

**Pedagogy in the Playhouse:
The Role of Hans Krása’s Opera *Brundibár* in Modern Holocaust Education
Through the Arts**

Julie Levey

In a Tortoiseshell: *In this paper, written for a Freshman Seminar, Julie Levey demonstrates how a powerful sense of **narrative** can enliven an academic paper and make it both convincing and compelling. As she build towards her **thesis**, she presents varied and conflicting perspectives and pieces of **evidence** before presenting her own view.*

Excerpt

It is also crucial to listen to testimonies with an understanding of the audience and context. Some Holocaust survivors note that when interviewed about the role of music, they change their narratives to conform to the story Americans have created about Holocaust resistance, emphasizing only “those instances in which music helped an individual to survive, acted as a form of cultural resistance, or demonstrated a triumph of the human spirit over evil.”^[1] Regardless of whether the known *Brundibár* survivor narratives present the whole picture, the joy and distraction that came from participating in the opera is apparent in many of the testimonies.^[2]

Declarations that *Brundibár* was true resistance are somewhat invalidated by the fact that the Nazis not only allowed performances of *Brundibár* to take place, but filmed *Brundibár* for their 1944 propaganda documentary “Theresienstadt,” or, “The Führer gives the Jews a City.” A common assertion is that the mustache worn by Honza Treichlinger (who played *Brundibár*) was meant to be a Hitler mustache; though this may have been the case, the actual mustache barely resembled Hitler’s facial hair and did not bother the Nazis enough to be excluded from their documentary.^[3] When asked whether the Germans did not understand *Brundibár* or were simply ambivalent about it, Holocaust survivor and *Brundibár* cast member Handa Drori said, “Yeah that’s what we wondered all the time. If they don't understand that what we are singing is against them... Or if they just don't care, because they knew what we didn't know. That we are meant all to go to the gas chambers and to die, not to survive. Maybe they thought, ‘Ah let the Jews play a little bit before they go to be, to be killed.’”^[4] Even if some cast members considered *Brundibár* to be an act of resistance, it is evident that the Nazis did not consider it dangerous

because if they had, *Brundibár* would not have had a 55-show run nor have been featured so prominently in “The Führer gives the Jews a City.”

In fact, *Brundibár* may have been more of a resistance piece before it arrived in Theresienstadt than once it got there. The Hagibor orphanage premiere of *Brundibár* was a secret event, occurring after the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia, and an audience of 150 watched the performance. Additionally, the set designer, František Zelenka, inscribed “Volte 62541” (Vote for 62541) on part of the set, which was an act of resistance because the “62541” corresponded to the Jewish community’s telephone code in Prague.^[5]

Brundibár’s role in Theresienstadt should inform its role in our culture. Though testimony and documentation indicate that performing *Brundibár* may not have been a formal act of resistance within Theresienstadt, the themes of the show and the fact that by performing it, children were able to find happiness in the worst of times, connect the show to opposition. Thus, performances today should encourage children to consider what they resist against and what it takes to defy those forces.

^[1] Wlodarski, *Dislocated Memories*, 66.

^[2] Greer, “Brundibár: Confronting the Misrepresentation of Resistance in Theresienstadt,” 26.

^[3] *Ibid*, 57.

^[4] Daniel Schorn, “Brundibár: How The Nazis Conned The World.” *60 Minutes*, February 23, 2007. www.cbsnews.com/news/Brundibár-how-the-nazis-conned-the-world/.

^[5] Pantouvaki, “Like Seeing Normal Life,” 180.

Author Commentary

Julie Levey

I wrote this paper for my final research project in the Freshman Seminar “Music, Memory, and the Holocaust” (FRS 117). In class, we had spent a few hours studying *Brundibár*, a children’s opera composed right before the Holocaust that was performed 55 times within the Nazi concentration camp Theresienstadt. Our course focused on the history of *Brundibár* during the Holocaust, but as I considered what I wanted to investigate independently, I was drawn to *Brundibár*’s post-Holocaust life. As a student who is passionate about both Holocaust education and theater, I was intrigued about *Brundibár*’s usage as a pedagogical tool in the modern day.

Throughout my research, as I attempted to craft a clear argument about the function of *Brundibár* in Theresienstadt with the hope of illuminating what role the opera should play in Holocaust education today, I found it was crucial, though difficult, to find sources representing multiple outlooks. For example, today, it is much easier to find testimony from Holocaust survivors than testimony from Nazis; therefore, I had to be creative and use a Nazi propaganda documentary as a source that indirectly elucidates the Nazi perspective.

