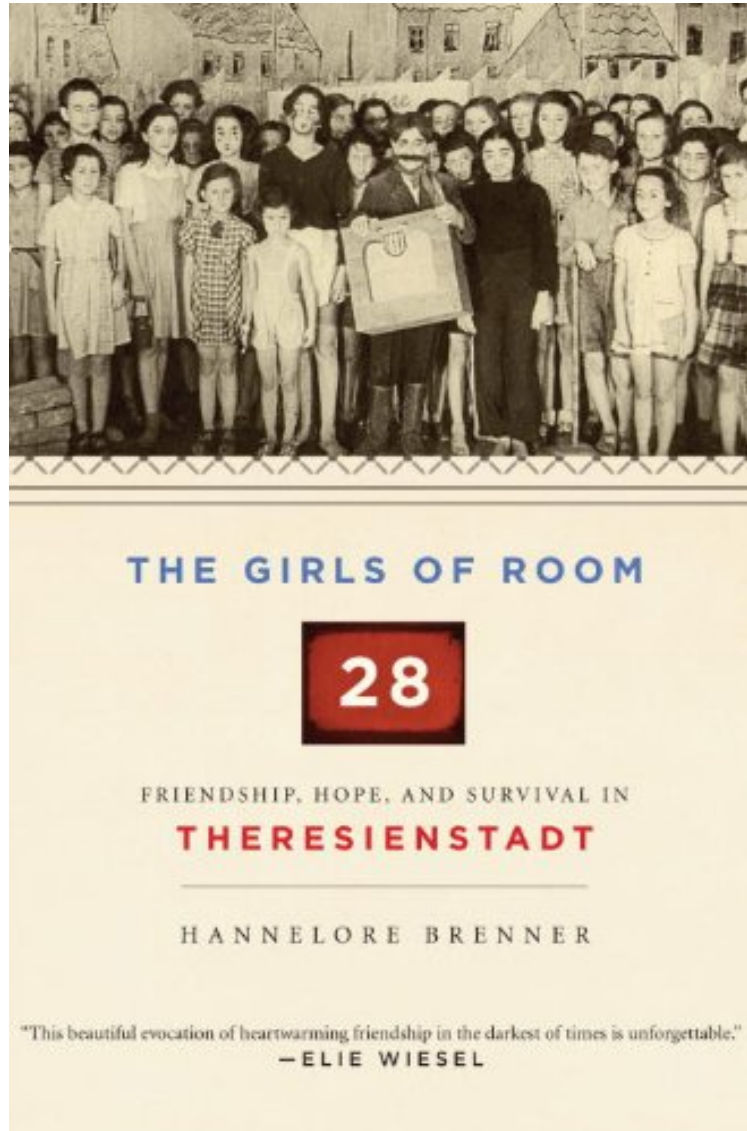


[Free and download] The Girls of Room 28: Friendship, Hope, and Survival in Theresienstadt

The Girls of Room 28: Friendship, Hope, and Survival in Theresienstadt

Hannelore Brenner

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#644804 in Books Brenner, Hannelore/ Woods, John E. (TRN)/ Frisch, Shelley (TRN) 2009-09-01 2009-09-01 Original language: English PDF # 1 9.58 x 1.25 x 6.391, 1.47 #File Name: 0805242449336 pages | File size: 41.Mb

Hannelore Brenner : The Girls of Room 28: Friendship, Hope, and Survival in Theresienstadt before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Girls of Room 28: Friendship, Hope, and Survival in Theresienstadt:

52 of 52 people found the following review helpful. Fresh, compelling and ultimately both hearbreaking and

