

# Terezín Memorial and the memory of the Holocaust in Czechoslovakia and Czech Republic since 1945

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**O**n 6 May 1947, the government of the Czechoslovak Republic decided to set up a Memorial to National Suffering in Terezín as a reminder of the fate of those who passed through it during the Nazi occupation. Later renamed the Terezín Memorial, it was the only institution of its kind on Czech soil. It was established on the site where the largest Nazi persecution facilities in the country operated.

When the Memorial was established, its staff sought to stress the fate of the Jewish victims in Terezín. Consequently, the Jewish Cemetery and the Crematorium in Terezín were included in the memorial. These decisions were made by the Jewish religious community in Prague. At the time, there was a consensus among all the political parties that the Memorial should be kept in its original state as a place of remembrance to all the victims of Terezín. Some publications about the Terezín persecution facilities were published from 1945 to 1948, including the first survivors' testimonies, many of which described details of life in the Terezín Ghetto. The most important of those publications was the testimony of Rabbi Richard Feder from Kolín, one of the great personalities of spiritual life in the Ghetto.

After the Communists seized power in February 1948, the situation changed rapidly. Communist Czechoslovakia's foreign policy towards the state of Israel became hostile, following instructions from Moscow. This was reflected in the focus of the Memorial's activities, which were closely connected with the orientation of state policy.

This situation was evident in the form and content of the Memorial's first permanent exhibition, opened in the Small Fortress Museum in June 1949. The theme of the exhibition was the role of the Communist faction in the Czech resistance movement against the



1. The National Cemetery in Terezín.

Nazi occupation. The history of other groups of freedom fighters was reduced, as was information about the fate of the Jewish inmates of the Terezín Ghetto. At the time, there was practically no reminder of the existence of a Jewish Ghetto in the town of Terezín. On 15 December 1952, a proposal to set up an exhibition about the Terezín Ghetto in one of the houses in the town of Terezín was discussed in the committee in charge of the Memorial, though it was ultimately rejected because information about the Ghetto appeared in the exhibition in the Small Fortress Museum. It is quite significant that this discussion was held in the hysterical, anti-Semitic atmosphere around the so-called Slánský trial. At the time, there were many anti-Semitic trends. However, the democratic traditions of pre-war Czechoslovakia (connected mainly with the personality of former president T. G. Masaryk) were more powerful than Communist propaganda and Nazi propaganda during WWII. The vast majority of the population did not take part in the campaign against the Jews. Nevertheless, this post-war history tarnished Czechoslovakia's reputation.

This more direct anti-Semitism was replaced by anti-Zionism in the mid-1950s. For the Terezín Memorial, the consequences were the same, because everything related to Judaism and Jewish history was suspect to the authorities.



2. Delegates of the scholarly conference in Terezín Memorial.



3. View of the permanent exhibition in the Ghetto Museum in Terezín.



The first change in the Memorial's activities occurred in the first half of the 1960s. It was decided that the Memorial should be transformed from a monument with one exhibition into a research centre with its own collections of documents and objects, including collections related to the former Ghetto. Of course, this positive development still had its limitations. The Memorial's activities remained within the Communist ideological system, which put considerable restrictions on change. Positive shifts were possible only as part of a vast liberalisation of the Communist Party and, subsequently, of society as a whole.

The Prague Spring in 1968 made the Memorial's working conditions more favourable. After a long period of silence, the need to establish a Ghetto Museum in the town of Terezín was stressed once again by the Memorial's new leadership. At the time, preparations began to establish the Ghetto Museum, as did work on the architecture of places of remembrance at the Terezín Memorial, such as the Jewish Cemetery and Crematorium, the National Cemetery, the site at the Ohře River (where ashes of Terezín Ghetto victims were thrown into the water) and the Crematorium and surroundings of the former concentration camp in Litoměřice. This positive development continued even a few months after the Warsaw Pact armies' invasion of Czechoslovakia, but was scaled down under pressure from the occupation authorities. The Stalinists returned with what they called normalisation. Unfortunately, this also entailed the return of anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist policies.

