

TWO DOCTORS OF TEREZIN

By Michael Nevins, MD



Drawing of Dr. Erich Munk made in 1944 in the Terezin Ghetto by his associate Dr. Karel Fleischmann. Original in the Yad Vashem Art Museum.

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All of us felt a sense of sliding helplessness, again and again, day after day, night after night, you descended toward the abyss whose bottom was unfathomable....you felt only the downward movement, the fear, what next?

These chilling words, reminiscent of an earlier Prague resident Franz Kafka, were written in April, 1942 by Bohemian dermatologist Karel Fleischmann. With the Nazi takeover of Czechoslovakia in 1939 the situation for Jews had deteriorated and anti-Semitic racial laws restricted the doctor's ability to practice. Now at age forty-five, Dr. Fleischmann (b. 1897) awaited deportation to Terezin, the recently established ghetto town some forty miles to the north. As he would only be able to bring one book, he muses.

What kind of book should it be, a book that can be a devoted reliable, faithful guide for Jews going into exile? One that can be a friend, companion, adviser and supporter? What can unite all these functions. What will provide a broad cultural base, a healing power to turn to first and last, for small traumas or when facing death? The book to prevent the decay of the spirit, to combat melancholy and lethargy? What kind of book might this be? And what book could you possibly take that would be more precious than a loaf of bread? Finally, I brought along a dictionary. It's an honest kind of book. It keeps what it promises..."

The morning of our deportation was pitilessly cold. The clouds as black as ink, the rising sun blood red in the background...darkness on earth, darkness in our souls...a nightmare. We arrived in Terezin in the evening. Really, you did not arrive, you were consigned. Someone managed for us for we no longer were we – we had become an object, a number, a ground substance, a kneaded mix of humans....Tired to the bones, sick, longing for quiet and sleep, we came into the cellars and dark holes of the barrack...still the mass was mixed, kicked and reduced to nothing, dirtied, put on the floor, kneaded and rolled till we became a formless porridge, a heap of rubbish....poisoned with the taste of the stable

Such eloquence is unexpected from a mere physician. Indeed, Fleischmann had pursued a medical career reluctantly, only at his parent's insistence, but attending medical school in the capital provided an opportunity to partake in cultural opportunities. After completing his studies in dermatology-venereology, he returned to his small provincial home town (Ceske Budejovice) where he established a modest but busy practice. But in the evenings he would argue art and politics in local cafes, became a well known writer, editor and artist, an active member of the avant-garde. His literary work was idealistic, trusting in a rational world and based on his personal experience. Fleischmann supported liberal and nationalistic political causes as well as several Zionist organizations although he was not religiously observant. In a poem written shortly before the Nazi invasion, he asked "Is the captain allowed to leave the sinking ship?" For him the answer was no; scorning an opportunity to emigrate he gave his passport to a friend. Here Dr. Fleischmann describes the initial process of adaptation to the Terezin ghetto:

We lived like rats in a cellar and became shy of the light, shy of people. Then I met Dr. Popper, a member of the Council of Elders. He recognized me and came to me. I did not know what his function or title in the ghetto was but he smiled, was friendly, spoke frankly and not artificially. He embraced me, shook my hand warmly and said, "If you

want to work with me, I'll gladly take you." That was a lot. I knew nothing about my future – whether I'd succeed in staying there, working, living there. Our transport [group] was shrinking. Some were sent off to the East. You had no time to grasp it, you did not get the meaning yet and already your friends and acquaintances were gone – for the time being? For ever? We had become fewer, we had a feeling not only of loneliness but of abandonment. Your helplessness became more and more pronounced as you lay denuded among the hundreds of strangers on the concrete floor or on bunks in the huge barracks.

Dr. Fleischmann had been advised that upon arrival in Terezin he should look up the head of the ghetto's Health Department Dr. Erich Munk, but making contact was difficult. Known for his scrupulous integrity and organizational ability, the thirty-eight year old radiologist Munk (b. 1904) had been selected by Zionist leaders to direct what would become a massive medical apparatus. Here Fleischmann relates his anxiety:

Dr. Munk has not come. Right upon arrival at the railway station I asked about him. I had a message for him. I wanted to know where he could be reached and sent a number of notes to him. No answer – he had no time. That's what I was told and wanted to believe. The following morning, a representative arrived. He was a doctor who came to inquire after colleagues in the transport and the professional qualifications of the nursing personnel. I had a feeling that Munk did not register my presence in the transport.

At long last, I succeeded in reaching Dr. Munk. He glided by, saw me in the office and I addressed him, or rather approached him stuttering, asking him when he would have time to see me. "That I don't know, I don't know when I'll have time, come tomorrow, come the day after, come maybe in a week's time." "And will you [then] have time for me at all? I asked in a slightly sharper tone and looked for the first time into his dark button-like eyes. He engaged my look back, nailed me down with his own and said with a disinterested tone, "Naturally I have time for you and will have time for you." He sounded reassuring. And so I went home with a shaky picture of a person whom I had never seen before, of whom I had only heard and who suddenly had become real. So that was "the Munk."

Later, upon first entering Munk's private quarters, "the holy of holies," Fleischmann recalls:

We looked at each other for a while and then Dr. Munk told me in his calm way which impressed through its disinterested manner, that he invites me to "cooperate" with him. He had in mind to do this, that and the other but was unable to do it all by himself; very pressing things had to be worked on. He at once developed a work plan for me and while explaining it, he asked me to take off my leather coat and begin. I accepted without delay, took my notebook out of my pocket and began writing. I felt slightly dizzy when I realized that I'd been accepted, that I was to stay, watch, listen... it all went along at breakneck speed. People came in, problems were discussed, decisions made, regulations met, [the problems were] varied, the actions often improvised on the spot. Once dragged in, somehow I became infected. I felt elated, laden with new energy. I could not explain it to myself, could not grasp the momentous change of my outlook. I never overcame my amazement.

