

Room 28 Projects
Press Release, 27.10.2014



Speech of Holocaust survivor Helga Pollak-Kinsky

held on 28 January 2014 at the **United Nations in Geneva, Assembly Hall**
together with Hannelore Brenner **on occasion of the**
International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust

Hannelore

In memory of all the Jewish people, who were deprived of their rights, expelled from their homes, persecuted, deported and murdered by the Nazi regime and their willing executioners.

Helga

In memory of all the adults – carers, teachers, artists - who helped us Jewish children in the darkest of times, who lifted our spirits, who helped us to maintain our faith in ourselves and in humanity.

Hannelore

In memory of people like Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, Ilse Weber, Hans Krása, Viktor Ullmann, Rafael Schächter and so many other.

Helga

In memory of the children of Theresienstadt who were murdered in Auschwitz: Ruth Gutmann, Hanna Lissau, Lenka Lindt.

Hannelore

Last words into the autograph-book of Helga's friend Anna Flachová, called Flaška: "Dear Flaška, human beings are in this world to do good. Anyone who does not abide by this principle has no right to be a human being. If you want to fulfil your mission on this earth, act accordingly. In memory of my sweetheart, Lenka Lindt, October 15, 1944"

Helga

In memory of Pavla Seiner, Zdenka Löwy, Erika Stránská, Maria Mühlstein -

Hannelore

"Dear Flaška, never forget what we experienced together, how we sang and dreamt – and the concerts with Baštik! And never forget what was beautiful in our Room 28.
A kiss for you from your Maria Mühlstein, October 13, 1944"

Helga

I have been invited to speak to you as “a survivor of the Holocaust”. This only gives you a general idea of who I am. I was born into a Jewish family, I belong to the people stigmatized by the Nazis as “Untermenschen”, as subhuman beings. I belong to the people who were deprived of their property and their civic rights, who were persecuted, deported, imprisoned - - doomed to be killed.

I was lucky. I escaped the hell of Auschwitz, after having been sent there from Theresienstadt in October 1944. I was lucky to be reunited with my father half a year later, when I came back to Theresienstadt Ghetto almost starved to death. And I was lucky to be able to join my mother in England in April 1946, seven years after I last saw her. She had fled to England in 1939.

From my father’s side, more than 60 relatives were murdered by the killing machinery of the Nazis. Only my father, my cousin and I survived.

From about 60 girls, who - for a longer or shorter period of time - lived with me in Theresienstadt, in Room 28, fifteen girls survived.

From about 15,000 children who were deported to Theresienstadt Ghetto to be sent further to the East, less than one-thousand survived.

I am one of them.

It is by pure luck, that I survived.

When I arrived in Auschwitz in a transport of 1,700 people, 200 young women passed the selection and were sent to work in Germany. I was amongst them. 1500 people were killed the very next day.

To this very day, thinking about the six million Jewish people, and many more people of other nations and backgrounds that were murdered in the Second World War and the Holocaust, makes me feel kind of paralyzed - helpless. These are numbers of such dimensions, and acts of terror of such dimensions, that I simply cannot imagine them - six million people killed by arbitrary acts! - by acts of law, killed by a perfectly functioning bureaucracy, by people ready to kill those who were once their neighbours and fellow citizens, their colleagues and partners, sometimes even their relatives and friends.

When I think about it, talk to you about it, now that I hear the music, pictures come back. I can see the thousands of people arriving in Auschwitz, people going through the selection, people clinging to each other, people being separated, people going to be killed.

So many people went this way.

Hannelore

Verses from Helga’s friend Handa Drori, survivor of Room 28

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

Helga

How can we mourn six million people? How can we show our sorrow and our compassion? I think we can do it only together – by every one of us paying homage to those we knew, to those to whom we have some kind of connection. And by giving these people a voice, by listening to what they had to say when they lived, what they wanted us to know, when they said good-bye, by letting their words, their music and their poetry resound and their works of art be seen in the world of today. By giving their hopes and their despair, their ideas and their visions a stage.

Verses from Lenka Lindt, a girl of Room 28:

Hannelore

Eva, Eva, why did you go away?
why did you leave an open scar behind?
why did you go away, to a land so remote.