At the time, plans to establish the Ghetto Museum were not stopped immediately, but the essence of the content had to be changed. A document written in April 1973 lists the main tasks of the Terezín Memorial: "One of the greatest (tasks – V.B.) is to build a Ghetto Museum, the need for which, in a period of rising Zionism whose aggression threatens world peace, is especially urgent. Yet elsewhere in the world, there is so much evidence proving that imperialism is what upholds racism and that it was

the Socialist order that stood in its way, as it was the Soviet Army that liberated Auschwitz and Terezín, as well as other places where Jews were liquidated... In this spirit, we are ready to set up a museum in one of the concentration camps that Fascism established throughout the world. Nor will we forget the concentration camps in Vietnam and in Israel" (Terezín Memorial Archives, I.N. 85). Instead of paying homage to the memory of the victims of the Terezín Ghetto, who perished directly in Terezín or in death camps in the East, the museum was planned to become an instrument of propaganda. So after a very short period of liberalisation in which the real story of the Holocaust was presented, a new period of regression began.

Fortunately, the aforementioned anti-Semitic design of the museum was not implemented, as the building intended to house the Ghetto Museum was transferred to the Ministry of the Interior and the Permanent Exhibition of the National Security and Revolutionary Traditions of Northern Bohemia, as it was called, was to be established there. To create such a museum on a site connected with the memory of tens of thousands Jewish victims of the Holocaust was an indication of the arrogance of the regime. The new museum stood empty. It received no regular visitors, with the exception of organised groups, and there was no evidence of the former Ghetto in the town of Terezín. The results of such a policy were dangerous. After so many years, many young people did not even know of the existence of the Terezín Ghetto. The Small Fortress was the only symbol of the history of Terezín in World War II.

On the other hand, we must mention that some positive changes in the Memorial's work from the late 1960s remained. The art collection gained many valuable works made in the Ghetto and a great number of valuable modern artworks dealing with anti-war themes. The professional processing of archive documents also improved to a degree, a picture library was established and a collection of survivors' testimonies was recorded. Most importantly, research on the history of the Terezín





4. Replica of the Terezín Ghetto's dormitory in the former Magdeburg Barracks.

Ghetto and the Final Solution of the Jewish Question did not completely stop, though it was not practically possible for the researchers to publish the results of their work. This situation was similar to that of researchers working in the Jewish Museum in Prague. However, after democratic change came to the country, this previous fine work and research enabled the staff to establish the Ghetto Museum quickly and to present the history of the Holocaust. The regime's anti-Zionist orientation continued in the 1980s. Nevertheless, a memorial plaque for the Jews transported to Terezín was unveiled, a small exhibition about the Holocaust was created in the Crematorium at the Jewish Cemetery in Terezín and a scholarly conference about the mass murder of the prisoners of the Terezín family camp in Auschwitz was held in March 1989. These events were the first signals of the coming changes.

The "Velvet Revolution" in November 1989 created a new situation in Czech society and in the orientation of state policy, including a new attitude towards Jews and Judaism. After 40 years, relations between Czechoslovakia and Israel reverted to what they had been before. Many former Terezín Ghetto survivors came to Czechoslovakia for the first time since 1948. Survivors from Czechoslovakia established the Terezín Initiative, an organisation supporting remembrance activities, research and education on the Holocaust. From the beginning, the Terezín Initiative supported the activities of the new leaders and staff of the Terezín Memorial by helping to establish the Ghetto Museum and develop research on the history of Holocaust. These activities were also strongly supported by new Czechoslovak President Václav Havel, who became a member of the Board of Directors of the new Ghetto Museum. Václav

Havel addressed the Czech population several times, explaining the suffering of the Jewish people during the Holocaust and he visited Terezín with Israeli Presidents Herzog and Weizmann in 1991 and in 1996.

After a long wait, the “Velvet Revolution” set the stage for the implementation of the plans that had emerged during the reform movement in the 1960s. As early as 1990, the building which housed one of the Homes for Youth during the Ghetto period was vacated and preparations began to build a new museum in terms of technical and material provision and content. It was eventually opened to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the beginning of the deportation of Jews from Czech soil and the establishment of the Terezín Ghetto. The Terezín Initiative, which was then an organisation associating former Terezín Ghetto inmates, systematically supported the Memorial’s new management in commemorating the victims of the Terezín Ghetto, thereby redressing all the wrongs committed by the previous regime. First and foremost, it was crucial to convince the country’s new political leaders of the need to create a new system to remember the victims of the Holocaust.