Whereas Karel Fleischmann was prolific with more than a thousand of his diary notes, poems and art work surviving the war, only a few fragments of Dr. Munk's words remain. The following probably written during his first year at Terezin describes his first unpleasant impressions:

We had not yet freed ourselves from the needs of comfort, social norms, social stratas, prejudices... We had not yet realized that we have been set apart for an unknown length of time into an uncertain future. The impressions are as damp as the weather had been. Muddy like the mood of us all. Was I desperate? No. I was only deeply touched. I needed two nights and two days to overcome my deep depression, to be able to overcome my own self. I was unable to concentrate my thoughts on work.... It was at noon of the third day that I suddenly succeeded in breaking through and submerged myself straight into work. Work saved me... ever since then I haven't stopped working

As they endured their personal metamorphoses, Drs. Fleischmann and Munk learned a crucial survival technique - they could help themselves best by helping others.

TEREZIN

In 1780 Emperor Franz Josef, the emperor of Austria, built a garrison town in Bohemia which he named Theresienstadt – the city of Theresa, after his mother Queen Maria Theresa. After the formation of Czechoslovakia in 1918 the town was called in Czech Terezin. Then with German occupation during World War II, again it was officially designated as Theresienstadt. In later years both names were used depending upon the perspective of the speaker or writer. English language references tend to prefer the shorter Czech version which is used in this essay.

The Terezin ghetto was euphemistically described by the Nazis as “a city of refuge” or sometimes as “Hitler's gift to the Jews.” In truth it was an assemblage camp where Jews were concentrated for varying periods until they were deported to “the East” – another euphemism for death camps, particularly Auschwitz-Birkenau. At first, Terezin was intended for Czech Jews but, before long others mainly from central Europe were shipped there – affluent, privileged, older people -- rabbis, scientists, war veterans, musicians, artists -- as many as 58,491 in September, 1942, all sharing space with rats, lice and fleas. Few of them suspected what lay ahead; many felt fortunate to be in this safe haven – some even paid for the privilege. Famously, in June, 1944, a delegation from the International Red Cross visited and couldn't, or wouldn't, appreciate the masquerade. They reported favorably to the world on conditions in what Nazi in the “model city” -- in truth it was a Potemkin's Village – a place of false facades.

Terezin is often remembered as the concentration camp where guards turned a blind eye to cultural activities that were put on by the prisoners. Perhaps these were permitted for the purpose of propaganda or to temporarily appease the doomed inmates. There was a cabaret of sorts with a jazz band and performances of Verdi's Requiem and the children's opera Brundibar were sung by doomed choruses. Hundreds of lectures were given by famous scholars. Why did they do it? For some it may have been an escape into a semblance of normalcy; for others it represented a proud act of defiance – of being able to act human in the midst of depravity. Yet, few prisoners actually could attend the cultural events – most were too exhausted from work or were literally starving. Although technically Terezin was not a death camp, between November 1941 and May 1945 of nearly 160,000 people sent there, some 36,000 died of illness or starvation; the rest, about 88,000, were deported to extermination or work camps with only a few

thousand of these surviving the ordeal. When the Russians liberated Terezin in May 1945, there were only about 30,000 survivors, more dead than alive. Within weeks many more died of a typhus epidemic. Of more than 12,000 children who passed through Terezin, only 325 survived.

HEALTH CARE IN THE GHETTO

Terezin's main hospital was located in a large barrack which had been built in 1780 to service military and civilian populations of about 7,000 people. It was ill-suited to care for the needs of 40 or 50,000 prisoners at a time and although solidly built with high vaulted wards and a huge attic, it was a hospital with no beds or bandages, no sterilizing equipment or instruments. Nevertheless, there was an abundance of knowledge and resourcefulness among the physicians. Dr. Munk's Health Department was able to collect some antiquated or broken equipment; glasses, orthopedic shoes and trusses were fitted and repaired, test tubes were manufactured and eventually a central pharmacy was stocked from medicines confiscated from new arrivals. Later this was supplemented by supplies brought in from the defunct Jewish hospitals and clinics of Europe. And so, gradually, a semblance of a functional hospital emerged.

By the end of its first year there were more than six hundred prisoner physicians at Terezin, estimated to be probably the greatest per capita concentration of physicians in the world. Some were renowned scientists but most of these luminaries were older, less vigorous and served mainly as consultants. Most of the nearly four hundred working physicians were in their thirties and forties although there were exceptions. For example, Julius Spanier had been one of Munich's outstanding pediatricians but when he arrived in the camp at age sixty-two refused special treatment and threw himself into work. When asked how he liked Terezin, he said "I have always wanted to be strictly a doctor and not have to worry about payment...Here there is no telephone, no cashier's office, no bills or insurance forms to fill out. Why shouldn't I like it?"

