

# Theresienstadt

## The Girls of Room 28

The Creation of a Lasting Memory  
1996 - 2026

Room 28

The Legacy of the Girls of  
Room 28 Theresienstadt



All of you  
Nameless ones  
And friends  
You live with us  
In the old castle  
Of remembrance  
You are with us  
Because we think of you



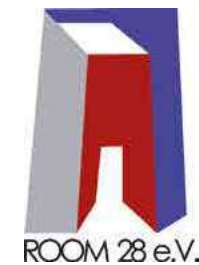
**Hannelore Brenner**

# **Theresienstadt**

## **The Girls of Room 28**

### **The Creation of a Lasting Memory**

- ▶ Feature and Documentary Film
- ▶ Music Theatre Play
- ▶ Sound and Film Archive
- ▶ Permanent Exhibition
- ▶ Edition Room 28
- ▶ Room 28 e.V.



Looking back with the Future in Mind  
Room 28 Project of Remembrance  
1996-2026

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Edition Room 28, January 2026

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Front cover: Banner from the exhibition with a poem by Handa Pollak

Back cover: painting by Helga Pollak made in Theresienstadt 1943/1944

Two photos on page 22 and page 28 are from [www.evelinfrerk.de](http://www.evelinfrerk.de)



[www.edition-room28.de](http://www.edition-room28.de)

## Looking for

- ▶ Cooperation partners
- ▶ Sponsors and fellow campaigners

to establish a team and to create  
a multimedia memorial embracing art, history and education.

If you are interested, do not hesitate to contact me.

Hannelore Brenner

[hannelore.brenner@room28.net](mailto:hannelore.brenner@room28.net)

mobile: +49 (0)162 71 61 897

phone: +49 (0)30 69 18 395

[www.edition-room28.de](http://www.edition-room28.de)



**T**he world has changed since 7 October 2023. Germany's »Erinnerungskultur« - Holocaust-Remembrance Culture -, widely considered to be exemplary, is facing its most severe crisis to date, and our »Room 28 Project of Remembrance«, unique in its international appeal and impact, is on the threshold to...? Oblivion? Because the survivors of the Holocaust are no longer with us? Because from one moment to the other hatred, violence, and unspeakable slogans dominate the streets and media worldwide opening the floodgates for ideological perversion and political corruption of concepts, terms and values? Values that are of vital importance for social cohesion and coexistence.

The aim of this brochure is to establish an alliance in the spirit of »Room 28«. The name itself may sound banal, but the idea behind it is not. The story of the girls who once lived together in a room in the Theresienstadt ghetto reminds us of the importance of concepts and values such as humanity, solidarity, art, and resistance. These are the very concepts and values that are at stake in our utterly disrupted world, values we need to stand up for and defend.

For this reason, I would like to set up a team of like-minded people and forge an alliance to preserve what has been achieved, collected, and produced over the past thirty years, and to transform a precious legacy into a cross-media and international work of art, history, and education.

This brochure is intended for people who want to play a part in creating a lasting living memory together and pass on the story of these girls for present and future generations.

**Partners** are especially needed from the fields of

**Film** – to create a feature and a documentary film.

**Theatre, Music** – to stage the play in which music plays an essential role.

**Exhibition** – to develop a permanent exhibition rooted in the existing one.

**Education** – to develop and design the Room 28 Educational project.

**Archive** – exploring an extensive media archiv (audio and film).

**Publishing** – to ensure the future of the Edition Room 28 publications and to find publishers for the books in other countries.

### **We Welcome**

**Donors** who wish to support and finance our efforts and goals.

**Friends** who join us in standing up for a better world.

**Supporters** in whatever way possible.

**New Members** in our organization »Room 28«, which may, if fortune favors us, be transformed into a foundation.

I want to thank those who have kept alive the story of »The Girls of Room 28« in their own way and field in the past two decades. I want to thank the members of our association for their commitment, initiatives and support for various projects over the years.

