TWO DOCTORS OF TEREZIN

By Michael Nevins

Portrait of Dr. Erich Munk,
by Dr. Karel Fleischmann.
Collection of the Art Museum at Yad Vashem

While leading a history study trip to Israel in 2005, I met a physician by the name of Tomi Spencer who as a young child had escaped Prague on a *kindertransport.* He grew up in England where he was educated, married and later moved to Israel where he became a family practitioner at a kibbutz in the Galilee. Also, he taught at the Technion's medical school in Haifa where he developed a curriculum for students that was based on moral dilemmas that physician prisoners had encountered in the Nazi camps.

Dr. Spencer told me that in 2000 he had curated an exhibition of several dozen paintings and drawings with medical themes that were made by Jewish prisoners, some of them physicians, in the Terezin ghetto near Prague. The exhibition consisted of digitized reproductions of the originals, and when Tomi described them, I asked whether I could exhibit them in the United States. He agreed but, as it happened, when I returned home my wife was entering a terminal phase of lymphoma and it was more than a year before I worked through that loss and remembered my conversation with Dr. Spencer. But then I couldn't relocate him. I tried unsuccessfully for many months before learning that in the interim he had died, shortly after my wife had and of the same illness. Finally, I located one of his sons in Israel and found that the art collection still was intact, stored in a carton in his kibbutz garage. Tomi's son shipped them to me and I was able to exhibit them at several venues. More about that later.

First let's focus on the picture shown above. Both the artist and his subject had been prisoners at Terezin — what the Germans called Theresienstadt. I'll begin with a diary selection that was written in 1942 by the physician painter **Karel Fleischmann** (1897-1944)**.** It reads like something that might have been written by Franz Kafka — here the doctor describes what it felt like while waiting for deportation to Terezin, some forty miles from Prague:

> *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?…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…Your helplessness became more and more pronounced as you lay denuded among the hundreds of strangers on the concrete floors or on bunks in the huge barracks…We live like rats in a cellar and become shy of the light and shy of people.

I didn't expect such eloquence from a physician but Karel Fleischmann was no ordinary man -– he was an intellectual and thousands of his works of art and poetry were hidden and survived the war. It's revealing that because each prisoner was allowed to bring a single book to Terezin, after much deliberation the doctor chose a dictionary — as he explained, "It's an honest kind of book. It keeps what it promises…"

Dr. Fleischmann was advised that when he arrived in Terezin he should seek out the man who headed the ghetto's health affairs, a former radiologist by the name of **Erich Munk** — the man in the portrait shown above. He was a leading Zionist in Prague before the war and you'll notice that he's dressed here in a rather shabby suit, the only distinguishing mark of his identity being the Star of David affixed to the jacket.

It wasn't easy for Fleischman to locate Dr. Munk, but when he finally was in the busy doctor's presence, Munk was brusque but seemed willing to engage the young doctor as an administrative assistant. Here's how Dr. Fleischmann recalled their first meeting in Munk's private quarters — "the Holy of Holies."

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. 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 in my outlook. I never overcame my amazement.

Erich Munk was austere and scrupulously honest and, although respected for his integrity, he was controversial because he had the thankless job of mediating between the inmates and the Nazi authorities.

Dr. Erich Munk

Fellow prisoners called him “the Monk” while the Nazis referred to him as “the man who swallowed a ruler” -- meaning that he was straight and followed their rules to the letter. He had to in order to survive in that macabre world and to gain the power to possibly save the lives of others. As Assistant Director of the Health Department, Fleischmann was in charge of welfare for the elderly inmates. He secretly documented life in the ghetto in drawings and writings and gave lectures on medicine and art.

Terezin wasn’t a death camp — it was euphemistically described by the Nazis as a “city of refuge.” In truth it was a walled assemblage ghetto where Jews were concentrated for varying periods before deportation to “the East” for the final solution. Between 1941 and 1945 of nearly 160,000 people sent there, some 36,000 died of illness or starvation, about 80,000 were deported to extermination or work camps and only a few thousand survived the ordeal. Of more than 12,000 children who passed through, only 325 lived through the war. What distinguished Terezin from other camps was that it was a Potemkin’s Village – a place where wealthy or prominent people were lured by promises of privileged treatment – a demonstration project for visiting Red Cross inspectors to show how well the Jews were being treated. It was famous for cultural activities that were permitted for the purpose of propaganda – a cabaret, a jazz band, soccer games, a chorus, lectures by famous scholars and there was visual art – both permitted and subterfuge.

Dr. Karel Fleischmann

During nearly a year that they worked together, Dr. Fleischmann became obsessed with his boss and considered criticism directed at Munk to be totally unfair.

