

Music Theatre Play

The first outcome of our remembrance project was a play which was available as a manuscript by 2002. It is a play about the fate of a group of girls, most of whom were murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau. It brings to the stage the lives of the girls between 1943 and 1944 in the microcosm of »Room 28« in the Theresienstadt ghetto.

It is a play about fear and hope, friendship and solidarity, about the opera »Brundibár« and the importance of art, education and human values. Music plays an important role as well as hope – in Czech »Naděje«, in Hebrew, »Hatikvah«. The play vividly conveys what Zionism, the longing for »Eretz Israel«, meant for the children in the ghetto and for all Jewish people who were persecuted during the time of the Nazi regime.



English edition, September 2020



»Ghetto-Tränen 1944« (Ghetto-Tears 1944). Freiburg. Theodor-Heuss-Gymnasium. Directed by Elmar Wittmann.



Otto Pollak (1894 - 1978)
Photo from 1919

Plot

Helga Pollak returns to Theresienstadt in April 1945 in a terrible state. Auschwitz-Birkenau and the Oederan labor camp are behind her. Accommodation in a quarantine hospital. Flashback: Feverish nightmares bring to life past experiences. Reunion with her father. Reunion with Flaška and Ela, who have remained in Theresienstadt. The curtain rises.

Helga enters Room 28. The scene marks the beginning of the common story of the girls brought to life by spotlighting special moments: the arrival of new transports; conversations between girls before they fall asleep; singing with their carer Tella; celebrating Shabbat with Margit Mühlstein; inauguration ceremony for their organization Ma'agal; listening to Verdi's Requiem resounding from the cellar of L 410; listening to a Brundibár-performance, talking about the opera; art classes with Friedl Dicker-Brandeis; Eva meeting her boyfriend Harry; Helga visiting his father...Both Helga's diary and the meetings with her father are key plot elements of the play.

In autumn 1944 over 18,400 people are transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, among them most of the girls of Room 28.

Helga must separate from her father on 23 October 1944. Otto Pollak is left behind in shock. For weeks he would not note down a word.

Otto Pollak. Monday, 1 January 1945

New Year's Day. Snow drifts in the morning. I think of my child all the time. In the afternoon Helga's friends Ela and Flaška come to wish me good luck. It hurts me more than it makes me happy. I miss Helga so much.

Friday, 4 January 1945

Frieda's [Helga's mother] 37th birthday – how might she be doing? I wonder if she holds us to be still alive. In her last letter she wrote, »Watch out for our Helga until we can reunite again«. If Frieda knew that my only child was taken from me and that I am no longer able to watch over my Dearest.

Often and often, I ask myself whether I should have gone with my child, whether I have betrayed Frieda's last warning by entrusting Helga to Tella, her caretaker, who was in the same transport. The head of the Girls' Home and others advised me not to accompany her. They told me that we only would be together on the train, and that my sacrifice would be in vain. All these objections would not have prevented me from setting out on the journey into the unknown with my only child, would I have two legs and could I carry my own luggage. For I know what moral, spiritual and material support I was for my child in Theresienstadt.



Helga Pollak, 1939



www.room28.net/exhibition

Exhibition

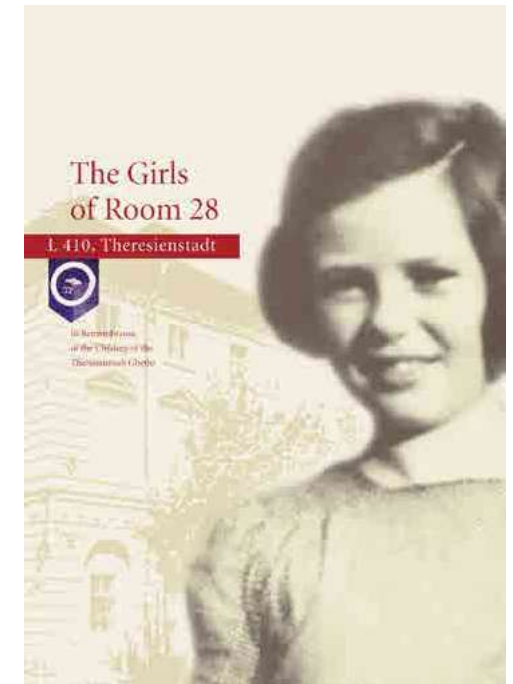
The exhibition was created in 2004 in addition to the book **The Girls of Room 28** and opened on 23 September 2004 in Schwerin as part of the festival »Forbidden Music«. The idea was to give more space to the original documents and make it easier for the survivors to tell their story to young people along the panels. This hope was fulfilled. For many years the survivors accompanied the exhibition and shared their experiences with young people all over the country, especially in Germany and in the Czech Republic.