My thoughts and thanks go to the survivors of Room 28, to **Anna Hanusová** (1930-2014) and **Helga Kinsky** (1930-2020), the »founding mothers« of the remembrance project, and to their childhood friends from Theresienstadt. They put their trust in me. This is what gave me the determination to do what I did and to achieve what I achieved. And the vision behind.

With this brochure I want to give you an insight into an extraordinary project of remembrance and an idea of what has been achieved so far. Above all, I want to give you an idea of what has not yet been achieved and what still needs to be done to fulfill a hope and make a vision come true.

Should you be interested in getting involved in one way or the other, I would be happy to hear from you.

Hannelore Brenner  
January 2026





Zwirnen

»The Girls of Room 28« were Jewish children sent from Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia to Theresienstadt concentration camp during WWII. They were among the around 75,700 Jews from what was termed by the Germans »Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia«, who, with the incursion of German troops into their country, lost their homes, their property and their freedom and were eventually deported to Theresienstadt, a small fortress town near Prague. There, in Room 28, in the Girls' Home L 410, their paths crossed.

They spent their lives together in the closest of quarters – thirty girls confined to about 325 square feet. They slept on narrow bunks, ate their meagre rations together and listened as the caregivers read to them from a book when evening fell. Once the lights were out, they would talk about their experiences, share their thoughts and dreams, their worries and their fears.

While the older prisoners of Theresienstadt suffered increasing physical deprivation and severe psychological stress, which claimed over 33,300 of their lives, a group of adults – educators, teachers, artists, Zionists – were determined to protect the children, to teach and to educate them and, as Fredy Hirsch put it, »to save them from the devaluation of what is good.«



Terezin/Theresienstadt ©Jewish Museum, Prague



Girls' Home L 410. Two windows of the upper floor belonged to Room 28.

In the summer 1943, the girls participated in performances of the children's opera »Brundibár« in Theresienstadt; Ela Stein played the cat, Maria Mühlstein often the sparrow, sometimes Aninka. And Anna, Handa and some of their friends were part of the choir.

Time and over again, girls would suddenly be torn from their midst and forced to board one of the dreaded transports to the East. New girls would arrive, new friendships would grow – only to be torn asunder again by the next transports.

Despite of the fear, there were times when the girls experienced Room 28 as an island of friendship and hope. They grew together as a community, with their own hymn and flag, and founded their own little society called »Ma'agal« – which is a Hebrew word meaning »circle« and, in a metaphorical sense, »perfection«. For this was their goal.

In September and October 1944 transports carried away more than 18,400 ghetto inmates to Auschwitz-Birkenau, among them about 14,000 children, boys and girls. Five of the girls from Room 28 stayed behind in Theresienstadt.

From about 50 to 60 girls who passed through Room 28, fifteen survived.

## This book tells their story.

A moving book about intellectual resistance, human dignity in a time of inhumanity, and about the beauty and power of a child's imagination.

**Süddeutsche Zeitung**

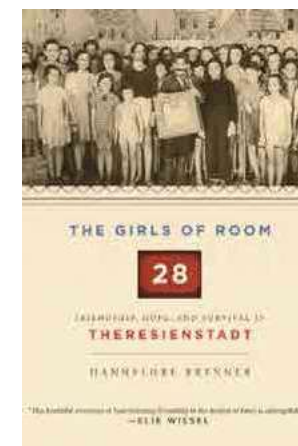
This beautiful evocation of heartwarming friendship in the darkest of times is unforgettable.

**Elie Wiesel**

The book, first published by Droemer, Munich in 2004, is the starting point of our project of remembrance. Editions in Czech, Polish, English and Brazilian followed. In June 2025, I published an updated, revised, redesigned and extended edition. It gives deeper insight into what the girls went through after leaving Theresienstadt for Auschwitz-Birkenau, and where and how they were liberated. The book completes the »Edition Room 28« series and makes the most important element of our project available again in the German language.



