



Episode 6 Transcript To Infinity and Beyond Petr Ginz

Hello and welcome to “The Human Spirit in the Holocaust”, an Echoes & Reflections podcast, in which we uncover remarkable stories of courage during one of the darkest periods in human history. Echoes & Reflections is a partnership of the ADL, USC Shoah Foundation and Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem. Our podcast is produced by Yad Vashem.

I’m your host, Sheryl Ochayon.

[NASA SPACE SHUTTLE COUNTDOWN]

“T minus 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 liftoff. We have liftoff!”

On January 16, 2003 at 10:39 AM, the Columbia Space Shuttle launched from the Kennedy Space Center in Florida. Aboard the shuttle was an international crew of 7 specialists, each with scientific research missions. Among them was Colonel Ilan Ramon, the first Israeli astronaut.

Ramon, whose mother and grandmother were survivors of Auschwitz, wanted to make a symbolic gesture while in space:

[ILAN RAMON]

“I asked the museum of Yad Vashem in Israel, the Holocaust Museum, to try to provide me something symbolic out of the Holocaust to take with me. And one of the suggestions was Petr Ginz’s drawing. Petr was a boy in Theresienstadt, later on he was murdered in Auschwitz. But in Theresienstadt he drew, and wrote. He was a very, very talented boy. And the drawing that I got is the drawing of Petr who drew earth from the moon, the way he imagined it. And it’s a very symbolic act that I can take his drawing; although he is physically not with us, his spirit will be with us and with me in space.”

Who was Petr Ginz? What was Theresienstadt? And why was it so important for an astronaut to take a drawing into space?

Petr was an artist, a novelist, a poet, a reporter, and a scientist, all before the age of 15. These days we would call him a child prodigy. He was a voracious reader and began to write as a boy. He wrote and illustrated five novels before he turned 14. He dreamed of far off adventures and fantastic journeys. But his own journey was cut short.

Petr grew up in Prague, the capital of Czechoslovakia. When he was 11, the Nazis conquered Prague, and beginning in September 1941 they began to deport the Jews. In 1942, when he was 14, he was wrenched away from his parents and his sister and sent to Theresienstadt, an old fortress town, which served as a ghetto and transit camp to the death camps in eastern Europe, including Auschwitz. The Jewish prisoners were forced to deal with appalling conditions. The town had been built for about 7,000 people, but at its height almost 59,000 were crushed into it, an area approximately five by eight city blocks. There was

overcrowding, filth, starvation and disease. Daily reality was life in the shadow of death. Over 140,000 people were imprisoned in Theresienstadt during its three-and-a-half-year existence. Over 33,000 died there from hunger or disease.

Over 88,000 were deported to the death camps.

To protect children from the difficult reality in the ghetto and give them a better chance to survive, Jewish leadership decided to separate the children's living arrangements from their parents. Petr, and about 50 other Czech boys who were prisoners of Theresienstadt, lived packed together in what was called Home One in House L 417. They were mostly between 12 and 15 years old. The room was so tiny that two boys slept on each bunk in three-tiered bunk beds. Their leader and counselor, Professor Valtr Eisinger, only 29 himself, was responsible for their daily routine. The boys loved his enthusiasm, courage and tolerance in teaching them – something that was forbidden by the Nazis. He did not want to give the boys ready answers, but urged them to think and draw their own conclusions. He even lived with them, which was unusual, sleeping in one of the 3-tiered bunks. He encouraged and inspired them to create an alternate reality where they had agency and control, and governed themselves. So they did, replete with a flag and an anthem.

In December, 1942, the boys celebrated the establishment of their republic, and this speech was read by Walter Roth, its president:

“The banner has been raised...The Home has its own government. Why did we set it up? Because we no longer want to be a group of boys, passively succumbing to the fate meted out to us... [The Nazis] have only one aim in mind – to destroy us, not only physically but mentally and morally as well. Will they succeed? Never!”

The boys also decided to create a magazine. They called it “Vedem”, which means, “In the Lead.” Sidney Taussig, sent at 13 to live in Home One, explains:

[SIDNEY TAUSSIG]

“When I lived in this Home somebody suggested that we should talk about our daily lives and maybe put it on paper. So, we got encouraged by our leader who was Professor Eisinger, and a fellow by the name of Petr Ginz, he became the editor. He was one of the older fellows in our home. So, he started to write this magazine, And this fellow was very gifted guy; he would write poems, he would be painting – he did all kind of things

Interviewer: This is Petr Ginz?

Petr Ginz, yes. And the guys in the home contributed to whatever they wanted to. Some guys, we had some guys who were very good poets – there was a guy by the name of Hanus Hachenburg, a young guy who wrote a lot of poetry. Another guy was Zdenek Ornest – his name was Ornstein, he changed his name – he wrote also a lot of poetry. And various guys who were going through their life in the ghetto, they wrote about their experiences throughout the camp...and I contributed some of the articles too, some of the paintings.”

Petr and the other boys of Home One were surrounded by death and faced their own, but they defied it by putting words on paper, writing short stories and poetry. In their cramped barracks, the magazine they wrote and illustrated was an expression of life.

Over the course of two years, the boys created an issue of Vedem every Friday, totaling 800 pages. They painstakingly handwrote most of the 83 issues. The magazine was produced secretly, because the boys would have been killed had the Nazis known what they were doing. So they used aliases like Academy, Pidli

and Abscess, and they never actually published the magazine. Instead, they gathered around their bunks on Friday nights. As one of them guarded the door to the room, watching for SS, each boy came down from his bunk and read what he wrote. Everyone listened.

