

Part II - Child Holocaust Diarists and Artists

—Mirta Glasman

Although Anne Frank is perhaps the most famous child diarist of the Holocaust, there were other children who contributed memorable records of their lives during the Shoah. One such diarist was **Helga Weiss**. As a young Jewish schoolgirl in Prague, Czechoslovakia, she endured the first waves of the Nazi invasion, and in 1938 began to document the anti-jewish directives in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. In 1941, at age twelve, Helga and her parents were forced out of their home and were interned in the Theresienstadt (Terezin) ghetto and concentration camp, where she documented and painted her experiences in a diary. Daily life in the camp was vividly described and her thoughts deeply expressed in her diary entries. She wrote: *'Does our life have anything in common with the rest of the world? We are only separated from it by a couple of ramparts, but isn't it something else that broke the bonds connecting us with them? When Terezin's gates open one day, once the barbed wire is torn down and the ramparts levelled, will we be able to walk on in life alongside those who stayed outside and went their own uninterrupted way through life?'*

Helga was incarcerated in the Girl's Home L410, Room 28, where close relationships developed between the girls. They depended on each other and loved each other like sisters**. One important aspect of their life was the continuation of their education, under the guidance of scientists, artists, and musicians who taught their pupils secretly. Before being deported to Auschwitz (September-October 1944), she gave her diary and her drawings to her uncle who hid them in a brick wall. Of the 15,000 children brought to Terezin and deported to Auschwitz, only one hundred survived. Helga was one of them. Miraculously, shortly after the war she was able to recover her diary and finished it by writing everything she had experienced in Auschwitz, Freiberg and Mauthausen, where she had no opportunity to write. In 2013, her powerful story through her own words and illustrations was published for the first time under the name of *Helga's Diary*.



Helga's drawing: Arrival in Terezin (1942).

Rutka Laskier, from Poland, was also a child diarist during the Holocaust. From 19 January to 24 April 1943, without her family's knowledge, Rutka kept a diary in an ordinary school notebook, writing in both ink and pencil, making entries sporadically. In it, she discusses atrocities she witnessed which were committed by the Nazis. She described daily life in the Bedzin ghetto, as well as innocent teenage love interests. She also wrote about the gas chambers at the concentration camps, indicating that the horrors of the camps had filtered back to those still living in the ghettos. The diary begins on 19 January with the entry *'I cannot grasp that it is already 1943, four years since this hell began.'* Another entry, one of the final ones, says *'If only I could say, it's over, you die only once... But I can't, because despite all these atrocities, I want to live, and wait for the following day.'* Rutka also wrote: *'The little faith I used to have has been completely shattered. If God existed, He would have certainly not have permitted that human beings be thrown alive into furnaces, and the heads of little toddlers be smashed with gun butts or shoved into sacks and gassed to death.'*

Rutka gradually came to realize that she would not survive and by understanding the importance of her diary as a document of what had happened to the Jewish population of Będzin, she asked her friend Sapińska to help her hide the diary. Sapińska showed Rutka how to hide the diary in her house under the double flooring in a staircase, between the first and second floors.

Rutka and her family were deported to Auschwitz in August 1943. After the ghetto was evacuated and all its inhabitants sent to the death camp, Sapińska returned to the house and retrieved the diary. She kept it in her home library for 63 years and did not share it with anyone but members of her immediate family. In 2005, Adam Szydłowski, the chairman of the Center of Jewish Culture of the Zagłębie Region of Poland, was told by one of Sapińska's nieces about the existence of the diary and he was able to obtain a photocopy that was instrumental in the publishing of its Polish edition. Its publication by Yad Vashem Publications was commemorated with a ceremony in Jerusalem on 4 June 2007. At this event, Sapińska donated the original diary to Yad Vashem.

Frederika "Friedl" Dicker-Brandeis was an Austrian artist and educator. Friedl and her husband were deported to the Terezin ghetto and during their time there, she organized secret art lessons and lectures for the children. She saw drawing and art as a way for the children to express their emotions and describe their environment. In this capacity, she was giving art therapy. In September 1944, Friedl volunteered to follow her husband, who had been deported to Auschwitz. Before she was taken away, she gave to Raja Engländerova, the chief tutor of Girls' Home L 410 (the same home where Helga was interned), two suitcases with 4,500 drawings. After the war, Willy Groag, the director of the Girls' home L 410 brought the suitcases with children's drawings to the Jewish Community in Prague. From the nearly 660 authors of the drawings, 550 were killed in the Holocaust. Most of the drawings are now in a collection in the Jewish Museum in Prague, with some on display in the Pinkas Synagogue in Prague.