[www.edition-room28.de/maedchen-von-zimmer-28](http://www.edition-room28.de/maedchen-von-zimmer-28)



American edition, Schocken Books, New York, 2009  
First German edition, Droemer, Munich, 2004



Poster for the Brundibár performance by František Zelenka ©Terezin Memorial

Music played an important role in Room 28. Ella Pollak, whom the girls called Tella, took care of the girls. She was a professional pianist and music teacher and started a choir with her charges. *When it was getting dark and we would sing those wonderful Hebrew songs – it sounded so lovely. We really believed we were very good singers*, remembered Ela.

Now and again in the evenings, compelling voices would drift up to their room under the roof. They were coming from the old, vaulted cellar of the building. All inmates knew that Rafael Schächter was rehearsing with his choir – Mozart's Bastien and Bastienne, Smetana's Bartered Bride, or the unforgettable Requiem by Verdi. *It was like angels are singing in hell*, recalled Handa.

On 23 September 1943 the opera »Brundibár« was staged for the first time in the ghetto. More than fifty performances followed. Whenever they sang the finale, »Brundibár poražen« (We have win over Brundibár), there was a stormy applause. *We have soaked up this moment of freedom*, Ela, who played the cat, recounted vividly. *And we did not have to wear the yellow star while we were on stage. And this meant that for this moment we were free.*

In mid-summer 1944 the »Beautification of the Town« was in full swing. A pavilion was set up in front of the Girls' Home, and the »Stadtkapelle« (town band) and the »Ghetto-Swingers« took turns giving concerts. From the window the girls watched in amazement and listened to music they haven't heard in a long time, if ever – like jazz and swing, music that was banned since the Nazis seized power in their homelands in 1938/1939.

Music also echoed in the hearts of the girls. After Handa had listened to a concert of Smetana's *The Bartered Bride* directed by Rafael Schächter, she felt *like being caught in dreams of beautiful things*. She could not stop thinking about the music. *Even as I fell asleep, I could still hear »Our True Love«.*

»The music has ended,« Helga Pollak wrote in her diary on 5 April 1944, after she had listened to a Beethoven concert. »People are getting up from their seats. I don't want to leave. Why am I in Theresienstadt? Everything was just so beautiful – and now this dark, grey Theresienstadt! I would like to crawl inside the piano – there is music inside! And outside, it is a prison.«

Twelve-year-old Helga Pollak from Vienna was part of the community in Room 28 since she had arrived in January 1943. It was there that she jotted down her experiences and recorded whatever she felt was worth holding on to.



Pavilion in front of the Girls' Home.



### **Helga on Wednesday, 10 March 1943**

One of our carers makes signs for us to attach to our bunk beds. Each girl chooses a motto and a symbol that is meaningful to her. My symbol is the lighthouse and my motto is: Be prepared. The girls say the lighthouse could represent hope. But I imagine that we are all exposed to a storm here, surrounded by the raging sea – the war.

### **Helga on Friday, 2 April 1943**

Yesterday we had our first meeting in our blue and white outfits... We are going to have a kind of a parliament, our caretakers are the ministers followed by delegates consisting of two classes, the second class (lower house) and the first class (upper house) – this is the Ma'agal. Girls who are dutiful and friendly and who could serve as role model are voted into the Ma'agal.

### **Helga's father Otto Pollak on Tuesday, 6 July 1943**

As a shield in her Home Helga chose a lighthouse. She says it is her symbol of life. May the lighthouse show her the way through the stormy waves of life and lead her out of darkness into the light. Today I surprised my child with a drawing depicting the silhouette of a sailing ship approaching a lighthouse. Helga was overjoyed.