Helga

Lenka, are you angry with me?
But there was nothing I could do.
I had to go away
I could not defeat the Germans.

Hannelore

I'm not angry with you, Eva. I do understand.
I know that if you could
You would fulfill my wishes.
You know, don't you, Evička
That after the war, all will be better
And we will never leave one another.

Helga

When our friends of Room 28 were forced to leave on a transport to Auschwitz, they left notes for their friends - some wrote a letter, some left a few words in an album. My friend Flaska is the only one, who could preserve her scrapbook, as she was not deported to Auschwitz. Years later, when I met Flaška again, when we talked about our childhood in the Ghetto Theresienstadt, read in her scrapbook and read in my Theresienstadt diary, our childhood revived – and with it the voices and the faces of those we knew. I see them clearly before my eyes - children who would be my age today. They never grew up.

Hannelore

From Helga's diary. Thursday, August 26, 1943

Things are terrible here right now. There is an awful tension. Transports are being prepared, off to a new ghetto - into the unknown. It looks like Pavla and Zdenka have to leave.

Helga

Saturday, September 4, 1943

People have to go on transport tomorrow. Everything is in a terrible commotion. 5,000 people have to leave. From our Room it is Zdenka, Pavla, Olile and Popinka.

Hannelore

Good-bye, Zdenka. Good-bye, Pavla.

Helga

Good-bye, Popinka. Good-bye Olile. We will think of you.

Hannelore

Always. Be brave. We won't forget you.

Helga

Good-bye, Pavla. Remember: After the war: Ring me up in Olbramovice. You know my telephone number? It is the number 1.

Hannelore

We will meet on the first Sunday after the war under the Old Bell Tower in the Old Town Square in Prague.

Helga

Write to us when you get there. Sign with Olile, if you are doing well, and with Olga if things are bad for you.

Helga & Hannelore

You trust me / I trust you

You know what I know

Whatever shall be /we never betray

The trust between you and me

Helga

Sunday, September 5, 1943

What a day this was! But it is all over now. The goodbyes were hard.

At eight o'clock I went looking for Zdenka. She was with all her family, sitting on their luggage.

She was so happy to see me. She wept and laughed at the same time.

In the evening, as we lay in bed, we were all aware that some of us were missing - our girls who had left. We all felt that the real Room 28 was gone forever.

Hannelore

All these girls deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau in September 1943 lived for half a year in the family-camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau and were murdered in the gas chambers together with almost 5,000 people from this September transport exactly half a year later, on 8 March 1944. In the Ghetto Theresienstadt life continued. New transports arrived, new girls would fill the places of those who were gone, new friendships would form, only to be torn apart by the next wave of transport. It was the increasing pressure, the constant fear that made the girls cling together all the more tightly. However, they were 30 girls at the age between 12 and 14 living in a room of about 30 square meters, day and night together. Life was not easy. And it was not an easy task for the adults who took care of them to keep up their spirits.

Helga

Friday, April 2, 1943

Yesterday we had our first meeting in our blue and white outfits. Because the atmosphere in our room is terrible these days, we have decided to start from the beginning, to act as though we had only just arrived. We will have a kind of parliament. Our carers are the ministers, then there are two classes of deputies. The upper house is 'Ma'agal'.

Hannelore

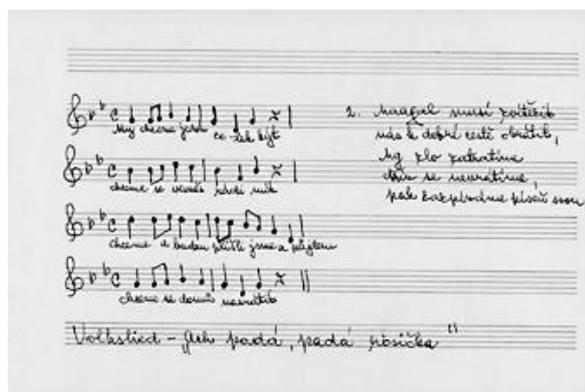
'Ma'agal' is Hebrew meaning both 'circle' and, in a metaphorical sense, 'perfection'. The girls took an oath of comradeship and promised to help each other and be more considerate.