Dr. Erich Springer was one of fifteen Czech doctors who arrived with Dr. Munk on December 4, 1941. Although only age thirty-three, he served as the ghetto's chief surgeon from the time it first opened until liberation. After the war Dr. Springer resumed a successful medical career in Prague and in 1965 wrote a detailed report *Health Conditions in Terezin* which documented the massive undertaking that was orchestrated by Dr. Munk. He began with a disclaimer about how paradoxical it was to speak of "health conditions" in connection with a concentration camp in which the Gestapo was working to undermine health even as the doctors and nurses were striving to maintain it. Then Springer describes the first chaotic days:

I was charged with the medical supervision of the women's barracks and was supposed to set up a sick bay there, with the possibility of performing urgent operations as well. How this was to be done was left up to us. A completely empty barracks with bare walls looked like ruins. Where were we to get beds, where could we set up an operating room, how could we make bandages and operating material sterile? Where could we get the operation linen and what should we use to perform the operations?We found old army beds and even a bath stove in a garret, left behind as useless rubbish when the barracks were cleared out. We installed the stove in a room that had been used for baths and that now was intended as "operating room." Here it could be used to heat water. The beds were repaired, fitted with straw pallets and put in three rooms. We collected bed linen from the inhabitants. Everyone gave what he could. Without urging we collected hundreds of items from the coarsest material to fine batiste, both

threadbare and new. A few days after the barracks were settled, the sick bay was fully occupied. Those who were not gravely ill were treated in the out-patient department. Bed patients were put in the sick bay. They lay on straw, ten, twenty, up to several hundred in one room, some women even dressed in fine lingerie.

When the town's gentile population was moved out, additional space became available which Dr. Munk used to set up auxiliary hospitals for the blind, the mentally ill and the elderly. The medical service gradually succeeded in establishing a network of clinics and facilities. In April, 1942 internal medicine and surgery wards were opened and later infectious disease, laryngology, gynecology, ophthalmology, urology, radiology, dentistry, pediatrics departments were established – even a laboratory and a medical library. A scientific research department focused on preventing infectious disease and studied the medical complications of starvation. The main hospital had over 1000 beds squeezed together and there were more than a thousand other beds in satellite units. By the end of the first year there were 36 clinics in each of the living areas, 438 sickrooms and 4,680 sickbeds. The medical personnel initially were exempted from transports but being prisoners themselves they suffered as much as their patients. The few professional nurses in Terezin were mostly employed in the main hospital. They were supplemented by hundreds of untrained women who performed in a self-sacrificing way, as did the stretcher-bearers, disinfection workers and many others who helped to alleviate the misery. And so, despite the dreadful conditions, everyone needing aid received medical care.

Doctors made daily rounds of the dormitories and families could visit hospitalized patients twice a day. If there was some ether or chloroform for anesthesia available, mastoidectomies were done frequently because without antibiotics surgery was the only option for middle ear infection lest they develop meningitis. Here Dr. Springer laments:

Under these conditions any major surgical step was a risk, as in the time before Semmelweis or Lister, with the difference that we knew the cause of poor healing of wounds...insufficient asepsis. For an amputation the surgeon required a saw which was unavailable in our modest instrument case. We had to use a carpenter's saw and then were able to perform the operation. Before the "hospital" was opened we operated only in the most urgent cases in order to avoid unnecessary danger.

Despite these heroic efforts, little really could be done for the suffering inmates and it was nearly impossible to maintain adequate cleanliness. The Health Department strived to prevent the outbreak of major epidemics exhorting people to comply with hygienic practices as best they could and to eradicate vermin. They built a central disinfecting station and disinfecting teams regularly deloused the barracks. But it was a losing effort. Measles, mumps, diphtheria, scarlet fever and other contagious diseases led to mandatory six weeks in isolation but little could be done for those with more serious conditions. In Terezin's first year the main causes of death were pneumonia, tuberculosis and execution, but after August, 1941 when transports from Germany and Austria began [in fact June 1942], old age became the chief cause. Most of the elderly had left their homes in relatively good health but the ghetto broke them down; undernourishment and despair took their toll. Once proud and elegant elderly Germans were reduced to begging for bread.

Many thousands suffered from "Terezinka," the dysentery that especially afflicted old people who scavenged in the garbage for a few potato peels or rotten vegetables. Out of

120,000 who arrived at Terezin in the first two years, 768 people attempted suicide, only 246 succeeded. They committed suicide by swallowing poison, cutting their veins, jumping from upper floors of the barracks, hanging or just losing the will to carry on. And if the elderly didn't die at Terezin, they were transported to death camps. It was a fiendish process of unnatural selection.

Even in the most terrible time of epidemic and mass death, the health workers never gave in to a feeling of hopelessness, but again and again tried to do the best for the patients under the given conditions....Although these efforts were often brought to naught by the brutal intervention of the Gestapo, the achievements of health workers in Terezin should hold an honored place in the history of medicine. Thanks are due to all of them.

The Health Department employed close to 20 percent of the camp's working population. In time there were four hospitals and every barrack had a clinic. At its maximum in September, 1942 the number of patient visits was more than 200,000 patients a month; as many as 10,000 clinic visits a day. Some may have been suffering from psychosomatic illnesses, others may have been malingerers but all who asked received medical attention.

WHO REALLY WAS ERICH MUNK?

Dr. Munk rarely revealed his personal feelings which contributed to conflicted opinions by others about him, including envy and fear. The S.S. sometimes described Dr. Munk as "a man who swallowed the ruler" meaning he followed rules to the letter. But that did not necessarily make him complicit. A partial understanding of his character can be constructed by analyzing vignettes reported in the memoirs of those whose paths crossed his at various times.

