

The Museum of Modern Art

For Immediate Release
June 1991

PANEL DISCUSSION AND SCREENING OF NAZI PROPAGANDA FILM AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Film and Reality, a panel discussion and screening of the Nazi propaganda film *The Führer Gives a City to the Jews*, is presented at The Museum of Modern Art on July 18, 1991, at 6:30 p.m. The program is held in conjunction with the exhibition SEEING THROUGH "PARADISE": ARTISTS AND THE TEREZIN CONCENTRATION CAMP, currently on view at the Drawing Center in Soho.

The Führer Gives a City to the Jews (1944) comprises twenty-three minutes of restored sequences and fragments from the original black-and-white film, in German, with English subtitles. It was made by the Nazis at the Terezín concentration camp, near Prague, to conceal for propaganda purposes the reality of the camps. Many scenes in the film were staged with the forced participation of the inmates themselves.

Following the screening, a panel discussion investigates and analyzes the use of art in propaganda and the deceptive power of disinformation. Panelists are Johanna Branson, professor of art history, Massachusetts College of Art, and curator of the Drawing Center exhibition; Annette Insdorf, co-chairperson, film division, Graduate School of the Arts, Columbia University, and author of *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust*; Sharon Rivo, executive director, the National Center for Jewish Film, located at Brandeis University; Frederick Terna, a survivor of Terezín; and Fred Wiseman, documentary filmmaker, Zipporah Films. Moderator is Sondra Farganis, chair of Social Sciences, Vera List Institute, New School for Social Research.

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The Führer Gives a City to the Jews was restored by the National Center for Jewish Film. The exhibition of drawings, SEEING THROUGH "PARADISE": ARTISTS AND THE TEREZIN CONCENTRATION CAMP, was organized by The Massachusetts College of Art.

Tickets for *Film and Reality*, which is held in the Museum's Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 2, are \$7 and available at the lobby information desk.

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For further information or film stills, contact Barbara Marshall, Film Press Representative, Department of Public Information, 212/708-9752.

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BACKGROUND ON THE FILM *THE FÜHRER GIVES A CITY TO THE JEWS*

In 1941 the Nazis decided to use Terezín as an assembly and transit camp for Czech Jews before deportation to the death camps. The idea to create a "privileged camp" was conceived by SS General Reinhard Heydrich and elaborated upon at the Wannsee Conference on January 20, 1942. Famous musicians, composers, poets, painters, and scholars were imprisoned at Terezín. Some artists worked in the prison drawing studio, where they were forced to create art work for propaganda, including maps, plans, and posters promoting the productivity of the camp, as well as booklets portraying Terezín as a "spa." Some artists secretly obtained materials to create pictures to bear witness and protest their treatment and the dire conditions in the camp.

The Nazis promoted Terezín as a "model" camp where elderly Jews, decorated war heroes, and prominent individuals would be sent to live and work in so-called comfortable circumstances in a harmonious community. The entire camp became a propaganda scheme designed to deceive the Jews of the Reich into easier acquiescence to deportation and to fool the outside world about the true fate of the Jews.

Terezín was operated like the ghettos of Eastern Europe; the population was forcibly enclosed within the walled fortress from which departure was punishable by death. The barracks and buildings housed as many as 58,000 Jews. Although not an extermination camp like Auschwitz, Terezín was a grim place where disease, hunger, and cold ravaged the prisoners. Of the 140,000 Jews sent to Terezín, 33,430 died, and 87,000 were shipped to death camps in the East. Ultimately the camp was liberated by the Soviet army on May 7, 1945.

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At the end of 1943, a major beautification program was instituted to prepare for a visit by the Danish Red Cross, the Danish Foreign Minister, and the International Red Cross. The streets were repaired, living quarters were spruced up, the town square was cultivated, a lawn was laid with paths for strollers, 1,200 rose bushes were planted, a music pavilion was erected, and a children's playground was constructed. Signs reading "grocery," "bakery," "to the playground," "library," "school," "laundry," and "men's wear" were produced by the inmates in the drafting shop.

7,500 able-bodied young men and women were shipped from Terezín to Auschwitz to make space and substantiate the image of the camp as an old-age ghetto. Workers who delivered the bread were given white gloves to wear. The inmates were threatened with severe reprisals if they did not cooperate with the subterfuge and beautification program. The Red Cross Commission filed a favorable report.

In the summer of 1944, the Nazis ordered the production of a "documentary-style" film about Terezín. Kurt Gerron, the well-known German actor and director, who was interned in the camp, was selected as the director. The production crew included Frantisek Zelenka, the Czech theater architect; Jo Spier, the Dutch cartoonist (who documented the making of the film by making 400 sketches during the shooting); and Hans Hofer as assistant director. The script was supervised by the Camp Commandant Karl Rahm.

The Czech newsreel unit Aktualita, with Ivan Fric and Cenek Zahradnicek as cameramen, provided the equipment and crew. Filming took place between August 16 and September 11, 1944. Gerron was closely supervised by the Nazis on every scene, but he never saw any of the developed footage nor played any role in assembling the film.

Some scenes were actually staged for the film, e.g., the swimming pool sequence. Others were shot outside the walls of the camp, with narration falsely stating that the inmates were allowed to participate in activities, e.g., the garden sequence. Only positive images and activities were depicted, making the camp appear to be a wonderful place to live. The film is an insidious fraud, not only because of the distortions it created, but because of the reality that it did not reveal--the misery, the hunger, the overcrowding, the high death rate, and the transports leaving for the death camps in the East. On September 28, 1944, massive transports to Auschwitz began, including nearly all of those who participated in the production. On October 28, Geron was deported in the last transport. He was gassed on arrival.

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