

His father, Moshe Breda, formerly in the Israeli standing army, who lives in Tel Aviv, was born in Brno in 1923. 13 months later his brother Pavel was born. They were like twins and did everything together. Their love of sport started early – soccer, ice hockey, ski, and athletics. In 1939 the family could immigrate to Palestine but the mother had a heart condition and the father was afraid of the heat in this country. The parents got a certificate for the 16 years old Moshe, but the younger son Pavel remained with them. After WWII Moshe Breda, who by then served in the British army in Italy, traveled to Brno to find out what had happened to his beloved ones.

There he learned that his parents and brother were deported to ghetto Terezin, his parents from there to Auschwitz where they were probably immediately murdered; his brother Pavel was sent in 1944 to a labor camp in Germany, where he died of hunger.

On his second trip to Terezin Oded Breda had the idea to re-play the last match in which his uncle Pavel participated. He never realized this idea, but in his search for the story of Pavel, Oded got more and more interested in the history of Terezin. Last year he left his work in hi-tech and started to work as director of Beit Terezin. "I left the world of money for a world of values.

Thanks to Breda who supplied the material, today opens an exhibition in the gallery Nelly Aman, Tel Aviv about the soccer league which existed for three years in the ghetto. Among other things there will be short films and some interviews with surviving players.

Frantisek Planicka, the noted Czech soccer player was the childhood hero of Jirka (today George) Taussig – Tesar who grew up in Prague. Eventually he got to be goalie for the soccer team and also played ice-hockey in the Czechoslovak league. On November 17, 1938, a few days after the pogroms of "Kristallnacht" in Germany, Tesar was goalie in a match of the National Czechoslovak Junior soccer team against Hungary in Budapest. The newspapers wrote about him as the best player of all.

Tesar, aged 90, relates on the phone from his home in San Francisco how his family was imprisoned and sent in June 1943 by train to Terezin. His father was brought to the "Small Fortress", from there to Buchenwald where he was shot dead. Tesar and his mother came to the ghetto – thanks to the fact that Tesar was already a well-known soccer player; every team in Terezin wanted him to join. Finally he joined the team "Kleiderkammer", where he also worked. There all clothes people brought with them to the ghetto were concentrated. "The luggage was brought in carts and the Czech gendarmes looked through everything to find contraband."

Tesar remembers everything clearly – dates, names and places, his stories are fascinating. "We were the stars of Terezin; every Sunday afternoon 3.500 fans came to watch the league matches. Youth saw us as a model to imitate, we gave them hope, and we represented life. In all the misery and suffering hope was a rare thing! We played for them, because we knew that shortly they would be sent East and we felt that we gave them a little spark of light before their death."

Tesar was sent from Terezin to Auschwitz and from there to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp in northern Germany, and later to Bavaria. On April 26, 1945, he was liberated by the US army. He returned to Czechoslovakia, played there in the soccer league, but after he was injured he returned to ice hockey and played for Czechoslovakia in the Olympics in London, 1948. On his way back, in Paris, he saw the star of artistic skating Aliska Havlova training and fell in love with her. They met again in Prague and decided together to escape to the West.

"When I dragged myself on the death march I promised myself, that if I got out of this hell alive and will have a family, I would not live in Europe", he told us this week. Like he relates, he thought about going with his wife to Palestine, but that seemed too near to Europe. I still smelled the stink of Hitler and I knew that history repeats itself. And there was yet another reason: "My brother secretly immigrated to Palestine in the late 30ies; he did not like it there and joined the British army. So we decided for the US.

In 1949 they arrived in America. He changed from a career in sport to business and like he says, he did well. "My wife is not Jewish and my three children got no religious education" he says, "but I was born a Jew and will die as a Jew."



פטר ארבן (סרט לראשו) פורץ לרחבה

Peter Erben (bandana on the forehead) storms ahead

### **The "Kinderfuersorge" [children's care department] Team**

The Nazis established ghetto Theresienstadt in a fortress town in the North-West of Czechoslovakia, there they concentrated – at least for a transit period – the Jew of Czechoslovakia and old Jews from Germany and Austria, many of them professionals, scientists, intellectuals and artists. Into a place where formerly some 7000 persons lived, ten thousands Jews were crowded.

The ghetto, the only one standing until the end of the war, was presented by the Nazis as a model Jewish settlement with an autonomous administration. And so, in spite of the crowding, hunger, the harsh conditions and the transports to the "East", a life of culture developed in the ghetto that included various branches of sport, mainly soccer.

In his book "In My Own Footsteps" Peter Erben, who played soccer in Terezin as full-back and defender, he writes about the leisure time activities. Erben, today aged 88, lives in Ashkelon. From early age he was a sportsman in various fields – ski, ice hockey, athletics and soccer. In September 1941 he was deported to Terezin at age 21 together with his mother. In the ghetto he found the gymnast Fredy Hirsch; the latter had had good chances to be included in the German Olympic team in 1936 – if Hitler would not have risen to power. "Hirsch saved me by employing me in the Department for Youth Care; many of my friends were deported to the East".