## Hymn of Room 28

My chceme jeden celek být  
chceme se vesměs rádi mít  
chceme a budem  
přišli jsme a půjdem  
chceme se domů navrátit

My půjdem proti zlému  
klestíme cestu dobrému  
my zlo zatratíme  
dřív se nevrátíme  
pak zaspíváme píseň svou:

Ma'agal musí zvítězit  
nás k dobré cestě obrátit  
ruce si podáme  
pak si zaspíváme  
hymnu našeho domova

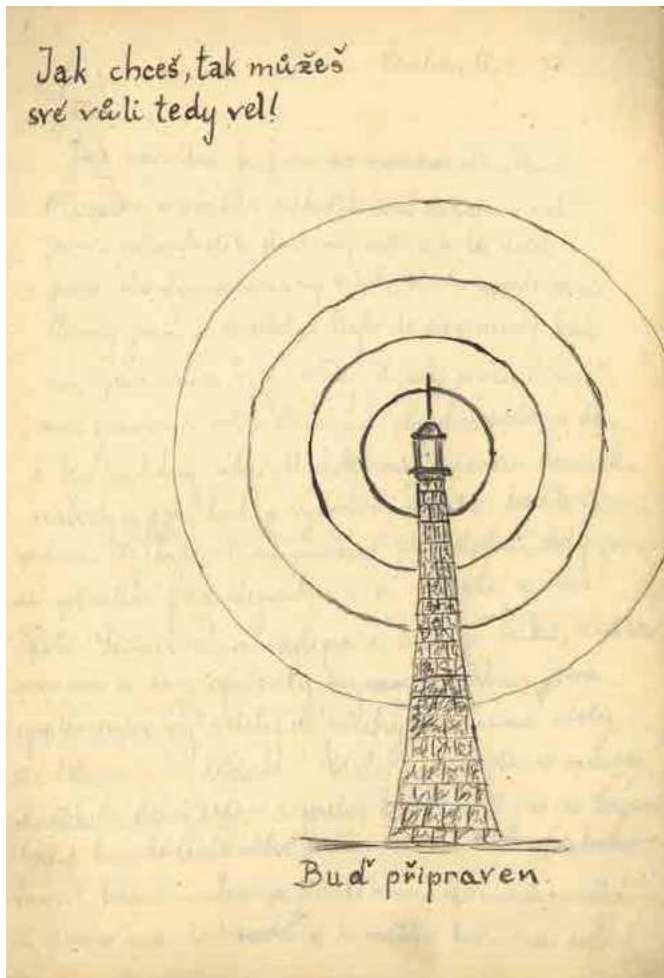
We pledge to live in unity  
Cherish each other  
stand for each other  
We came here and we will  
Surely one day return home

We will fight evil  
And clear our path to what is good  
We will chase evil away  
We won't return home until then  
And then we will sing:

Ma'agal must prevail  
Set us down the right path  
We take each other by the hand  
And sing  
The hymn of our home



Flag of the girls and their organization  
»Ma'agal«, which is Hebrew for circle and, in a  
metaphorical sense, perfection.



Above: If you want to, then you can. So command your will!  
Below: Be ready.

### **Helga on Friday, 9 July 1943**

Papa made me very happy today; he had my symbol, the lighthouse, painted for me. Lighthouse – freedom – hope – independence.

### **Otto Pollak on Sunday, 5 September 1943**

A dark day despite sunshine. Helga is all churned up. Some of her best friends must leave for transport. For each of them she has a little gift. The evening is awful. Saying our goodbyes, maybe forever, is heart-wrenching.

### **Helga on Sunday, 5 September 1943**

What a terrible day! Pavla, Helena, Zdeňka, Olile and Popinka are all leaving us. The goodbyes were hard. (...) At eight o'clock I went looking for Zdeňka. She was with her entire family, all sitting on their luggage. She was so happy to see someone before she left that she cried and laughed at the same time.