For example, concerning his attitude toward the German occupiers, in a letter to the doctor's older brother Max, Mr. O. Hradil of Brno described a prewar incident when Munk was working at the "Palestine Office" in Prague. Hradil, a member of the Czech underground, was charged with obtaining weapons and ammunition and asked Dr. Munk to obtain curare that was to be used for poison darts to be shot from a silent air gun in order to kill Germans. Mr. Hradil wrote, "we were aware that it is internationally forbidden to use this poison in battle, but the behavior of the occupants forced us to this use." Dr. Munk obtained the curare from a local apothecary, delivered it to Hradil's home and was partially paid for his service.

Another prewar encounter with Mr. Hradil gave further evidence of the doctor's strong anti-Nazi conviction which sometimes was questioned by those who thought he was too compliant with German orders:

It was exactly a week after the closing of the universities and the mood in Prague was peculiar. As we were strolling about, we came to Cerninsky Palace just as the SS guards were changing. Dr. Erich said something slanderous without noticing that behind us was a superman with a swastika on the lapel of his coat. When he [Munk] noticed him it was too late. The man followed us for a long way. When we sped, he sped as well. When we slowed down, he did the same. He followed us for quite a while and I think that at that time we had more good luck than good sense. When at last we descended to one of the bridges over the Vitava [river] that spy was on our heels. Then Dr. Erich stopped on the bridge and said in a loud voice: "On this very spot we threw a few of those fools into the

river." Indeed, a number of Germans had been thrown from the bridge into the water recently. When our pursuer heard that, he looked around and not seeing any help for himself, he disappeared. It was an ugly situation for both of us, but it ended well.

Another narrative which provides insight into Dr. Munk's personality was written after the war by Vera Katz (Schiff.) She was a sixteen year old with two years nursing school training when assigned to work in the Urology unit which she described as a vile place filled with the stench of pus, blood and excrement. Mattresses were soaked through and never cleaned and because gauze dressings were unavailable, paper was used to cover purulent wounds. After two years working on this unit, nurse Katz was advised that if she switched to kitchen work she'd be better able to smuggle food to her desperately ill mother. However, she was shocked when the chief Dr. Munk refused to release her from hospital service. Here nurse Katz describes her reaction:

Erich Munk, in whose hands rested the fate of our family, was relentless. He was a handsome man of about 40 years, opinionated, a cold man in a cruel environment. There were moments when he was charming, exuding wit and ready repartee, but mostly he displayed a lack of empathy and compassion. As a powerful member of the Council, he warranted a great deal of respect, but because of his position his life also hanged in the balance. Perhaps a man who knew that his days were counted was not given to kindness. He listened without interrupting me and then replied that what I was asking was out of the question.

Although Vera Katz pleaded tearfully, Dr. Munk repeated that his only concern was the smooth functioning of the camp's health care. He would not accommodate her private problems at the expense of the hospital where there were so few trained surgical nurses, only about 1,500 in all. She asked others to intervene in her behalf, but no one dared circumvent Dr. Munk. But soon another incident forced Vera to change her mind about the doctor. In 1944 when her mother was diagnosed with Tuberculosis and assigned to a transport to the East, Vera volunteered to serve as a transport nurse although she understood that this was tantamount to suicide. She received permission but just as the train was being loaded, the SS commandant Karl Rahm drove up to supervise. It happens that this shipment was part of the "thinning out" process prior to the Red Cross inspector's visit. 7,500 prisoners were to be deported but since this left a shortage of healthy looking inmates, Rahm wanted to screen the deportees for a few more able individuals. As the candidates filed in front of him, he was flanked by a few SS men as well as by Dr. Munk and when it was Vera's turn to pass before the inebriated Commandant, she pleaded for him to grant a stay of deportation for her mother. Vera describes the scene:

He [Rahm] appeared to have listened and asked where the rest of my family was. My answer informing him that all had died already, seemed to please him, for he turned to Dr. Munk and asked him if I was a competent nurse. A wave of panic swept through me, for Dr. Munk was the man I had a bitter row with only a few weeks ago when I had asked him to release me from the hospital assignment and free me for my kitchen job. I thought all was lost... and while I tried to look composed, inside I trembled with fear. I need not have worried. Dr. Munk was not a vindictive man. During this ominous hour he tried to support my choice. I heard him praising my diligence, devotion, competence and dedication. I sensed Rahm's hesitation. Well aware of German expectations when within eye contact of the SS, I cast my eyes demurely on the ground. Rahm's bark informed me that I could remain in the camp; there was no need to have a nurse accompany the

transport of consumptives. Dr. Munk, well informed that I was a volunteer, not an assigned caretaker of the ill, asked for permission to add an explanation. Most likely he feared that I would anger Rahm by refusing to step aside without permission for mother to stay with me and took it upon himself to clarify the point that I was a volunteer wishing to go along with my TB-suffering mother., I was not certain that Rahm's brain awash with alcohol took it all in. There was another pause, but then rather impatiently, he raised his voice saying, "Step aside, both can remain behind. Next quick."

Vera Katz was the last person to be exempted from that transport but her mother died soon afterward (in fact, all told, fifty members of her family died or were killed during the War.) Shortly before the end of the war, Vera got married in the camp and then after a few months, discovered to her amazement that she was pregnant (emaciated women almost always were anovulatory.) At first the Nazis permitted pregnant women to run their course if they had arrived already pregnant. In this way some 230 children were born in Terezin and of these 23 survived the war. But in July 1943 a general ban on pregnancy was ordered and Dr. Munk sent a circular to all doctors requiring them to report all cases of pregnancy without delay lest they be considered accessories to the crime and deported along with the parents. Pregnant women were given a pseudo-diagnosis of "endometritis" and D&C's were performed no matter in which month pregnancy was discovered. Because nurse Katz's abortion was performed with only a few drops of ether, it was physically as well as emotionally agonizing.