This is a story of the deepest despair and the loss of childhood (...) It is a very Jewish story – and a very universal story at the same time. Its message is genuine and provocative – injustice must be challenged. The story calls on us not to lose hope, and this hope is not a banal one and not founded on naivety. Always extraordinary, the story shows what can be achieved by true friendship for every single one of us and for society as a whole.

We should all learn from this story, should we not?

Yehuda Bauer (1926-2024)

He wrote the Foreword to the exhibition.



Design: Renate Schlicht and Walter Hagenow, Wiesbaden
Consultant 2004: Benedikt Burkhard, Frankfurt a. M.

© Idea, concept, text, documents
Curated and managed by
Hannelore Brenner, Berlin, 2004/2025



In 2005, exhibitions followed in Berlin, Leipzig, Freiburg, Salzburg, Überlingen, Leverkusen and Koblenz. In 2006 in Hamburg, Leutershausen/Bergstraße, Dorsten, Aalen and Düsseldorf. To date, around 50 exhibitions have been held in Germany alone.

Over the years the women had been invited countless times to the openings and to many other events, especially performances of the children's opera »Brundibár«. They spared no effort to attend an event if invited. They came from Israel, the US, Vienna, Brno, Cheb, and Sankt Petersburg. They were always ready to remember the past and share their experiences. Above all, they felt it was their moral duty to remember their childhood friends who were murdered in the Holocaust. Together, they transformed our joint venture into a vibrant international project of remembrance.

The growing interest in their story naturally led me to take on the role of organizing and managing our project. I named it **Room 28 Projects**, created a logo and a website. Finally, the various branches were brought together under the Edition Room 28 website and also under the NPO Room 28 website, whose mission is to secure the future of the exhibition and educational project.



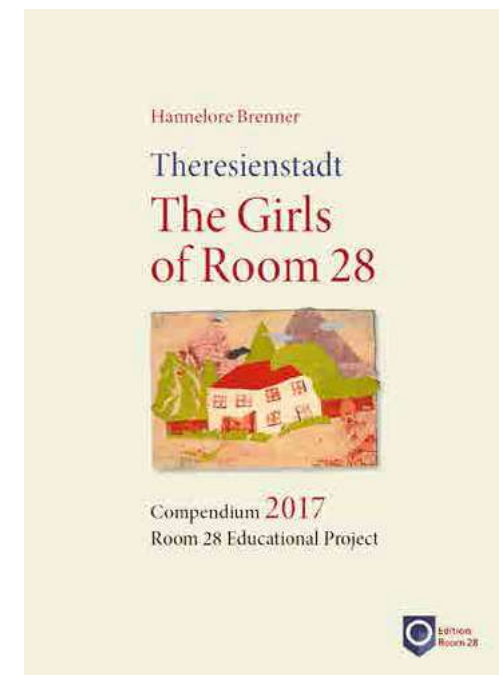
www.edition-room28.de/room28projects

A Bridge between the Generations

Teachers were among the first to recognise the exceptional quality of our project. When drama teacher Lisbeth Wutte invited the group of survivors to be part of a Brundibár project in Überlingen on Lake Constance in September 2005, she said: »Our generation has repressed and forgotten so much. This is a unique opportunity to create a bridge between the generations.«

Years later, she contributed an essay on »Resilience« for the Compendium. Having just completed a study on how challenges spark resilience, she approached the girls' story with the insight she had gained. »It is not the causes or symptoms of the difficulties that matter most for resilience, but the resources that can be mobilized to overcome them«. As regards »The Girls of Room 28« Lisbeth wrote:

»What did the carers or teachers, or the art teacher Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, leave undone to make life for the girls worth living despite everything! Can a child experience the supportive effect of friendship any more intensely than in Ma'agal? Can the value of life be conveyed more vividly than through educators who have managed to preserve their dignity in the face of devastating brutality of an inhuman world and live out this dignity in the presence of their protégés, imperceptibly implanting it in them?«



The Compendium is created to acquaint schools, teachers and people active in the field of education, culture and Holocaust Remembrance with the book and the exhibition »The Girls of Room 28« and with the projects that evolved from our project of remembrance.

It also contains reflections on the educational value by renowned educationalists as well as exemplary teaching material.



Room 28 Initiative

In 2006 an ambitious idea for a project gave rise to our “Room 28 Initiative”. The project’s title was “The last Chord: Theresienstadt”. Its basic idea was to make a journey through the Czech Republic, visiting together the women’s hometowns and other places that were significant to them, inviting a group of young people to it, and to document the journey in various media.

It was clear that this project could only be carried out with substantial financial support and that it required a strong advocacy alliance to promote our cause. So, all the friends who had come together in Špindlerův Mlýn joined the alliance, among them the pianist Edith Kraus, the painter Helga Weissová and Paul Aron Sandfort, who had played the trumpet in the Theresienstadt performances of Brundibár.