In this section of my paper, I analyze some of the sources I discovered, considering the arguments of Holocaust survivors and the Nazi perspective. Perhaps the largest challenge I came across when writing this part of my paper was that the historical evidence was much more multifaceted than I had anticipated it would be. In prior papers I have written, it has often been simpler to identify a single truth resulting from a combination of historical facts. This was not the case with determining *Brundibár*’s role in Theresienstadt, given that many of the sources and individual testimonies I read suggested different understandings of the opera’s role. Additionally, writing this section of my research paper challenged my previous understanding of *Brundibár*; our brief exploration of the opera in class had led me to one conclusion about the opera’s role, whereas looking at the opera over a longer timespan resulted in a different interpretation. My writing in these few paragraphs was thus a venture to critically engage with and reconcile the different perspectives I encountered and use them to come to a logical conclusion.

Editor Commentary

Rosamond van Wingerden

Julie's essay, in which she examines the performance history of *Brundibár*, an opera first performed by child prisoners at the Theresienstadt concentration camp in Czechoslovakia, was selected for its excellent sense of narrative. In this excerpt, that term takes on multiple meanings. Multiple narratives, sometimes conflicting with one another, are at play: the triumph-over-evil narrative to which survivors felt pressured to make their experiences conform; the Nazi propaganda narrative that used the opera as a tool; the present-day narrative that Julie argues educational uses of the opera should put forward—and, on another level, the narrative of the opera itself, which is reshaped by each of these perspectives. Julie weaves these intricate tellings and retellings together and, in doing so, creates a convincing narrative of her own as she argues that contemporary productions of *Brundibár* should neither paper over its history nor treat it as a fossil without relevance to the modern world. Instead, Julie suggests that performances should seek to make connections between the opera's history and what “resistance” means today.

In each of the first three paragraphs excerpted here, Julie outlines one narrative about *Brundibár*, introducing her evidence as she does so. In the final paragraph, she presents her own argument. This structure makes for a paper that is both convincing and compelling. It gives Julie ample opportunity to introduce evidence alongside analysis, instead of simply presenting a block of facts in which the author's voice is drowned out (a common pitfall in research papers). The structure also works as a narrative device: Julie's exploration of varying and conflicting perspectives on *Brundibár* leads neatly into her own argument. Drawing together the various concerns she has introduced, Julie is now ready to make a convincing case for her own thesis. In doing so, she demonstrates that scholarly papers do not need to be dry expositions of facts: they can also be captivating narratives in their own right.

Professor Commentary

Christopher Hailey, Department of Music

The Freshman Seminar “Music, Memory, and the Holocaust” explored a range of questions concerning music’s role in forging and sustaining identities, underpinning ideologies, and shaping patterns of remembrance. Julie was particularly fascinated by the fate of the children of the “model camp” Theresienstadt/Terezín and wrote her final research paper on the opera *Brundibár*, which since its rediscovery in 1975 has played a prominent role in educating children around the world about the Holocaust. Julie’s paper is remarkable for its extensive research, thoughtful nuanced analysis, and clearly stated conclusions, all presented in prose that is both lucid and succinct. The paper falls in two parts. Julie first considers the work’s genesis and performance history, drawing on both contemporary accounts and recent reflections by noted scholars such as Amy-Lynn Wlodarski, Rebecca Rovit, Anna Catherine Greer, and Teryl Dobbs to explore such questions as the nature of resistance and the instability of witness testimony. In documenting postwar productions of the opera, she has consulted publishing records and reviews, and assessed multiple filmed performances. The second part of the paper is analytical and asks how modern-day productions can balance the aesthetic pleasures of the piece (an entertainment for children) with the harsh realities of the Holocaust, including the fates of the children who saw and performed the work in Theresienstadt, most of whom did not survive the war. Finally, she asks how present-day performers and audiences (again, primarily children) can apply the work’s underlying message (solidarity against tyranny) in their own lives or, as she writes in the present excerpt, lead children to consider “what they resist against and what it takes to defy those forces.” With this paper, Julie has not only provided a fine introduction to *Brundibár* and its post-Holocaust performance history but has dug deeply into controversies attending those productions and set a path toward developing her own pedagogical strategies for educating children about the Holocaust.

Works Cited

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Bios

Julie Levey, '24 is a prospective concentrator in the Religion Department. At Princeton, Julie is on the Executive Board of the Center for Jewish Life and on *The Daily Princetonian* features staff, and she sings a cappella. She is also a journalism intern for EPIDEMIC, a podcast about the science and society of COVID-19. She wrote this as a first-year.

Rosamond van Wingerden, '21 is a senior in the Comparative Literature Department, with certificates in Vocal Performance, Russian & Eurasian Studies, Music Theater, and Greek. At Princeton, she sings with the Princeton Opera Company and is involved in interfaith initiatives through the Center for Jewish Life and Princeton Presbyterians. She wrote this as a senior.