As Sidney remembers:

[SIDNEY]

“The guys would contribute and Fridays we would sit on the bunks and the guys who contributed these articles, they would read them.....and we would switch writing and some of it. At the beginning we had typewriters, somebody brought us, somewhere found us a typewriter, and we were typing it, but we ran out of ribbons, we didn’t have any more ribbons, so we started to write it by hand. Most of the pages are hand-written; people were doing the pictures by hand, and this is how.”

There was exquisite poetry by Zdenek Ornest and Hanus Hachenburg. Though Zdenek survived, Hanus’s poetry is literally all we have left of him; he was murdered at the age of 14. He wrote:

What good to mankind is the beauty of science?
What good is the beauty of pretty girls?
What good is a world when there are no rights?
What good is the sun when there is no day?...
What good is life, when the living suffer?
Why is my world surrounded by walls?
Know son, this is here for a reason:
To make you fight and conquer all.¹

The boys wrote articles about places and people in Theresienstadt. One, written by Josef Stiasny, alias Peppek, Valtr Eisinger’s assistant who was loved by the boys, urged the young to help the old, who were mistreated, ill and dying. There were silly and playful pieces, as well as tragic poems about their lives in Theresienstadt. One asked the question on everyone’s mind: “Why must we die when we just want to live?” And in one of his poems Hanus described his feeling,

Today death holds his filthy hand
Over the world and over my soul.²

Petr was the editor and the driving force behind Vedem. It was hard work. He organized contributions. He wrote and edited the upcoming issue all week, transcribing contributions by hand. Vedem, for Petr, was a matter of personal pride.

Kurt Kotouc, 14 when he reached Home One, remembered Petr this way:

“I can still see him, sitting cross-legged on his lower bunk, surrounded by pens, pencils, engravers, brushes and paints, and sheets of paper of all sizes, along with what was left of a parcel from his parents. ... He was an extremely bright boy... He extracted contributions [to Vedem] any way he could. He browbeat, he appealed to people’s consciences, and sometimes, to save the situation, he wrote the entire issue himself

1 Marie Rút Křížková, Kurt Jiř Kotouč, Zdeněk Ornest, *We Are Children Just the Same: “Vedem,” the Secret Magazine by the Boys of Terezin* (Philadelphia and Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1994), p. 142.

2 <http://hanushachenburg.org/>

under various pseudonyms. He was completely wrapped up in the work.”³

In the ghetto, amid the hunger and the misery, Petr read an exceptional number of books and made plans for his further education. He kept a list of what he had read, drawn and learned. He produced an astonishing amount of artwork, creating more than 100 drawings, watercolors, and other art. In many of them there are high mountains, or wide seas with sailboats – all symbols of his desire for freedom and his inability to attain it. He drew the picture that Ilan Ramon took with him into space, “Moon Landscape,” when space exploration was still just a fantasy. It would be years before man reached the moon, but Petr imagined how the earth would look from its craggy surface – and he got it right. Perhaps this was his way of expressing his longing to reach a distant place among the stars where he would not be oppressed and imprisoned as he was on earth. Hanus Hachenburg had a similar thought that he expressed in poetry: “One day I shall fly to the heights above, free from my body’s encumbrance, free in expansiveness, free in distance...”⁴

Petr and the boys of Home One refused to accept their fate. They defied the Nazis in the only way they could, by creating something powerful to express their feelings. This creative resistance is embodied by Vedem. As Petr wrote, “The seed of a creative idea does not die in mud and scum. Even there it will germinate and spread its blossom like a star shining in darkness.”⁵

There was a flood of this type of resistance: at least 8 other magazines were written in the ghetto by child prisoners in other barracks and other Homes. These included Bonaco (an acronym for “Mess on Wheels”), written by the teenage girls of Home 11 in Barracks L414, and Kamarad, meaning Friend, written by 10-12 year old boys in barracks Q609. By putting their words, illustrations and dreams onto paper, the children, no older than 16, did not allow their spirits to be broken. They fought back in the best way that they could – with their imaginations, creativity and words. In fact, the cover of one issue of Vedem, illustrated by Petr, shows a cannon. Looking closely, we see that it is not a real weapon of war – the cannon is actually a rolled-up issue of Vedem, and the cannonballs stacked next to it are “Mirth”, “Satire” and “Laughter.”

Of about 15,000 children in the Theresienstadt ghetto, only about 150 survived. Petr was not one of them. He was murdered in the gas chambers at Auschwitz Birkenau. He was 16. Only a handful of the boys of Home One ultimately survived the Holocaust, and only one was saved from deportation. Sidney Taussig was allowed to remain in Theresienstadt because his father, the blacksmith, was needed by the Nazis to shoe their horses. It was Sidney who went back to the deserted room, found the issues of Vedem that Petr had hidden, and saved them by burying them. He dug them up after the war.

When Ilan Ramon took “Moon Landscape” into space with him on the ill-fated Columbia Space Shuttle, he was bringing to life Petr’s dream of seeing earth from space. The picture represents the heights that man can reach even in the depths of despair; it shows undying hope. On February 1, 2023, the Columbia exploded as it entered the earth’s atmosphere and all the astronauts were lost. Coincidentally, it would have been Petr Ginz’s 75th birthday.

Thanks for listening. For more podcasts about the human spirit in the Holocaust, please see the Echoes & Reflections website, at EchoesandReflections.org. For more information about Theresienstadt, you can find testimonies among the thousands in the USC Shoah Foundation visual history archive. Special thanks to: Moshe Cohn, as the voice of Kurt; Ethan Chi as the voices of the boys of Home One; and Oren Gilor, as the voice of Ilan Ramon.

3 We Are Children Just the Same, 18, 64.

4 <http://hanushachenburg.org/>

5 Petr Ginz, *The Diary of Petr Ginz, 1941-1942*, ed. Chava Pressburger, trans. Elena Lappin (New York: Grove Press, 2007), 133.