In the Lodz ghetto, Mordechai Chaim Rumkowski, the head of the ghetto's Jewish leadership, believed that the only way to keep the Jews of the ghetto alive was to open factories and workshops to show the Germans that they could be productive. In its factories, some children who were over ten years old and could work were taken in and given jobs in order to protect them from deportation. One of the factories that employed children was the tailors' workshop, where vocational courses were set up in a setting known as "szkolka", Polish for "little school." Children were trained not only in their vocation, in courses including machine sewing, hand sewing, cutting and drafting, but were also taught some general studies, including bookkeeping, hygiene and even Yiddish. During this period of great uncertainty and terror, artists and poets in Glazer's tailors' workshop produced an exceptional children's fairytale accompanied by beautifully-drawn pictures. They did not sign their work, nor did they leave any clues as to how to interpret the tale and the pictures. The work was found after the war, in the ruins of the ghetto. It is now known as the "Legend of the Lodz Ghetto Children." It is an extraordinary work that can be interpreted on a number of levels, as many fairytales can. The Legend consists of 17 drawings and text that accompanies each drawing. The terror of the time, and the tragedies experienced by the Jews in the ghetto, are given voice by the desolation evident in some of the scenes, and by symbols used repeatedly. A menacing sun is colored red – the color of blood, the color of danger. A mysterious hand seems to wave hello but could more probably (considering the deportations) be waving goodbye. A fence fails to protect those within it because it is broken and crooked. Although the pictures are naïve and well-suited to a children's fairytale, they cause unrest in the viewer.

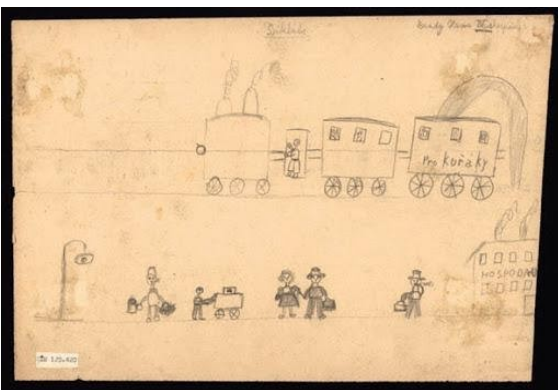


One of the pictures of *The Legend of the Lodz Ghetto Children* pair with its verse that discusses the anguish of the children who may not know how to sew but understand too well that their fate depends on it.

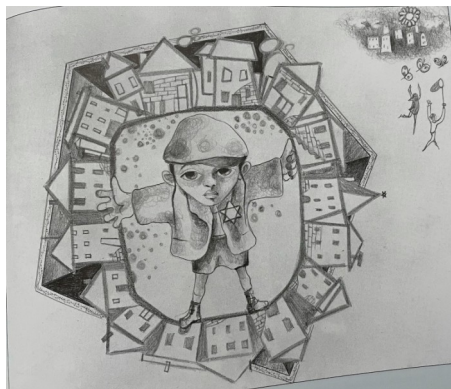
*"Sweat pours off the girl's brow
She looks for help – it's no use, she's on her own.
It's because of the pranks and tricks of the naughty demons and dwarfs
Perpetrated crudely and malevolently
Always ruining her stitches."*

Diaries and drawings by children, teenagers, and young adults during the Holocaust reflect a great variety of personal backgrounds and wartime circumstances. Their authors often addressed themes such as the nature of human suffering, the moral and ethical dimensions of persecution, and the struggle of hope against despair. Each diary reflects a fragment of its author's life, but, taken together, the diaries provide readers with a varied and complex view of young people who lived and died during the Holocaust.

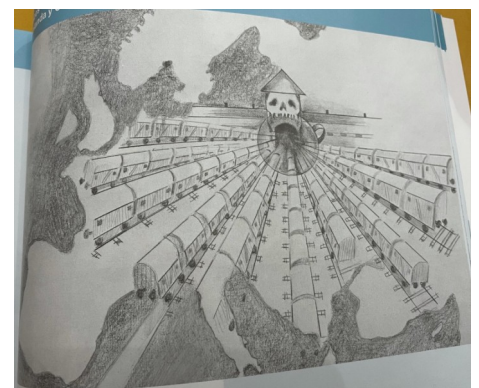
** *The Girls of Room 28: Friendship, Hope, and Survival in Theresienstadt* Hannelore Brenner, Shocken Books, 2009



Hana's drawing from Terezin



Kid trapped in the ghetto. Paul Fux



All the trains lead to Auschwitz. Paul Fux