inspiring

By S. McGee

Growing up in Europe during the late 1960s and 1970s, World War II was an immediate reality, if not one I had any firsthand experience of. Still, everywhere around me there were people who had -- as combatants, as civilians who had suffered bombing and invasion and occupation. I visited Anne Frank's House for the first time at the age of 7, and read her diary in the car as we traveled from the Netherlands to Denmark. By the time we arrived at the German frontier, I was hysterical at the idea of visiting the country whose Nazi leaders had murdered Anne Frank, my parents tell me. Now, decades later, a lot more attention has been paid to the Holocaust. There have been histories of all kinds, from the straightforward ones by Martin Gilbert to Daniel Goldhagen's provocative analysis of the makeup of the extermination squads in Eastern Europe; there have been documentaries (Shoah) and dramas of all kinds (Sophie's Choice, Schindler's List) and innumerable memoirs. It sometimes feels as if there can be little left to say about the Holocaust and that the subject itself is in danger of becoming too ubiquitous to pack the same kind of powerful punch that it did when I first read Anne Frank's diary decades ago. And then I began to read this book. From the very first pages, I was gripped by the story of young Helga Pollak, the central character around whom journalist Brenner carefully structures the stories of the young girls (aged between 12 and 14) who at one point or another inhabited Room 28 of Theresienstadt's Girls' Home. When we meet Helga, she has said farewell to her mother, who has brought her to a town in Czechoslovakia where she hopes Helga will be safe from the growing anti-Jewish sentiment in Nazi-occupied Vienna. Helga, however, who doesn't speak Czech, is lost and bewildered - and it will be six long years before she sees her mother again. Brenner has drawn on diaries and notebooks written by the girls themselves, their families and their caretakers to supplement interviews she has conducted with the handful of those who survived. (Of the 12,000 or so children who entered Theresienstadt, only a few hundred survived; only about a dozen of those who went through Room 28 are still alive to reunite each year in Europe.) The approach works well, surprisingly, giving readers a way to break away from the main narrative -- a straightforward chronicle in time -- to read profiles of some of the main characters or poetry they wrote, or the lyrics of the music they sang, as well as excerpts from those diaries and notebooks. Throughout, it's the clarity and distinctive viewpoint of these adolescent girls that makes this such a startling and remarkably fresh book. Against an ominous background, these girls (like Anne Frank) go through the kinds of petty squabbles, reveries about their futures (Helga even asks her father if he would mind if she were baptized after the war, since she doesn't really feel an attachment to her Jewish identity), evolving sexual identities common to adolescence against the backdrop of daily life in a concentration camp. The privations are stark and deeply felt even by the children, whom the camp elders have made a conscious decision to give greater access to food and other resources at the expense of the elderly. But an important thread in Brenner's narrative is the importance of education and culture, and how these girls themselves valued experiences such as the children's opera, *Brundibar*, all the more because of the ominous environment in which it was staged. That opera, one recalled is "about saying goodbye to childhood--and that had a very deep meaning for us back then. We were twelve, thirteen years old, and our childhood was coming to an end. We were facing the adult world, the world of bakers, ice-cream vendors, policemen, and *Brundibrs*. And the better world, the world of the children, defeated the adults and *Brundibr*." (*Brundibar*, in the opera, is an evil ice-cream seller - Hitler personified.) A tribute to the power of Brenner's book is that even though we know the fate that awaits most of the camp's inhabitants -- they will enter the 'sluice' and head eastward to one of the extermination camps, such as Auschwitz-Birkenau -- I was only vaguely conscious of something ominous lurking in the wings, hints of which would occasionally surface in the book (when a group of obviously petrified Polish orphans arrives and recoils from the showers to which they are taken; when a bedbug epidemic is dealt with by gassing, forcing the children to sleep outdoors and avoid their rooms, which now bear signs warning of poison.) As in an opera, that ominous feeling grew (as a small sound of drums gradually grows louder to become the dominant theme in a piece of music), forcing me to turn the pages more and more rapidly to find out what would happen to each of the characters in the book. I ended up reading the whole thing in one sitting, cover to cover in five hours, because I couldn't bear to set it down. Highly recommended. It's become a trite tribute to describe a book as being inspirational; this one truly deserves the label.

12 of 12 people found the following review helpful. Unusual Holocaust Story, very good.

By gilly8I have read a lot of Holocaust nonfiction. The best overall, I think, was "Treblinka" by Steiner. It was written in the '60's when the author could still interview many adult survivors. *Treblinka* was a death camp, where the camp prisoners eventually staged a revolt. Steiner describes in depth how the people gradually became used to less rights, (no school for children, no work for the adults), then to being moved into "Jewish" (or Gypsy) ghettos, where they lived in unbearably crowded conditions; then to promises of resettlement and a better life "in the east"....at the point where the ghetto people were starving and disease ridden, many people volunteered to go east. Once on the trains, they were locked into a situation they could not escape, and the majority were gassed immediately upon arrival.----- Now, essentially the only living people able to be interviewed are those who were children during World War II. Children's memories usually are not as good as those of adults, and often because they do not understand the big picture of which they were a part, they cannot provide the clarity that an adult could. The author got to know, and interviewed many times, the surviving girls of room 28 from the camp called Theresienstadt. She was able to get the mental picture of the prewar backgrounds of the girls, their gradual loss of freedom, being sent from their schools and sports teams, their non-

