

Art: A false reality

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- 4 September 2013
- Robert Guttman Gallery, Terezin Ghetto



Film fragments show how SS propagandists wanted Terezín to be seen

Most people wander through museums and galleries giving the artwork a casual glance and maybe watching a few seconds of an avant-garde video piece, while at the same time wondering whether the gallery café serves good coffee.

Truth and Lies.

Filming in the Terezín Ghetto 1942-1945

When: Aug. 29-Feb. 23, 2014, daily except Saturday

Where: Robert Guttman Gallery, U Staré školy 3, Prague 1

Web: Jewishmuseum.cz

"Truth and Lies: Filming in the Terezín Ghetto, 1942-1945," a new exhibit at the Robert Guttman Gallery of the Jewish Museum in Prague in association with the National Film Archives, demands more of the viewers' attention. It endeavors explore not only the conditions in Terezín - a concentration camp used as a transit point for sending Jews and other victims of the Holocaust further east to extermination camps. But it also looks at how the camp was used for propaganda purposes to try to convince anyone who would listen that the Nazis were actually trying to help the Jews.

Terezín was an unusual camp, and Holocaust historians still debate the best way to describe it, with concentration camp, ghetto and transit camp commonly being used. It was not an extermination camp like Auschwitz, but many of the inmates of Terezín were sent on to that and other camps. There were also outbreaks of disease due to overcrowding and poor living conditions. Some 144,000

lived in the Terezín and of those, some 33,000 died of starvation or illness, particularly typhus, and 88,000 were sent to extermination camps.

Extensive texts tell a complex story of how the SS made several films, not just one as had long been thought, showing Terezín as an almost idyllic community. Much of the information, including copies of pictures and documents in German, is printed on boards that pull out from large chests.

Explanations are in Czech and English.

This makes room for a lot more information than would fit on the walls, but it also creates an odd feeling. The gallery visitor opens up a drawer to see some details, but must close it before going on the next set of facts -putting a distasteful chapter of history safely out of sight, and then leaving it safely closed up. The details of the information collected are quite stunning. Not only are there short biographies of the SS members involved in the filming, there is information about the Jewish inmates of Terezín who had professional film and acting experience and wound up becoming unwillingly involved in the projects.

Projectors show the propaganda films - only fragments survive - on endless loops on two walls in the exhibit, while sketches and still photographs are projected on other walls. The first film really is a set of silent clips, a few seconds here and there, from the 1942 film Ghetto Theresienstadt, referring to the town's German name. It shows people arriving and having their possessions inspected. The most complete sections show bread being baked, work in a lumber mill and women in some sort of factory setting. A meeting of a so-called self-governing board and well-equipped hospital is also shown.

Some additional filming is thought to have been related to efforts in 1943 to beautify the camp before a Red Cross inspection visit, but none of this footage survives save for some production stills. A few inmates thought the film had a pragmatic benefit: their lives would be safe as long as film continued and a good performance might even help them be spared. But it was not the case. Most of the people who appeared in this film were sent to extermination camps before the editing was even completed.

A few complete scenes of another film do survive, an elaborate sound production usually known as The Fuehrer Gives the Jews a City. In addition to the main cast, inmates of Terezín were given instructions on cards and used for large crowd scenes. The director, Karel Pečený, kept extending the filming deadline and it wasn't finished until March 1945, just two months before World War II ended. The director's delays did help spare lives, as the Nazis were unable to liquidate the camp while filming was taking place, and by the time filming ended the war was clearly lost. The Nazi authorities had to turn their attention to other issues. Pečený would eventually be sentenced for his collaboration with the Nazis, and then pardoned. The record of his life's work shows that he had no sympathy for the Nazis and probably delayed the filming on purpose.

This film is more clearly staged, with artists making statues and sculptures, and others happily involved in various forms of non-strenuous labor such as making handbags, shoes and clothing. After a short work day, the inmates are allowed a choice of recreational activities. Hundreds of inmates are seen enjoying being spectators at a football game. Well-dressed and manicured people are seen in a vast library and at a classical music recital. Later, people are seen laughing while they tend vegetable gardens, play cards and knit. Documents give some insight into the scene.

One person who was child at the camp recalls that aside from filming scenes they had no access to toys. During filming some children manage to steal a rocking horse, and everyone lived in fear of retaliation. Set designers were also used, according to the documents. The places seen in the film are not always the real places where people lived and worked, but idealized sets made for propaganda purposes. The still photographs and sketches tell a contrasting story to the films. Some sketches, made by Terezín inmates with artistic talent, show that plays and dramas were performed and there was some cultural life - but the conditions were not as grand as the film depicts.

One inmate, Jo Spier, even documented the film making, and his illustrations provide valuable insight into the missing scenes. Other sketches are more somber - people pulling a cart filled with cloth-shrouded corpses. Sketches of the medical facilities have a more gruesome air than the clean and bright place seen in the film fragment.

Lastly there is the extensive biographical material on all of the key players. This makes it easy to see both the SS officers involved in filming the camp and the inmates who worked on or were seen in the films as real people, not just anonymous faces in official ID photos.

There is too much to absorb in one visit. The museum does, however, sell a multilingual CD-ROM with both film fragments, the photographs and sketches and extensive commentary on the filmmaking process.