Vera Katz's ambivalence about Dr. Munk was typical. Some critics considered him to be a poor administrator who drove his people to the point of exhaustion and did not accept criticism or suggestions. Yet, if he drove others, it was no more than he did himself for as one physician noted, "He terrorized himself as well as his subordinates." Doubtless his self-denial helped contribute to his developing a mild case of tuberculosis which temporarily forced him to slow down. After his first year in the ghetto, in an apologetic note to a medical colleague Dr. Munk regretted that "work is so intensive, so demanding that it does not permit me to make friends....I envy you your free moments, I envy you your medicine." This last referred to the fact that during the first years he was totally immersed in administrative duties, until in 1944 he was able to write that he was able to work in radiology three times a week – "I have returned to my old love."

AN INSIDE LOOK

But his assistant Karel Fleischmann, better than anyone else, had the opportunity to observe his boss from close up and he thought differently. Fleischmann came to appreciate his boss as an intellectual who had the ability to see the big picture and not dwell on details, a man capable of forward thinking. He was so fascinated by "the Munk" that his notes contained detailed descriptions of Dr. Munk's posture, clothing, style of speaking, handwriting, the appearance of his office and his personal quarters; more important, he saw inside the man

The look of this man is extraordinary. Superficial people, and admittedly I spoke with many such people, call his look arrogant, supercilious and presumptive. You must spend a lot of time with Dr. Munk – like me you have to observe him night and day for half a year, you must hear him speak and see him act. Only then you will realize that this person is anything but supercilious or haughty. He is not only modest but he is full of humility – but not before people – superficial critics will never understand this. His look is mostly veiled with melancholy, a sadness that has nothing to do with personal experience but with a premonition of destiny.

Dr. Munk is well informed about everything although he has reduced his reception hours to a minimum. His opinion is that in order to be effective you have to be in the field, not behind a desk. Nights were meant for office work and days are spent visiting the various health institutions. He sees for himself and the problems are discussed at night in the framework of the various categories of physician.

Here is a night-conversation, rather a monologue that I had with Dr. Munk. By the way, I always find it difficult to talk to Dr. Munk in the street. He walks too fast. I can keep pace with my eyes but not with my breath. I certainly can't walk and talk at the same time. Hence I have to rely on listening.... That night.... it was the beginning of June and the Aryan citizens of Terezin had just been evacuated and control had been handed to the Judenrat. We planned how certain houses could be used for the Health Department. That very day we'd been talking about a "Doctors House." We had planned to have a Society of Doctors, a place for scientific lectures, a library, etc. He started talking and I thought that he was continuing that earlier discussion. He said he needed a nice modern house with a garden in a quiet quarter of town. I immediately thought that this was to be for the Doctors House, but Dr. Munk was talking about a house for babies. Then, he said there was a need for another very large house – would this be for the doctors and nurses? No, this second building which had to house several thousand people was meant for incurables. Then a third house – full of light and air and with a big garden. I wondered would this be the Doctors House? No, this was needed for the blind. And so it went, homes for physically disabled people, invalids, etc. Only at the very end came the turn of the Doctors House. That is Munk's way of thinking, his medical conscience, his vision. In connection with this, even during the very first week of his stay at Terezin, actually already on way to there from Prague, he began to plan and organize the Health Department. In spite of all the difficulties and setbacks, they have mostly been realized.

I could say a lot about his love for children. For a long time I didn't know for whom the boxes of Ovomaltine had been gotten (sic). For whom parcels of Dextropur and baby-flour and baby foods of all kinds were being acquired. For whom the first vegetables, especially spinach, and the medicines were gotten. They were unobtainable otherwise and had to be taken from Raudnitz after the purchase permit had been granted by the "kommandatur." It had all been procured for the babies, all for the sick children. They were at that time concentrated in the baby home in the Dresden barracks. His great care was given to the babies and with...superhuman circumspection he procured what until then nobody believed could be procured. He did that to a large extent from his own pocket since as a member of the Alttestenrat he was allowed to have money.

Only he who had a leading position in the Ghetto can understand what it means to be disturbed in the few hours of relative solitude. You are called upon at any hour of the day or night, you are appealed to, you really have no time to concentrate, to gather your own self, let alone to recuperate. A room of your own is no luxury. It is a dire need and the time spent there a healing factor – absolutely necessary. And still, Dr. Munk does not forbid anyone to look him up, to wake him. No, really, he requires it when a situation demands it.

[Sometimes] Dr. Munk is criticized and taken amiss personally. He is reproached that he does not understand and is incapable of pushing through the placing of the incurably sick in one big living quarters. His critics claimed that there was a difference between the

level of closed hospitalization (hospitals and clinics) on the one hand and open sick care in the block houses on the other. Also said about him was that he did not have real knowledge of people, that he did not evaluate them properly, that he was surrounded by people who were objectionable, that he was too harsh, domineering. As I've already said....I have not met many people of his modesty, his humility, his creativity. These qualities are given only to the few great.