Helga

And there was more: a flag made of dark blue linen, showing the emblem of Ma'agal: the circle of perfection: Then we sang our anthem of Room 28. It is based on the melody of a Czech folksong.

The hymn is being played.

We promise to be a unity
Be friends and hold together
We came to Terezin,
But we want and we will
Be soon home again
Maagal must win
We take us by the hand
And sing
The anthem of Room 28

**Helga**

More than 40 years later, when we survivors from Room 28 came together for the first time after the war, we were so happy to see one another. But at the same time we felt very sad for those who did not survive. The desire arose to do something in memory of all the people who meant so much to us – our family, our friends, teachers and carers, musicians, composers, artists - all the people who have given us hope, strength and support.

Hannelore

Under inhuman conditions, facing an abyss in which to look must have been pure despair, these adults set all their hope in the children. They shared with them their knowledge, their experience, their values and their vision for a better future. They helped them to maintain faith in themselves, to defend their human dignity.

Helga

I remember artists like Friedl Dicker-Brandeis who gave us drawing lessons, Hans Krása whose opera Brundibár was staged by the children of Theresienstadt or Rafael Schächter who, in the cellar of the Girls Home where I was living, rehearsed Verdi's Requiem. These were people who once represented middle European culture, a modern culture in the spirit of humanity, democracy and peace. A culture irretrievably lost.

Six million Jewish people all over Europe killed under the Nazi regime. It is crime against mankind of such dimension that it is just beyond what I can imagine, understand.

Just lately, when I looked through all the photos and documents left behind by my father Otto Pollak, I found a letter which he wrote to my mother in England just after liberation in August 1945:

Hannelore

There is not a single example in history of such mass murder organised by the state, of so many inventive and cumulated atrocities.

If one were to use the word 'animal-like' for all of this, it would be an insult to these creatures. Because there is no word, no expression, no concept for all of these bestialities, I cannot carry on like others do.

Compared with the immense catastrophe that has befallen us, every word of hate seems to me to be too small, too profane.

I have never been able to indulge in outbursts or to air my feelings like others do, because I have always believed that this would offend the memory of those who died.

Or was I too resigned, my soul too deeply wounded after all that immense suffering?

Helga

Millions of Jewish people murdered in the Holocaust have no grave where we can lay a stone to remember them. It is therefore why we are all here together. Every act of commemoration – the music, the exhibition, our Ceremony of today - for me these are stones of remembrance. May the present and the future generations never forget.

Hannelore

From the letter of Helga's father Otto Pollak to Helga's mother written after the war, on 25 October 1945:

Dear Frieda

(...) As far as Vienna and the Viennese are concerned, I share your feelings ...

In March 1938, the city welcomed the 'Führer' with incredible outpourings of ecstasy. It looked on as we were removed from our positions, from our professions, from our homes, as we were being tormented and tortured. All of them saw how families were torn apart, how men were sent to concentration camps, and finally how the entire city

was cleansed of Jews so that they could be brutally exterminated in the camps in Poland. There is not a single example in history of such mass murder organised by the state, of so many inventive and cumulated atrocities. If one were to use the word 'animal-like' for all of this, it would be an insult to these creatures. Because there is no word, no expression, no concept for all of these bestialities, I cannot carry on like others do. Compared with the immense catastrophe that has befallen us, every word of hate seems to me to be too small, too profane. I have never been able to indulge in outbursts or to air my feelings like others do, because I have always believed that this would tarnish the memory of those who died. Or was I too resigned, my soul too deeply wounded after all that immense suffering?

© Helga Pollak-Kinsky, Vienna and Hannelore Brenner, Berlin, 2014

Helga Pollak-Kinsky is the author of a precious diary written as a child in the Ghetto Theresienstadt. It was published in 2014 by **Edition Room 28**, www.edition-room28.de
Her diary is the heart of the book 'the girls of Room 28' which without her diary could not have been written. Helga Pollak-Kinsky, born in 1930, lives in Vienna.

Hannelore Brenner-Wonschick is the author of the book and the exhibition 'The Girls of Room 28', the editor and publisher of Helga's Theresienstadt Diary, and author and director of **Room 28 Projects**, [www. www.room28projects.com](http://www.room28projects.com) and of the international educational project **Room 28 Education**, www.room28education.net