Jewish friends refusing to speak to them, then the transport to the camp, with or without their parents. Many, many girls, mostly between ages of 12-14, lived in a dorm-like atmosphere in the concentration camp Theresienstadt. The book explains how many were "transitioned" through room 28, on their way to a death camp. Some, however, were able to remain there for most of the war. It was not a death camp (no gassing or mass executions); it was essentially a labor camp. Food was very scarce, and people were often sick due to the poor living conditions and malnutrition, but still it was probably one of the better camps (comparatively) to live in. However, quite frequently lists of names were released by the SS who ran the camp and those individuals (or whole families) were sent on transports (trains) "to be resettled in the East"....this of course was shipment by cattle car to the big death camps in Poland, such as Auschwitz, Birkenau, and others. What was unusual about Theresienstadt was the decision made by the internal (unofficial) Jewish camp leadership to make sure the children received most of the food and the best of it; also that were able to have a childhood of some type. They were given an education (illegal for Jewish children under the Nazis) secretly; they were exposed to art, dance, opera, music....many of the adults had been top quality professionals in those fields and worked with the children. The elderly people were given the least food, and essentially that led to the difficult choice of letting more of them die from malnutrition while the children were given the best chance to live. The camps' internal leadership did not know of the death camps---or did not know until much later on in the war.) The children's opera "Brunnerbar" written by two professional musicians/ lyricists, was written to be sung BY and FOR children. It was performed over 55 times by the children of Theresienstadt, including performances for the SS and their families. Much of the artwork of the children was saved: over 3500 pieces, and has gone on travelling exhibitions. Many of the young teens kept diaries and the diary entries of several of the "girls of room 28" have survived and are used in this book to show how life was and how it felt AT THE TIME to these girls. They express worry and fear when a friend's name turned up on the transport list. Ironically, and sadly, they would put together some of the scarce food and clothing for their friends, who, of course, never had the chance to use any of it. I was far more moved by the diary entries in this book than the more famous Anne Frank's diary. She was hidden, and didn't know much about the outside world. These children had some idea of what was happening, and most were separated from their parents. The girls also discussed boys their age (in another barrack) and many had "crushes" on certain boys, or were "going with" them...quite innocent though, compared to teens of that age in our era. A famous episode was the visit by the Internal Red Cross who had received messages about the treatment of the Jews, Gypsies, and others under Hitler. When it became known the Red Cross would visit to "see for themselves", the SS made sure the camp was quickly re-created to an ideal "small town".....shops and cafes were opened, people were given normal, nice, civilian clothes to wear, the children in room 28 (and probably all the others) were given new, brightly painted bunk beds and lockers for their personal items....all in all the camp was made to look like an ideal setting. In fact, film footage was staged and the Germans and others who saw these films in the theatres of the time were told "the Führer has given a city to the Jews". The tragedy that the Red Cross inspectors never even tried to look behind the scenes at what was actually going on, was one of the tragedies of the war. I'm essentially skimming over the main points in the book...not to give away the plot as there is not a true plot...we know from the start what the outcome will be for most the girls. This is not a "tearjerker"....though it is unbearably tragic that so many people of all age groups lost their lives for no other reason than their ethnicity. (Most of the girls came from homes where they were totally "assimilated" Jews, who often had Christmas trees, did not observe Jewish holidays or food laws, and considered themselves to be basically like their Czech neighbors.) Whether they were assimilated Jews or religious Jews, nevertheless, the loss of so many bright young people is a particular tragedy of the Holocaust. Hitler did not kill every Jew as he wanted to; but he destroyed Jewish culture and tradition in Europe for all time. 27 of 27 people found the following review helpful. Girls in Room 28 - Reminder of Spirit By Pamela J. Adams Ms. Wonschick's lovely book chronicles the story of children caught in the horror of Nazi Germany's internment camp at Theresienstadt near Prague. The story, of course is horrific, but told beautifully by the writer. The treasure of the book is the witness to the enormous spirit, love and courage by the children to keep pressing on in the midst of insanity, and to create a semblance of normalcy in their lives. The adults, in the face of death, devised an atmosphere where the children could think there was a life worth living. They sacrificed their gifts in music, art, drama, and poetry to distract their fellow captives from the daily threats of deportation to Auschwitz. The story reminds us of what we are all called to create . . . love among our fellow men. The inmates at Theresienstadt overcame evil and fulfilled their destiny. Sadly, most of the children and adults did die at Auschwitz, but remarkably, some of the diaries, art and stories have all been salvaged. Hannelore has gathered all the stories with love and gentle care. Remarkably, due to the efforts of some of the artists at Theresienstadt, art therapy was created in the camp, and today is helping children overcome the travails in their lives today. Congratulations to Hannelore Wonschick for telling this important story with such love, gentleness and respect.