FLEISCHMANN'S PORTRAIT OF DR.MUNK (see cover)

Concerning his art work at Terezin, Dr. Fleischmann once wrote "I wanted to see the world differently and I could perceive it by making many hundreds of drawings." His subject matter frequently was mundane while at other times his art hauntingly depicted life in the ghetto. He was especially intrigued by the thought of drawing "the Munk." Here Fleischmann considers how he might develop the boss's portrait in geometrical terms according to Cezanne's cubist style:

I have repeatedly tried to draw him. It's not easy. ...I made a whole lot of drawings with little success. Dr. Munk says about himself that he does not have a photogenic face. Maybe he is right. [But] from a painter's point of view his face is not only most interesting, but his entire stature and movements which are like counterpoint in a subconscious composed symphony movement

I'll have to set up two, slightly upstanding but beautifully formed ears, above the ears a wreath of shining dark brown hair on the crown of the head something that once had been a bushy mane – without being impertinent...[now] a head which can be called bald.. It should not be [overemphasized] because this is a weak point of the otherwise brave Maccabee...The head, although small is proportional to the upper part of the body [and] establishes symmetry and almost a monumental impression. Yet the most remarkable are the eyes – dark, deep, seemingly with no transition from the pupils to the iris, shadowed by the sleeplessness of long nights, supported by some striking crossbeams under the sunken cheeks.

The center is marked by an aristocratic finely-cut nose betraying a strong spirit, a proud person; it is a brave man who is facing you. In the physically small head lies a mighty brain. This small head is not the way a puppet's head is put on. It is a real organic entity, an integral part of the rest of the body. It's also the hands that impress you so. They are big, much too big for the small face but not malformed or clumsy, quite the contrary. They are strong and betray knowledge and feeling for what they hold... These are the hands of an energetic, yet gently touching surgeon.

When you see the gaunt man with his inflamed eyelids and tired mouth, how relentlessly he works for the welfare of the Ghetto inmates... then you can't lag behind him. For me personally, Dr. Munk has become a real experience. Rarely have I met people of his stature. It will be an honor for us all to be able to say that commissioned by the Health Department of Ghetto Terezin we were permitted to work together with Dr. Munk.

(Karrel Fleischmann's drawing of Dr. Munk is in the collection of the Art Museum at Yad Vashem.)

DR. MUNK'S RELATIONS WITH OTHERS

Ever the keen observer, Dr. Fleischmann once described Dr. Munk's relationship with Jacob Edelstein, who was the Head of the Council of Elders until in 1943 he was stripped of his leadership role:

Edelstein and Dr. Munk never liked each other too well. They mostly held opposite views – Dr. Munk protecting the Health Department and fighting for it..... But in this, Edelstein's most difficult hour, Dr. Munk joined ranks with him as a friend and loyal human being. There was no trace of sadistic malicious joy at Edelstein's misfortune, only an expression of humane solidarity. No joy at the sight of a fallen giant, but an outstretched hand of sympathy which helped Edelstein rise from the ground.

Before the war when Jacob Edelstein was a Zionist leader in Prague, he and Munk had worked closely together, the doctor performing physical examinations on members of the Zionist youth. The Zionist agenda, both before and during the war was to favor young people in the hope that some of them would survive. The Zionist hegemony at Terezin was resented by many of the more assimilated Czechs who sometimes referred to them as "the Shalom people." In October, 1942 Edelstein wrote a letter to a friend in Geneva which he knew would be censored and needed to have a positive spin. About his associate he said: *You would marvel at the achievement of our friend Dr. Munk: a hospital to be proud of, the latest sanitary installations, baby nurseries, dormitories for children and the elderly, all sparkling clean and all carefully attended, all an endeavor one can contemplate with satisfaction.*

On another occasion Dr. Fleischmann provided this additional insight: *Dr. Munk is well informed about everything although he has reduced his reception hours to a minimum. His opinion was that in order to be effective, you had to be in the field and not behind a desk. Nights were meant for office work and so most of his days are spent visiting the various health units. He sees for himself that way. He continually stresses that he gladly learns new things and that he doesn't understand everything. For instance he has been elected to a newly founded oncological society "I am too well inclined towards our patients to accept this nomination," he said. "There are among us specialists whose knowledge is far above mine" and he adds in his witty way, "I am neither a catholic Jew nor an orthodox goy, but Saturday should be a day of rest. I don't want to hold meetings on Saturday.*

It should not be surprising that physicians at Terezin would attempt to form a medical specialty society. Many similar clubs were established in an attempt to maintain a sense of normalcy for themselves. Of course, this perfectly suited the Nazi's cynical strategy to project a false image to the world. But even as the physicians strived to maintain scientific detachment, they had to respond to decidedly abnormal circumstances. On October 13, 1942 a circular sent by Dr. Munk to all department heads required them to submit lists that very day of all their personnel – physicians, podiatrists, pharmacists, nurses, masseurs, psychiatrists, assigning everyone to one of four categories: indispensable, relatively indispensable, relatively dispensable and dispensable. These rankings of candidates for transport to the East continued to be demanded of the Jewish leaders until the fall of 1944 when the Nazis took over the job.

Summing up, Karel Fleischmann writes:

Somebody more meritorious than I am may one day write and testify to Dr. Munk's distinguished services for Judaism in particular and humanity in general. Only one thing more I wish to say: Unique, continually changing and unforeseen assignments were hurled at him and at all of us. The erection of a city of sick people, some of them incurable, the organization of this unique, unprecedented apparatus consisting of many necessary institutions – [all] was erected from zero. It was presented to Dr. Munk as his coming of age thesis and he fulfilled it. He learned to master all the details....he had an exceptional memory for details...a gift for assessment of space....He could foresee for tomorrow and for after tomorrow and the year to come. He was well above average in his talents. He was not overbearing or aggressive in his manner. He knew how to motivate people [and] moulded his co-workers into a friendly community bound by loyalty and responsibility toward each other and the whole operation....

