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THE PUPPETMASTER OF LODZ

by Gilles Ségál
translated by Sara O'Connor
directed by Brian Roff

"I sang from the depths of my heart...I sang for those who only yesterday saw their wives and children cast into flames...My friends and I sang and recited. With blood, with tears, we did what is called theatre."

--Mosche Pulawer

Theatre in Nazi Concentration Camps: Manifestations and Motivations

The Holocaust exists in our collective memory and cultural imagination in the form of images and stories of unbelievable suffering and horrific oppression. Therefore, it is understandably difficult to imagine theatre or the arts playing any role or taking any semblance of precedence in Nazi concentration camps where basic survival seemed the ultimate priority. However, despite the conditions and incredible odds, for many prisoners, theatre and performance played an important, if not, vital role in the quest for survival and self-preservation, both literally and figuratively.

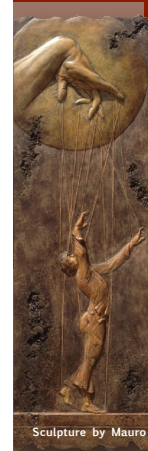
The conditions under which theatrical activity emerged were often incredibly dangerous for both performer and audience. Curt Daniel, an internee at both Dachau and Buchenwald, wrote that unauthorized performances were "extremely undercover, being carried out by prisoners at great personal risk...discovery would have so infuriated the S.S. camp guards that torture and death would have followed automatically." Historian Alvin Goldfarb goes on to stress in his article, "Theatrical Activities in Nazi Concentration Camps," that while the arts were banned or heavily censored in the majority of camps, the desire for culture and expression "was never extinguished. Nor was the desire to perform."

Indeed, many camps featured a wide variety of theatrical activities, which were authorized by Nazis in some cases and illicit and underground, in others. In her article, "Cultural Ghettoization and Theater During the Holocaust: Performance as a Link to Community," historian, Rebecca Rovit, explains that within the barbed wired walls of even the most notorious camps, prisoners produced, performed and patronized a variety of theatrical endeavors including: satirical cabarets, recitals, recitations, humorous sketches, operas, traditional dramas, Yiddish classics and even puppet shows.

Try as they might to intimidate and suppress theatrical expression, clearly the Nazis failed to squelch artistic drive. The question remains, however, what inspired prisoners in these bleak conditions to devote their precious energies to the risky business of creating theatre? Although tempting,

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Sculpture by Mauro Pozzobonelli

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FACTS ABOUT LODZ

- The Polish pronunciation of Lodz is "wootch." The city is also known as Lodzh (in Yiddish), Lodsch (in German) and was renamed Litzmannstadt by the Germans from 1939 until 1945.
- On February 8, 1940, the order to establish the Lodz ghetto was announced and was originally planned to be set up in one day. However, it took several weeks. The Germans established this ghetto in the northeastern section of Lodz. About 160,000 Jews, more than a third of the city's population, were forced into a small area.

FACTS ABOUT LODZ

•Lodz had been a key industrial center in prewar Poland thus it became a major production center under the German occupation. As early as May 1940, the Germans established factories in the ghetto and by August 1942, there were almost 100 factories.

•In the spring of 1944, the Nazis planned to destroy Lodz. By then, it was the last remaining ghetto in Poland, with a population of approximately 75,000 Jews.

in Dachau were performed at great risk to the actors and audience since they often featured, “humorous political monologues lashing the Nazis,” as well as blatantly “anti-fascist patter.” When one considers the popularity and content which characterized this often overtly political performance style, one gains a better understanding that release and defiance not only helped prisoners achieve heightened morale and maintain their sense of humanity and control, but were central motivating factors for the creation of theatre within concentration camps.

While many performers were driven to create theatre via selfless intentions and a desire to provide a “spiritual retreat” for and maintain a “tenuous connection” with their fellow prisoners and community, Rovit reveals that many also saw theatre as a concrete means of survival and as a way to access a more “privileged” status in the camp. She goes on to discuss that in some situations, performance was viewed as a “commodity to be traded for vital privileges such as respect, protection, a better barrack, or an extra bowl of soup.” Further, Nazi commanders sometimes appointed imprisoned artists as their protégés, earning prisoners some semblance of status in exchange for performance. This status may have temporarily benefited these prisoners, but as Rovit explains, no matter how talented or willing to comply, “few of the players were immune to transport or to selection for the gas chambers.”

