

Stanford

April 30, 2010

How Jews used 'creative resistance' to oppose the Nazis

BY CYNTHIA HAVEN

In the Nazi concentration camp called Terezín, a young Jewish pianist was "playing so wonderfully that tears were running down our cheeks," recalled a fellow prisoner.

The Moravian composer Gideon Klein had responded to the privation and internment by acting as a music teacher and cultural organizer as well as pianist and composer in the Czech "showcase" camp that was, for most, a route to Auschwitz. When Klein played, even the guards stopped to listen on the steps.

"These few hours of spiritual nourishment made many people forget the hunger and misery and long for another concert," wrote Ruth Elias, author of *Triumph of Hope*. "Meanwhile for the artists this was a revolt against the regime."

Holocaust research has traditionally focused on Jews as passive victims in the face of swift and ferocious Nazi aggression. But what of resistance? In particular, what of the creation of art - even in the extremity of hardship and mistreatment?

"People are so focused on the tragedy of the Holocaust - or if they think of resistance, it's of armed resistance - that it's so easy for humanities and arts and letters to get forgotten. Yet that's what makes us human beings," said John Felstiner their campus home.

The common feature of creative resistance, said Mary Felstiner, "is that pushing into the future, that sense that we need to mark this moment because there must be a future out there that will look back on us."

The Felstiners' investigations show that an explosion of drawings, paintings, music, writing, even graffiti was "pervasive all over Europe, all of the time, in unthinkable conditions."

"We want to place this at the heart of the Holocaust," said Mary.

It was not only ubiquitous, it was contagious - even among the Holocaust's children. Composer Klein, who eventually died in 1945 at a Nazi camp, inspired an anonymous Czech teenager to write:

*Under closed eyes he seeks among the keys
As among the veins through which blood flows softly
When you kiss them with a knife and put a song to it.*

"Creativity" sometimes meant little more than leaving a trace, a mark, a scribble. Teenager Marcel Chétovy wrote on a wall in Drancy that he and his father, Moïse, were leaving the deportation camp in France for Auschwitz, "with very good spirits and the hope of returning soon." They were never heard from again.

Sometimes prisoners on forced labor teams left their initials or some other sign in the few scant minutes when a guard's back was turned. In any kind of resistance, the idea of others being killed in retaliation had to be weighed.

Moreover, "Everyone who tried to resist was tormented, at some level, by the question of whether they were taking the means of the perpetrator in order to struggle against the perpetrator," said Mary. "To what extent do you have to act like a Nazi to fight the Nazis?"

"What creative resistance *can't* do is redirect the power of the perpetrators at that moment," she said, but what it can do is "point toward some future" by bearing its meaning like a sealed envelope into in another era and redirecting the world away from violence.

John says of creative resistance, "It's more human than blowing up a train, because of everything it takes to make a piece of art or a poem. The *personhood* is what the Nazis were trying to destroy, to try to erase from the globe."

Mary recalled that "not only Jews but Poles, gypsies, homosexuals and many other groups" were Nazi targets.

"Their policy was not just to remove the people, but to remove the memory of those people, and the very memories those people might have within them," said Mary.

Philosopher Theodor Adorno famously said, "To write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric" - yet one Holocaust survivor did precisely that. The Romanian poet Célán, whose native language was German, translated William Shakespeare's sonnets while confined to a Jewish ghetto.

He is now considered one of the major innovative poets of the 20th century.

Like others involved in "creative resistance," he had to recreate his medium - in his case, he was repelled by his language, the native tongue of the Nazis. Hence, he attempted to reinvent the German language, distancing it from the lyricism of Hölderlin to encompass a new and terrible reality. His "Todesfuge," reflecting his life in a concentration camp, is considered a masterpiece.

The exiled German painter Salomon created 1,300 autobiographical paintings during her time in the south of France while the Nazis prepared to take Paris. Like Célan, Salomon was an innovator - in her case, reinventing a way to tell her story as an operetta. She had only three colors of paint available to her during the war.

The oeuvre, which she called *Life? or Theater? An Operetta*, is perhaps the most innovative documented path through the Holocaust. It also signaled a personal spiritual triumph: By dint of will, she escaped the plague of suicides that had taken her mother and grandmother, but she could not elude deportation to Auschwitz, where she was likely gassed.

For Stanford art and art history Associate Professor Jody Maxmin, the Felstiners' April presentation offered "a clarity and simplicity that reminds me of what drove me to art in the first place."

Perhaps that's one reason why an unexpected sense of exaltation accompanied the standing-room-only event: "The last thing one wants to do is take joy in the Holocaust, but there is an elation to art," said John.

Joy may be the ultimate resistance. As Célan himself wrote:

*There are
still songs to sing beyond
humankind.*