In his position at the section for physical education in the ghetto Fredy Hirsch inculcated values of self-discipline, fitness and what he called control of body and spirit. His wards did not only train and play. They called his exacting inspections for cleanliness in the children's living quarters "one of the of the plagues in the ghetto" writes the authoress Ruth Bondy in her book "Shorashim Akurim" [Uprooted Roots].

Erben focused in the ghetto on athletics and kept up his bodily fitness by daily runs. "I was young and worked at a job that did not cause me physical hardship", he says. "My view was that the food in the ghetto was good and the quantity reasonable. For old people who did not work it was not enough. I, on the other hand, received from time to time additional rations at work, here a piece of bread and there some cheese. Those who looked well and had no Jewish nose got more".

During the first year, 12 soccer teams were organized in the ghetto, representing various work places. From 1943 until October 1944 the league became more efficient and consisted of 6 clubs: "Transportation", "Children's Care", "Clothes Store", "Cooks and Butchers", "Electricians" and "Youth Care". Because of the small playing field the teams consisted of 7 players each, the fans used to encourage them loudly. "They occupied all vantage points and the windows of the barracks, the atmosphere was like at normal, civil league matches", Erben wrote in his book. "I played for 'Children's Care' and in our group were Franta Mayer as goalie, Pavel Breda and I defenders, Shmuel Klauber mid-field and there were three forwards, among them the unforgettable Honza Burka, who shot goals from any position, sometimes even while floating in the air. Naturally – we were the darlings of the viewers and everybody recognized us. In the other teams there were outstanding international soccer players like Jirka Taussig (Tesar), goalie of the Czechoslovak National team.

Soccer, according to Erben, raised a good feeling. "Thousands of prisoners spent their leisure time this way; I was, of course, beloved. The girls were friendly and we lived like young people live everywhere". At the matches there was a sportive atmosphere, it was not usual, to put ones rival down. "The referees were professionals and the playing was serious", he says. "We played 'fair play' and did not hurt each other. We really felt to be sportsmen. There was a healthy envy. We won – you lost, but the friendship endured".

For three years he was in Terezin. "We hoped that, when the state of Israel would be established, it would be similar to Terezin – which started out as a model Zionist organization with values of justice and with a voluntary work organization", he says. "All those acting in the ghetto in the framework of the autonomous administration saw this as a mission. The Jews built up the town and organized everything under very hard conditions. Fredy Hirsch got up at 6 a.m. to make sure that the children and the youth got up and washed themselves. Terezin was a sociological experiment of an orderly life. We prepared the young people towards the realization of Zionism in Palestine".



השוערים פרנטה מאייר (משמאל) ויירקה טאוסִיג־טסר עולים למגרש בטרזין. מאחוריהם, בחולצה הלבנה, פאוול ברידא

The goalies Franta Mayer (left) and Jirka Taussig-Tesar enter the field. Behind them in white shirt, Pavel Breda

### **Half a Lemon for the Final Match**

Jan (Honza) Burka, aged 85, lives today in southern France and the first sentence he said this week during our phone conversation that he still paints. Two years ago his book “To Paint, so as to Survive” was published in Prague, an album with pictures painted by him and by other Terezin artists. But in the ghetto he was not known as a painter, rather as center-forward and famed soccer player.

Burka was born in Postoloprty to a Jewish mother and a Christian father; he learned painting at a private school in Prague. At age 18 he was deported together with his brother to Terezin and sent to work in the vegetable garden and in a communal kitchen. His brother was a carpenter; together they succeeded to build for themselves a room in the attic, where Burka used to paint. As the son of a non-Jewish father he managed to survive in Terezin until liberation and to safeguard his pictures.

In his album he wrote a chapter about the Terezin soccer league. He played for the “Children’s Care Department” team, he remembers clearly the day when soccer was played in the ghetto, when people waited for them excitedly from early morning: “The size of the square at Dresden barracks was 45 by 75 meters. Since there was not enough room for everybody, many crowded in the arcades of the barrack. The center “box” at the first floor was kept for the SS and I am convinced that during the matches all the hate that existed between us was gone, the SS men applauded loudly and enthusiastically during the matches as if they were Jews”.

Each match – both halves together - lasted an hour. “For many prisoners this was a special day, when they could forget their misery for a few hours”, he says. “My team won the title in the

league of 1942, in the 1943 league the butchers won. Before the final match our trainer gave to each member of our team half a lemon. It remains a mystery, how he managed to put his hands on such a treasure”.

At the end of the war Burka got offers from a number of European soccer teams, which wanted him to join their ranks, but he refused. He married in Amsterdam Ellen, a Danish girl, he had met in Terezin. Their daughter Petra Burka was born in November 1946, five years later the family immigrated to Canada where Petra became famous as national ice-skating champion. From the Olympic games in 1964 Burka returned with a bronze medal, a year later she became world champion.