While the motivations behind theatrical activity were multiple and intersecting, what cannot be denied was the existence of the art form itself. Clearly, even under the most severe conditions and against the most terrifying odds, theatre continued to flourish in many forms, providing prisoners a vital portal to escape, defiance, self-preservation, and community connection. The performing arts were not absent or inconsequential. Rather, for many prisoners, theatre served as a vital tool in the battle for survival, enriching the mind, body and spirit.



Camilla Spira performing in a revue at Westerbork, September 1943. Courtesy of Yad Vashem, Israel.

Kate Maguire on *The Puppetmaster of Lodz*

Q: *The Puppetmaster of Lodz* inspired an investigation into the universal and timeless relationship between trauma, hardship, or loss and the healing power of artistic expression. When asked to comment on this central theme of the play, BTG’s Artistic Director and CEO, Kate Maguire, had this to say:

A: As we see in *Puppetmaster*, the character of Finkelbaum expresses his loss, grief and the story of his life through his craft of puppetry. The ability to tell our stories through creative expression has given voice to our humanity since the dawn of



Kate Maguire,
Artistic Director & CEO

humankind. At Berkshire Theatre Group the stories of individuals who have found some healing through the performing arts are too numerous to write here. Perhaps one of the most remarkable I have heard came in the form of a letter from a mother of one of our young actors. In the letter, the child’s mother thanked us for giving her child the ability to find her voice

it would be impossible and inaccurate to generalize about or isolate a sole driving force behind the continued prominence of theatrical expression within the camps. Rather, theatre served many different and intersecting purposes for many different people.

Satirical cabarets featuring biting humor were some of the most popular theatrical styles featured in the camps. According to one imprisoned Polish artist, while the S.S. tried to create a prisoner who submitted to the terror of the camp “without thought, without initiative, following every order,” he and others resisted these efforts by seeking escape through “jokes, songs, poems, irony, and caricature” (Milton). Daniel echoes this experience and motivation, explaining that the cabarets he witnessed while

and confidence. This particular child was getting poor grades, was shunned by her classmates and retreating further and further into isolation. Once cast, she began to blossom. The letter from her mother, literally said the theatre had changed and saved her daughter’s life. The need to express ourselves, the ability to reveal our common humanity—to grasp the unseen through an artistic expression is what the arts offers us all. In *Puppetmaster*, we recognize that the arts have served as Finkelbaum’s only means of survival until he can face the truth, and ultimately regain his life.



{CREATION OF puppets}

Director, Brian Roff, on Puppetry Design

Q: WHAT INSPIRED THE DESIGN CONCEPT FOR THE PUPPETS?

When I first talked to puppet designer, Emily DeCola, we realized that the puppets in the play are the puppets of a man who arrived at this room five years ago with nothing and hasn't left. They should be made out of the simple objects that would be available to him



but still be intricately made and incredibly magical. We agreed that the magic should come not from the puppets themselves but from his animation of them; Finkelbaum is, after all, a master puppeteer. When we first see an inanimate object as what it is—like the chair—and then we see it

come alive, the whole time seeing how it's done, that's when I'm most amazed.



Puppet photos by: Lauren Pivrotto

THE ARTIST: Mauro Pozzobonelli

Mauro Pozzobonelli has been a sculptor for nearly forty years. In that time, he has created well over 3,000 individual portraits, inspiring monuments, numerous private commissions, and a collection of impressive relief artwork using



a perfected technique developed from a life spent in sculpting. Through childhood play and youthful dreams, Mauro created his first simple art piece by age seven and fell in love with sculpting. He has since dedicated his life to history, sculpting, and the fine arts. He has studied in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and then later in Florence, Italy.

After receiving numerous accolades in Italy, most notably the Benvenuto Cellini award, Mauro moved to America in search of his own prosperity and good fortune. It was in America that his nickname, "The Sculptor to the Stars," came to pass.

His life in America led him onto commissioned sculptures of celebrities such as Anthony Quinn, Sammy Davis Jr., Frank Sinatra, and Julio Iglesias, to name a few.



With only one hundred dollars in his pocket, and a deep passion for art, Mauro Pozzobonelli begins his early career by sculpting the faces of tourists in a busy piazza in Florence, Italy. photo credit: www.pozzobonelli.com

FACTS ABOUT LODZ

- In June and July 1944 the Germans resumed deportations from Lodz, and about 3,000 Jews were deported to Chelmno extermination camp. The Germans deported the surviving ghetto residents to the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp in August 1944.
- On January 19, 1945, the Soviets liberated the Lodz ghetto. Of the 230,000 Lodz Jews plus the 25,000 people transported in, only 877 remained.