

*Hájková, Anna: The Last Ghetto. An Everyday History of Theresienstadt.*

Oxford University Press, Oxford 2020, 364 pp., ISBN 978-0-19-005177-8.

Substantive histories of everyday life pay attention to food, housing, medicine, entertainment, and intimacy; they also analyze how possibilities to negotiate quotidian conditions can open opportunities (as limited as power relations can make them) for local institutions and “ordinary” individuals to make and act on choices. Anna Hájková’s ambitious, well-written study of the Terezín (Theresienstadt) ghetto in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia sheds light on both these aspects of everyday life for Jews forced to live in confined, crowded conditions of shortage with an unknown and, for most, eventually deadly fate. Using an extensive variety of primary sources, including government and personal documents, she reveals a complex set of social relations among Jews forced to live in the old Habsburg fortress town, challenges us to think about possibilities for and the significance of choices for confined groups, and situates Bohemian history within the transnational topic of prisoner societies.

Terezín is often remembered as the ghetto that the Nazis used in Potemkin-village style as a showcase exhibiting purported humane treatment of Jews to the Red Cross. A less-known fact about the ghetto, and one more important for understanding power relations and lived experiences within its confines, is that Third Reich occupation authorities set up a system of self-administration, in which Nazi occupiers issued orders and food supplies to the ghetto’s Council of Elders, who were themselves prisoners, and then left it to these appointed Jewish leaders to choose how to implement commands and distribute food coming from above. The managerial responsibility granted to Jewish leaders in the Council of Elders meant that they had limited, yet significant choices concerning the lives of Terezín inmates. The Elders made choices concerning who should receive what amount of food and whose names should be placed on lists for deportation to Auschwitz.

Recognizing the relative power of the Council of Elders is not downplaying or denying the powerful hold that Nazi officials had over the prisoners in Terezín; Hájková is clear that Nazis had tremendous control and they exercised it in cruel, hate-filled and murderous ways. She recognizes that the participation of Jewish leaders in ghetto administration is problematic and controversial. In keeping with her aim to write a “non-nostalgic” history, she does not criticize the Elders for participating in the running of Terezín, writing, “Jewish functionaries strove to do the best job possible, to send people out as families, with supplies and in good shape, to be fair, and to protect their own” (p. 201). She also recognizes that their choices were, in part, the result of wider social perceptions of the worth of others within the ghetto because they “indicated how people were valued in the ghetto’s self-understanding” (p. 101).

Shedding light on “how people were valued in the ghetto’s self-understanding” is one of the book’s major achievements. Through her attention to opportunities for food, housing, medicine, entertainment, and intimacy Hájková reveals details of a complex social hierarchy existing within the ghetto. The hierarchy was a product of perceptions within the wider inmate population of individuals’ worth based on age,

nationality, class, gender, family status, and skill or knowledge. Where an individual or group was located on the hierarchy affected their opportunities for choice and survival. Those on the lowest rung had the worst opportunities, whereas those higher up had better, but ultimately still limited possibilities. Elderly Jews were at the bottom of the social hierarchy, while Young Czech Zionist Jews were at the top. Czech Jews were better situated than were non-Czech Jews from the Protectorate and other countries, and German Jews from the Protectorate were higher than German Jews from elsewhere. Families were closer to the top than single women. Individuals whose knowledge and talent were useful or admired were higher up. Hájková's findings regarding this social hierarchy undermines an old narrative or "legend of Terezín" about solidarity or a "sense of groupness" among Jews in the ghetto (p. 68).

Hájková is particularly attentive to the position of the elderly at the bottom of Terezín's social hierarchy, a location that left this vulnerable group with the smallest food rations, worst living conditions, and least chance of choice and survival. The elderly had the highest mortality rate within the ghetto, a great number of them dying due to malnutrition. For Hájková, an explanation of this high death rate must include both Nazi persecution of Jews and the prisoner society's privileging of some groups over others. She writes, "It was the German authorities who consigned Jews to Terezín and restricted the supply of food. But maldistribution [...] was a consequence of inmate society" (p. 131).

A number of times in her book, Hájková uses the term agency when discussing choices that ghetto leaders and other inmates had. For example, she writes "By studying prisoner society as one in its own right, we gain key insights into the agency of Holocaust victims in recognizing seemingly small acts as serious instances of choice" (p. 6). In her last of six chapters, she examines steps individuals could take to avoid deportation, concluding "even though their options were severely limited, they still had choices that we need to recognize as moments of agency" (p. 238). She takes issue with Lawrence Langer's notion of "choiceless choices" for denying Terezín prisoners' agency, although it can be argued that his understanding of the term is different from what she suggests here (p. 6, p. 226). She tells readers that agency and *Eigensinn* are not the same (p. 240). These terms could be more clearly defined and the problem of awareness or consciousness of possibilities for choice could be discussed. Still, her attention to social position and choice is very illuminating. Hájková states, "Recognizing the choices of the Holocaust victims as valid allows us to recognize them as the acting, thinking people they were until the end" (p. 240). While this is a very important reason for studying choice in Terezín, more could be said about the significance of agency as a concept for deepening appreciation of state-society relations in dirigist systems. Certainly Hájková shows that identifying opportunities for choice, even when living *in extremis*, is one of the great lessons to be gained from history.

Auburn/Al.

Cathleen M. Giustino