> *Superficial 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 will you 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…I have not met many people of his modesty, humility, his creativity. These qualities are given only to the few greats.*

Terezin street scene by Karel Fleischmann

After the war's end, more than a thousand of Karel Fleischman's drawings, written notes and poems were found and collected in archives in Czechoslovakia and Israel so that the world gradually became aware of his contributions. However, only a few fragments of Dr. Munk's words remained. The following described his first impressions upon arrival:

> *We had not yet freed ourselves from the needs of comfort, social norms, social strata and 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 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 by helping others. Because Munk rarely revealed his feelings, this led to conflicting opinions by others about him. The S.S. sometimes called him "a man who swallowed the ruler" meaning that he followed the rules to the letter, but that did not necessarily make him complicit;.

Karel Fleischmann knew better: "I have not met many people of his modesty, his humility, his creativity. These qualities are given only to the few great…..For me personally, [working with] Dr. Munk has become a real experience….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."

In October, 1944 these two doctors of Terezin were among the last group to be gassed upon arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau — Fleischmann was 47, Munk was 40. In one of Fleischmann's poems he wrote, "Nobody will hear my song. The world of my time ends behind these walls." Another time he predicted in his 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."

Among a very few doctors who survived Terezin was the Viennese psychiatrist **Viktor Frankl** who spent about two years at Terezin. Karel Fleischmann assigned him to work with despondent, sometimes suicidal elderly patients by engaging their minds in constructive ways and this became the hallmark of his life's later work. Dr. Frankl survived three camps after Terezin, jotted down ideas on pieces of stolen paper which he hid in the lining of his clothes and after the war was over, published his book *Man's Search For Meaning* that eventually sold over nine million copies in nineteen languages. The core of Viktor Frankl's philosophy 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. He observed that in the camps those without hope were the ones who died the quickest. Conversely, those who held on to a vision of the future were more likely to survive.

> *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.*

Viktor Frankl once wrote that "the salvation of man is through love and in love" and the way that he hung on was to constantly think of his wife. But when he returned to Vienna after the war, he learned that she and his entire family had been killed. Broken and alone, he accepted a teaching position at the medical school, remarried and in time became a world famous psychotherapist. He held five professorships in American universities, received 29 honorary degrees, was a Nobel Peace Prize nominee and died in L Although the show was staged for the amusement of the Nazis. Although there was subtle mocking of the Nazis, one evening when a performance was viewed by Red Cross inspectors, it served as potent propaganda to display how well the Jews were being treated at Terezin. ondon in 1997 at age 92.

Viktor Frankl

In 2004 an article, co-authored by Tomi Spencer, appeared in *The International Journal of Dermatology* that described Fleischmann's life (KF had been a dermatologist before the war.) An accompanying commentary written by Dr. Bernard Ackerman was titled "The Importance of Remembering Karel Fleischmann" and here are a few excerpts:

> *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….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…..The Hebrew Scriptures advice that 'One man can save the world.' Let each one of us be that one.*

"Those who are coming and those who are departing." KF

To Bernard 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.

Before I felt competent to lecture about the medical art produced at Terezin, I felt the need to see the place for myself so in 2007 I made a brief visit to look around. One day I interviewed a survivor who worked as a docent at Prague's Jewish museum. When I asked how she could constantly relive her ordeal for visitors, she explained that she felt an obligation to bear witness. When I asked, how she'd kept her spirit up through those dark days, she replied, "Hope dies last."

After my visit to Prague, one of the places where I displayed and discussed the Terezin art was a Holocaust Museum which then was located in Spring Valley, NY. At the end of my talk at the exhibition's opening event, an elderly woman came up and introduced herself. Ela Stein Weissberger told me that as a child she had been sent with her family to Terezin where she stayed for several years. She added that she owned a painting done by Karel Fleischmann about whom I'd just spoken and she asked whether I'd like to see it? And how!

So I visited Ela at her home in Tappan, NY, but found Fleischmann's painting to be small and rather nondescript. However, when I asked Ela how her mother had obtained it, her answer was startling. She replied that her mother had been "the best thief in Terezin." She'd been assigned to work in the Nazi's private garden and because she was emaciated, she could easily hide tomatoes and radishes under her clothes and smuggle them out. What her family didn't eat she'd barter — in this case for a painting!

When Ela was about eleven years old she played one of the leading roles as the cat in the children's opera called *Brundibar*. The opera was performed 55 times at the camp although rarely by the same cast because children were constantly being deported to Auschwitz. But Ela the cat was a constant. After the war *Brundibar* often was performed throughout the world and sometimes Ela Weissberger would attend and tell her own story — the title of her published memoir was *The Cat with the Yellow Star*.

At the end of some of these performances, the elderly survivor would go up on stage to join the chorus as they sang the opera's final victory song. Ela told me that after the war survivors sometimes would gather at Kibbutz Beit Terezin in Israel and before they finished, they all would join hands and in a spirit of optimism sing a lilting song that used to close every show in the ghetto's cabaret. It was called *The Terezin March* and here's the refrain:

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.

You Tube recording of The Terezin March
(Start at 24 seconds)