From 1942 to 1944, twelve thousand children passed through the Theresienstadt internment camp, near Prague, on their way to Auschwitz. Only a few hundred of them survived the war. In *The Girls of Room 28*, ten of these children's mothers and grandmothers today in their seventies tell us how they did it. The Jews deported to Theresienstadt from countries all over Europe were aware of the fate that awaited them, and they decided that it was the young people

who had the best chance to survive. Keeping these adolescents alive, keeping them whole in body, mind, and spirit, became the priority. They were housed separately, in dormitory-like barracks, where they had a greater chance of staying healthy and better access to food, and where counselors (young men and women who had been teachers and youth workers) created a disciplined environment despite the surrounding horrors. The counselors also made available to the young people the talents of an amazing array of world-class artists, musicians, and playwrights. European Jews who were also on their way to Auschwitz. Under their instruction, the children produced art, poetry, and music, and they performed in theatrical productions, most notably *Brundibar*, the legendary children's opera that celebrates the triumph of good over evil. In the mid-1990s, German journalist Hannelore Brenner met ten of these child survivors—women in their late-seventies today, who reunite every year at a resort in the Czech Republic. Weaving her interviews with the women together with excerpts from diaries that were kept secretly during the war and samples of the art, music, and poetry created at Theresienstadt, Brenner gives us an unprecedented picture of daily life there, and of the extraordinary strength, sacrifice, and indomitable will that combined in the girls and in their caretakers to make survival possible.

From Publishers Weekly Brenner, a Berlin-based journalist, focuses on 10 former child survivors, women in their late 70s, who went through the Theresienstadt concentration camp during the Holocaust. She notes that 12,000 children entered the camp from 1942 to 1944, but only a few hundred survived to war's end, and a handful of women of Room 28 in the camp's Girls' Home, now scattered around the world, reunited for the first time in 1991. The insights of the survivors and stories of the camp's victims are unforgettable and full of poignant humanity, conveyed through letters, photos, diaries and remembrances. Forced into exile and almost certain death under the Nazi regime, the children confronted hunger, cold, terror and the soul's endurance as many of the girls of Room 28 were slowly eliminated; the small band of survivors is committed to keeping their memory alive. Well-detailed and inspiring, Brenner's book, especially her heartfelt epilogue, pays glowing tribute to these heroic survivors. Bw photos. (Sept.) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. "This beautiful evocation of heartwarming friendship in the darkest of times is unforgettable." Elie Wiesel "The insights of the survivors and stories of the camp's victims are unforgettable and full of poignant humanity, conveyed through letters, photos, diaries, and remembrances. . . . Well detailed and inspiring, Brenner's book, especially her heartfelt epilogue, pays glowing tribute to these heroic survivors." Publishers Weekly Brenner chronicles the remarkable artistic experiments undertaken by the girls, especially their enthusiastic production of the children's opera *Brundibar*. An inspiring story of courage rendered through impressive personal and historical detail. Kirkus s "The story of this children's home in Theresienstadt takes us to the limit of the bearable, to the place where compassion, fear, and the temptation to simply turn away all lie in wait. To resist that temptation--isn't that what the historical record must achieve? DIE ZEIT "This handful of girls wanted their memories of their dead friends and their time in Theresienstadt not to be forgotten. They wanted to make the story of their survival, and the love and friendship that their caretakers showered them, unforgettable. Together with the author, they have succeeded. In Hannelore Brenner, these women have found someone who listened to them, who read their albums of poetry, their diaries, and their chronicles, and who has written a wonderful book." PRAGER ZEITUNG "Brenner has gathered together these stories with great sensitivity. She makes the past spring to life and gracefully places the personal memories of these girls into a historical context, while at the same time offering solid research and background information regarding life in Theresienstadt and the political situation of the time." SCHSISCHE ZEITUNG About the Author HANNELORE BRENNER is a print and broadcast journalist based in Berlin.