*Helga wrote her diary in Czech. After the Nazis annexed Austria in 1938, she lived with her father's family in Kyjov, Czechoslovakia.*

## An Island in a Raging Sea

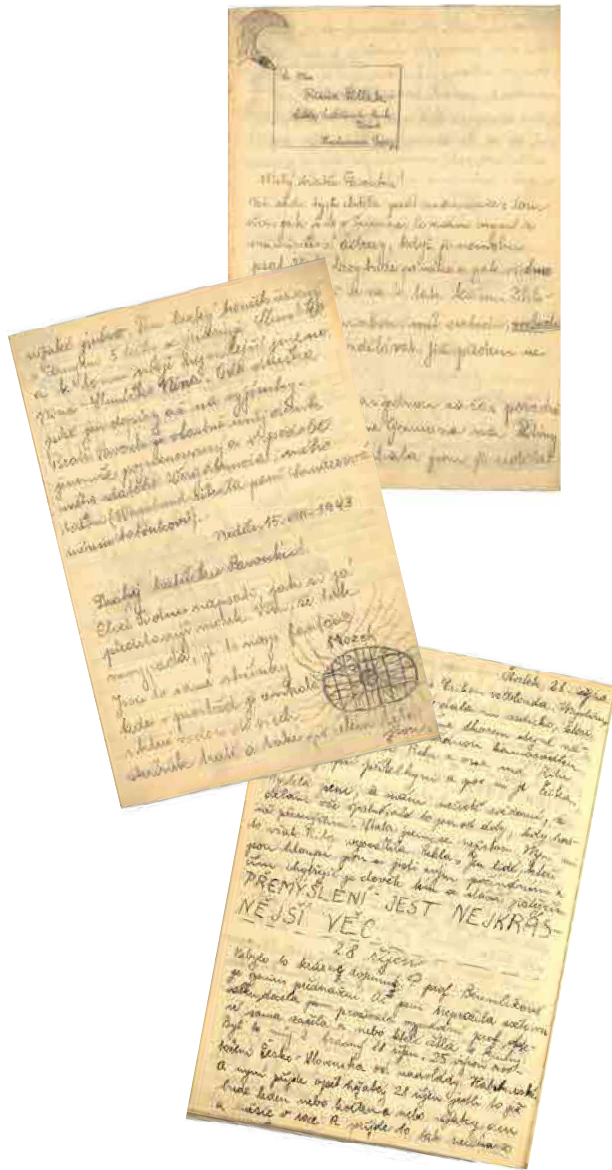
The diary of Helga Pollak made it possible to reconstruct daily life in Room 28 and set it against the backdrop of major events in the ghetto. Most importantly, it reveals the atmosphere in Room 28, this “island in a raging sea”.

The diary takes readers into the world of a 12-13-year-old girl from Vienna, for whom writing is a vital means of reflection and an equally vital form of dialogue with an imaginary friend. In the book »The Girls of Room 28«, Helga’s diary became the heart of the story and her father’s notes an equally important part.

For Helga’s friends, the diary acted as a catalyst for their joint efforts to remember their childhood in Theresienstadt. I became both, witness and participant of this process when we came together every September between 1998 and 2004 in Spindlermühle, Czech Republic. A passage from Helga’s diary, words from Flaška’s scrapbook, a poem from Handa’s notebook, a drawing, a photograph, a song – suddenly, the past would come alive for the women, and I too was swept along by this stream of consciousness into the center of a story that would never let me go.



Spindlermühle, September 2004



### Sunday, 15 August 1943

Dear little brother Spider! What's the point of having Mom's address, if I can't write to her? But the war will soon be over, and then I'll tell her everything. I'm so much looking forward to it – seeing Mom again, having freedom. Freedom! Being able to study!

### Thursday, 28 October 1943

Erika gave me a little heart that she carved out of wood. (...) Recently, I've been feeling guilty, thinking that I'm doing everything wrong. But that's only since I started thinking about so many things. It made me feel insecure. But now Rita [one of the carers] explained it to me. She said: »Only stupid people are sure of their actions and themselves. The smarter a person is, the more they doubt.« THINKING IS THE MOST BEAUTIFUL THING!

### Monday, 13 December 1943

Transports, transports! This terrible word shocks the inmates of Theresienstadt. Two transports with 2,500 people each, are leaving. Four of us are going: Irena and Eva Landa, Fiška and Milka. Fiška and Milka are held in reserve. Rumors spread that all Jews from the Protectorate will be sent to Birkenau.