On 20 September 2006, we gathered in the Conference Hall of the Horal Hotel to seal our joint initiative with a festive event. It also signaled the tenth anniversary of our Jewish-German alliance. Above all, it was a commemorative act for those who did not live to see the end of the war.

From above:

Judith Rosenzweig, Paul A. Sandfort and Hannelore Brenner, Edith Steiner-Kraus and daughter, Hanka and Abraham Weingarten

In 2007 the non-profit organization **Room 28 e.V.** was founded in Berlin. Its central mission: to share the story of »The Girls of Room 28« with present and future generations. The vision that guided its foundation was to establish a permanent home for the exhibition that would act as a focal point for our Project of Remembrance and Education.

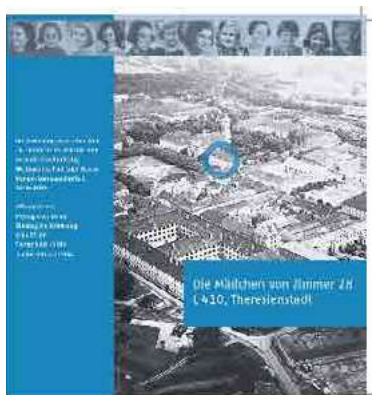


The educational nature of our project was evident from the very beginning, and teachers were among the first to join our association. Some launched extraordinary projects in their schools, invited survivors to share their story with young students and presented our exhibition, often accompanied by performances of »Brundibár«. Over the years our project has sparked collaborations and school partnerships, one with a Czech elementary school.

To this day, the greatest drive and inspiration come from the teachers in our organization. They have demonstrated in an exemplary manner how the girls' stories and the teaching material can be integrated into their practical teaching and used for extracurricular projects. One of the most important plans that arose from it is a permanent **Exhibition** featuring audio and film clips designed to also serve as an **interactive educational platform**.



www.room28.net/



An Agreement and its Mission

On 23 January 2008, the exhibition opened in the German Bundestag as part of the Remembrance Day for the Victims of National Socialism. Thanks to our organization we could raise funds to invite the group of friends to Berlin and to arrange a special event at the Academy of Arts on 22 January 2008, the first event organized by our association.



It was then in Berlin, when the survivors and me reaffirmed our cooperation regarding the exhibition by adding a supplementary clause to our 2007-agreement which had been necessary in order to affirm my copyright of the documents and biographies shared in the book vis-à-vis the American publisher. The supplement agreement defines my role as manager and promoter and our shared goal of creating a lasting memory.



Perhaps, one day, all the »Stones of remembrance« could be brought together to establish a Foundation? The idea has been in the air ever since. But for the time being, there was our newly founded NPO Room 28 with a wonderful circle of friends devoted to our cause, and the survivors as our honorary members.

Stones of Remembrance

Our friends from Theresienstadt and all those we loved and lost in the Holocaust have no grave where we can leave a stone in remembrance. That's why we wanted the book, and that's why we wanted this exhibition – as our stones of remembrance.

Helga Kinsky, née Pollak

We wish that by remembering our friends of Room 28 and all the wonderful people who took care of us, the human values and achievements, which became so important to us, will live on: tolerance, empathy, education, culture, friendship and love.

Anna Hanusová, nee Flachová



Stones of Remembrance



"Our friends from Theresienstadt and all those we loved and lost in the Holocaust have no grave where we can leave a stone in remembrance. That's why we wanted the book, and that's why we wanted this exhibition – as our Stones of Remembrance."
This illustration is to help ensure that what happened under the Nazi regime will never happen again. Seven stories of our experiences, valued with young people and people who can and should live forward. All of this has filled us with the hope that remembering our friends from Room 28 will help promote those human values that were there – and still are – so important to us: tolerance, empathy, education, culture, friendship and love.
Helga Kinsky-Pollak, Anna Hanusová and others

How it all began

It all began with words and pictures over left by children at two previous books – the autograph book composed by Anna Flachová and the Theresienstadt story kept by her friend Helga Pollak. It began with the desire of these two women to commemorate the children of Theresienstadt who were murdered in the Holocaust and to bring the adults who had grown their trust and love in the darkest of times and shared with them values that inspired their rising lives.
My involvement began with (then 82-year-old) Helga's open friendship. Research for a audio documentary about the story of his first performance in Theresienstadt had led me to the survivors of Room 28, and to Anna and Helga. We became friends. (A.K.A. I did my help them make their wish come true. So we made common cause. Most of the survivors from Room 28 joined in.
In September 1998 we all met at the Czech mountain resort of Spindlúv Mlýn and our work of remembrance began. We met again every year in September, until in 2004 the book and the exhibition were ready to tell their story.
Anna Hanusová, Helga Kinsky-Pollak & others