Although Dr. Munk remained a bachelor, at Terezin Dr. Fleischmann married a prewar friend. Probably it was not so much a love match as an attempt to save her life since the wives of Jewish leaders often were spared. But to no avail. In October, 1944 husband and wife were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau on the same train as Dr. Munk and other Council leaders. They were among the last group to be gassed upon arrival. A friend who survived the experience recalled that he stood just behind Fleischmann in the final selection line (October 23, 1944) and observed that the doctor was rejected for hard labor because of a deformed back, the result of childhood ricketts. When they died in Birkenau's gas chamber, Karel Fleischmann was age 47, Erich Munk was 40.

DR. VICTOR FRANKL

In Dr. Fleischmann's capacity as head of the geriatric section he became concerned with the mental health of new arrivals. In a diary note written on January 29, 1943, the doctor describes the arrival of a group of elderly deportees from Cologne who hadn't eaten or washed for four days (this also was the subject of one of his most poignant drawings):

I see them leaning against walls, tired to death, with harassed faces, half dead, old men with lovely white beards, white haired women with black hats, black dresses and gloves, with silver handled sticks, elegant handbags as for an outing at a health resort. But everything was very dirty, wrinkled and crushed. It smelled of excrement because they came in locked carriages and people couldn't wash for days. ..A human dung heap, an amorphous mass, something without life... Instead of comfortable spa houses and sanatoria, hastily arranged mass quarters in lofts of Terezin barracks received them.

Recognizing unusual sensitivity in one of his young assistants who ran one of the general medical clinics, Fleischmann asked him to organize a special unit to help these people overcome their shock. In response, this Viennese neuropsychiatrist Viktor Frankl formed a multi-disciplinary group which called itself the *Stosstrupe* or Assault Squad and sought to engage the minds of despondent inmates in constructive ways, especially those with suicidal tendencies. Dr. Frankl survived the war and became perhaps Terezin's most famous alumnus. With his wife and his parents he had been deported to Terezin in September, 1942 and remained there for about two years. Then during transfer to Auschwitz, he lost the coat into the lining of which he'd sewn a manuscript which summarized his life's work. He spent months trying to reconstruct his ideas on pieces of stolen paper. Frankl survived three camps after Terezin and after the War completed and published his great work *Man's Search For Meaning* (1946) which eventually sold over nine million copies in nineteen languages.

The core of Frankl's theory which he called "logotherapy" was that there must be a purpose to suffering and dying. Everyone can rise above their fate but must discover the meaning in life for themselves, either by creating a work or doing a deed - by experiencing something or encountering someone. Dr. Frankl observed that those who were without hope were the ones who died quickest in the camps. Conversely, those who held on to a vision of the future were more likely to survive. For himself, the way not to lose hope was to think of his wife for as he wrote: "The salvation of man is through love and in love. I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a moment in the contemplation of his beloved."

In explaining that man controls his own destiny, Dr. Frankl wrote:

In the concentration camp, we witnessed some of our comrades behave like swine while others behaved like saints. Man has both potentialities within himself; which one is actualized depends on decisions, not on conditions. Our generation is realistic because we have come to know man as he really is. After all, man is that being who invented the gas chambers and he is also that being who entered the gas chambers upright with the Lord's Prayer or the S'hma Israel on his lips.

When Dr. Frankl returned to Vienna after the war, he learned that his wife and entire family had been killed. Broken and alone in the world he accepted a position as director of the Vienna Neurological Polyclinic. Later he became a full professor at the medical school, remarried and in time became a world famous psychotherapist. He held five professorships in American universities, received 29 honorary degrees and was a Nobel Peace Prize nominee. Victor Frankl died in London in 1997 at age 92.

"THE IMPORTANCE OF REMEMBERING KAREL FLEISCHMANN"

Karel Fleischmann began one of his last poems with these words:

*Nobody will hear my song
The world of my time ends behind these walls.*

But the doctor was mistaken. After the war's end, more than a thousand of Fleischmann's drawings, written notes and poems were found and collected in archives in Czechoslovakia and Israel. They provided valuable testimony because as doctor-artist-writer he was able to see and record the entire panorama of suffering including hunger, fear, overcrowding, sickness and brutality. Gradually the world became aware of Karel Fleischmann's unique contribution but only a small amount of written material was translated into English. Then in 2004 an article appeared in the *International Journal of Dermatology* which described the doctor's life. The authors Leonard Hoenig of Florida and Tomas Spenser and Anita Tarsi of Israel concluded their review by noting that although Karel Fleischmann perished, his dream for a better future endured, declaring that it is up to each of us to help make it a reality. This had been poignantly expressed in Fleischmann's diary:

One of us will teach the children how to sing again, to write on paper with a pencil, to do sums and multiply; one of us will get there.

The unquenchable spirit of hope expressed in these words so resonated with the medical journal's editor A. Bernard Ackerman that he was inspired to write an accompanying Commentary which he called *The Importance of Remembering Karel Fleischmann*. Dr. Ackerman explained how for more than thirty years he'd taught thousands of students, residents and fellows from around the world and could not recall a moment of discord. As teacher and students gathered around his multi-headed microscope, the spirit had been collegial and collaborative, so gratifying that in 1982 he had the conceit to write an editorial with the provocative and overly optimistic title, *Doctors may yet save the world*.