### **The Joy was Authentic**

The delegation of the International Red Cross visited Terezin on June 23, 1944. Following this visit the Nazis decided to show also to the world that the allegations about the horrible conditions in concentration camps are just propaganda put out by the allies. They decided to produce a film, ostensibly a documentary, showing the “good life” in the ghetto, what was better than soccer matches with thousands of fans shouting joyously.

Adolf Eichmann gave his OK to shoot the film in Terezin. The project cost 35.000 Marks, taken from sequestered Jewish assets. The camera team came from the Czech news agency “Aktualita”. The work on the film “Theresienstadt – a documentary from the Jewish Autonomous Settlement” was finished in Prague only in March 1945. The film also shows a concert, a jazz performance and a children’s opera. For the first time the film was shown in Prague to a group of Nazi officers, after that delegates of the Red Cross saw it and also Israel Kastner, member of the Commission for the Rescue of Hungarian Jewry, who came to Terezin accompanied by two officers from Eichmann’s staff. The complete original film was lost after the war and only parts of it survived.

The Dutch historian Karel Margry, who researched this episode, is convinced that one of the reasons the Nazis decided to produce the propaganda film was the discovery of the atrocity at Majdanek death camp, liberated by the Red Army in July 1944. Margry writes that Himmler was involved in the production of the film and that Terezin prisoners called the film ironically “The Fuehrer gives the Jews a Town”.

The film was staged by Kurt Geron, a German star before the Nazis rose to power, a cabaret actor and film director. In 1928 Geron played “Mackie Messer” in the first version of Brecht’s “Groschenoper”. After that he acted in various roles in 72 films, best known among them was the magician – at the side of Marlene Dietrich – in “The Blue Angel” in 1930.

The documentary “Prisoner in Paradise” nominated for an Oscar in 2003 sketches Geron’s portrait and documents his life’s tragedy. Geron, of Jewish extraction, paid, after the Nazi’s rise to power, for the flight ticket of the Jewish-German actor Peter Lorre. He did not worry about himself, he was sure that he would survive. When his friends in Hollywood like the director Fritz Lang and the actor Peter Lorre understood what was awaiting Geron, they wanted to bring him out and even had a job lined up for him in the studios. Geron did not accept the offer because the flight tickets were not for first class.

Geron wandered from place to place in Europe and was finally caught in Holland and deported in February 1944 to Terezin. In "Prisoner in Paradise" survivors relate their memories about Geron's behavior during the shooting of the film. He wore a shawl on his neck, had a white handkerchief in his breast pocket and even had a director's chair with his name on it. In spite of the yellow badge on his jacket, he never went anywhere without the accompaniment of SS officers, he thrived during the filming. But from the film "Prisoner in Paradise" it is clear that during the production Geron suffered many insults and offenses – and restrained himself.

Peter Erben related this week how the house fronts of the main street in the ghetto were repainted. Erben was summoned to take part in the filming; he played the part of a citizen having his coffee at the coffeehouse in the ghetto, where a pianist played, like at the café "Savarin" in Prague. He was also filmed at the club erected for the filming, at a dance competition, in athletic competitions and at the final soccer league match.

"All of us knew the director and actor Geron from the "UFA", the well-known German film studio. Everything was staged and we acted", says Erben. Geron shot the league matches on Sundays, when some 3500 fans applauded the players. Here he did not need his staging talent. The joy was authentic.

Tesar sounds forgiving when he speaks about Geron's film: "If you were in a concentration camp, smelling death, you would not refuse to stage a film". Mayer thinks differently: "The poor prisoner Geron suddenly became a great director, running from place to place giving orders, beaming with happiness. Geron was more German than Jewish. He believed that he would live forever. I did not know that he is filming us, when we played, though I am shown clearly in the film. He filmed my children and when staging the scenes with the children, he was quite friendly with them. In other scenes I discerned how authoritative he was. He was not appreciated in Terezin and those who worked with him did not like him. I believe that he did not know that he is selling his soul to the devil. He thought that he still had power and standing".

Geron provided the paradise ghetto to the Nazis. The film was edited by somebody else in December 1944; by then Geron was already ashes. On October 28, 1944, he was put on the train that took a transport to the East. "Like a king", Ada relates in 'Prisoner in Paradise', "he did not look right or left".

## **Terezin in Numbers**

Some 158.000 Jews were brought to the ghetto at first from the Czech lands, later also from Germany, Austria, Holland, Denmark, Slovakia and Hungary. Out of these about 90.000 were deported from there to extermination camps, about 4.800 of them survived. Near to 35.500 Jews died in the camp from hunger and disease, at liberation (May 8, 1945) there were some 30.000 Jews there. Out of 12.121 Jewish children (born 1928 – 1945) deported to Terezin, 9001 were sent to death camps, of these only 325 survived.

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