Then in 2002 the scales fell from Ackerman's eyes. That year he led a colloquium in Weimar, Germany which was attended by dozens of his former students, nearly all of them Europeans. The last meeting was held at nearby Buchenwald where the fate of Jewish dermatologists and others at the hands of the Nazis was discussed. At the concluding dinner, amidst a spirit of good fellowship, two of Ackerman's former trainees launched into a loud anti-Semitic tirade. Someone tried to hush them up but they persisted, laughing "We enjoy it." For Dr. Ackerman, the evening was poisoned and only then he realized how naïve he'd been:

Not only have I been unable to free the bigots from the effects of the pathogen of prejudice, but I watched in disbelief and dismay, the unwillingness of anyone at that table...to express any sense of outrage, repugnance or shame. Some of the witnesses, in fact, have become apologists for bigotry.

The mentality that set in motion the roundup of Karel Fleischmann who, at the time, was caring for patients concurrent with contributing immensely to the cultural life of his society, the incarceration of him at Terezin and the extermination of him at Auschwitz is very much alive and well in Europe today....little has changed 60 years after his grievous death.

We, all of us, have much to learn from the life and plight of Karel Fleischmann. We, like he, must have...hope, so unshakeable that it cannot be dashed by disappointments like mine at Weimar. We must persevere in our zeal to fight bigotry wherever we find it – and not simply that directed at our own tribe, but at any and every tribe -- women, gays, Blacks, gypsies and Jews, to mention but a very few of them.

Each of us, in our own way, has a sacred responsibility to instruct very young children, as soon as they are capable of comprehension, about how every human being must be treated...Only by single-minded, purposeful commitment to teaching about the multifaceted matter of bigotry...is there any hope that the spirit of Karel Fleischmann not only will live on, but will prevail. [As he predicted] "One of us will get there." The Hebrew scriptures advice that "One man can save the world." Let each one of us be that one.

To Dr. Ackerman it was not enough for each of us to merely remember the medical martyrs of Terezin. Rather, we all are morally obliged to *teach* the next generation that the best way to fight intolerance is through personal activism – never to sit idly when we witness injustice. Neither Drs. Fleischmann or Munk were saints. Like all of us they were flawed human beings, but thrust into a horrific situation, uncertain what the future held, they tried to do their best.

To be sure, they were not the only heroes. Indeed, the redemptive spirit of Terezin was captured in the lilting refrain of a song known as "The Terezin March" which was sung at the end of every performance in the ghetto's cabaret. In later years when survivors from all over the world gathered for reunion at Beit Theresienstadt in Israel, they would join hands and sing in unison:

*Hey! Tomorrow life starts over,
And with it the time is approaching
When we'll fold our knapsacks
And return home again.
Where there is a will, there is a way,
Let us join hands
And one day on the ruins of the ghetto
We shall laugh.*

Sources:

Because this narrative is written in a literary style scholars may be troubled by an absence of footnotes and references. My intent has been to compose a "readable" character study of two remarkable men, but this is not an excuse to tamper with historical facts. Nevertheless, there were certain problems concerning precise documentation of sources. Primary material that has been reproduced here in italics was extracted from unpublished documents found in files of the Theresienstadt Martyrs Remembrance Association, Beit Theresienstadt (BT) at Kibbutz Givat Haim-Ihud in Israel. These had been translated by others into English and, in turn, I have slightly edited or resequenced portions for the sake of coherence. If in the process, factual errors may have inadvertently occurred, they are my own responsibility. Lydia Shmolka of BT translated some documents into English from their Health, Altostenrat and Erich Munk files. Several of Dr. Fleischmann's journals and poems which depicted the doctor-writer-artist's prewar work were translated into English by Hana Houskova and reproduced in an unpublished biography *Rack of Time* (BT Karel Fleischmann File No. 601.) A manuscript written by Dr. Fleischmann titled *Dr. Erich Munk. A Character Portrait of a Personality* which was found after the war and translated into English by Lydia Shmolka, was provided to me by Dr. Tessa Chelouche, also from BT files. I am indebted to Herbert Strauss and Karl Forman for their translations of various documents from German and Czech. Dr. Erich Springer's treatise about his medical experiences at Terezin appeared in *Terezin, Prague Council of Jewish Communities in the Czech Lands*, 1965: 115-122, on file at the Jewish Museum of Prague. Other useful sources were Vera Schiff's memoir *Theresienstadt: The Town the Nazis Gave to the Jews* (Toronto: Lugus, 1996) and Ruth Bondy's *Jakob Edelstein. Elder of the Jews* (New York: Grove Press, 1981.) Many books have been written by and about Viktor Frankl and especially useful concerning his time at Terezin were Anna Redsand's *Viktor Frankl: A Life Worth Living* (New York: Clarion Books, 2006) and George E. Berkley's *Hitler's Gift: The Story of Theresienstadt*. (Boston: Brondon Books, 1993.) The best English language biography of Dr. Fleischmann is the reminiscence *Dr. Karel Fleischmann: The story of an artist and physician in Ghetto Terezin* by Leonard J. Hoenig, MD, Tomas Spenser, FRCGP and Anita Tarsi of Beit Theresienstadt (*International Journal of Dermatology* 2004: 43. 129-135) and the accompanying Commentary by A. Bernard Ackerman, MD *The Importance of Remembering Karel Fleischmann*. I wish to acknowledge Oded Breda, the manager of Beit Theresienstadt, and historian Dr. Margalit Shlain for their thoughtful review of this manuscript and their constructive suggestions.