In the early 1990s, the Terezín Memorial became an institution directly administered by the Ministry of Culture. This was conducive to an overall upgrade of the quality of its work, helping Memorial to surmount the burdens of the past fairly quickly and to win recognition and a reputation at home and abroad.

Emphasis was mainly put on the development of research on the Holocaust. Contacts were set up again with institutions and scholars abroad. A number of international scholarly conferences about the history of the Nazi occupation were held in Terezín in the 1990s. Almost all these conferences were dedicated to the history of the Holocaust. However, there was also other work connected with the previous work of the Terezín Memorial. After building the Ghetto Museum and starting the scholarly research on the history of the Holocaust, the next goal was to prepare a new exhibition tracing

the history of the Gestapo Police Prison in the Small Fortress Museum in Terezín. A new display, set up shortly thereafter in the Crematorium in the Jewish Cemetery, proved to be highly needed as well. The existing one, which dated back to the 1980s and was noted for its modest extent, gave rise to the newly emerging permanent exhibition. Another permanent exhibition was organised relatively soon afterwards: the Art Exhibition of the Terezín Memorial and the Litoměřice Concentration Camp 1944–1945. Another important task was to begin research on the history of the detention camp for the Germans, which was housed in the Small Fortress from 1945 to 1948, which was followed by the creation of a new exhibition on this controversial issue in recent Czech history, which had previously been a strict taboo.

During the 1990s, all previous exhibitions from the time before the “Velvet Revolution” that had been inadequate and inaccurately presented the history of the repressive facilities in Terezín and Litoměřice were replaced by new ones. Seen in this light, the newly created exhibitions in the former Magdeburg Barracks were required to upgrade the quality of their museum presentations significantly, while new displays were expected primarily to present the culture and arts in the Terezín Ghetto. Symbolically, the new premises opened in the fiftieth anniversary of the Terezín Memorial, while a replica of a typical Terezín Ghetto dormitory and the exhibition entitled “Music in the Terezín Ghetto” were unveiled. The permanent exhibition “Art in the Terezín Ghetto” was opened in 1998, another on “Literary Work in the Terezín Ghetto” was opened in 1999 and a third, “Theatre in the Terezín Ghetto”, was opened to the public in 2000.

On 26 November 2001, the new permanent exhibition of the Ghetto Museum called “Terezín in the ‘Final Solution of the Jewish Question’ 1941–1945” was opened.

This involved completely new educational efforts. Brand-new educational programmes were devised for young people of different age groups, which

turned out to be of even greater demand for schoolteachers. Growing out of fairly modest beginnings, a multifaceted system of educational programmes began to take shape, now ranking among the Terezín Memorial's key and highlighted branches.

Remembrance events play a key role in commemorating the tragic past, associated with reflections of the challenges and threats to our times. The most important of these events is the Terezín Commemoration, which has grown to be the main act of remembrance in honour of the Czech victims and victims from many other European countries who passed through the Nazi repressive facilities in Terezín and Litoměřice, as well as those who perished in other parts of Nazi-occupied Europe. The actual significance of this event, held in the National Cemetery in Terezín, is stressed each year by the attendance of top-ranking officials representing Czech political parties, civic associations and unions, as well as ambassadors of the countries of the anti-Hitler coalition and the survivors of the Nazis' repressive facilities. Unfortunately, the number of these most important participants of the commemorative rallies is shrinking...

It is symptomatic of the great importance of this event that Czech media outlets are keen to cover it; in the past few years, the Terezín Commemoration has been regularly broadcast live by Czech TV.

The Terezín Commemoration is always preceded by an act of remembrance at the former execution ground in the Gestapo Police Prison in the Small Fortress, held in honour of the victims of the last wartime execution, just before the end of the war, on 2 May 1945. The event is also dedicated to all other victims of this infamous repressive facility.

However, acts of remembrance are also held to honour the victims of the other totalitarian regime that ruled the country for several decades. Symbolic in this regard is Dr Milada Horáková, a leading democratic politician jailed in the Gestapo Police Prison during the war. As soon as the war ended, Horáková joined the struggle for the future orientation of Czechoslovakia; soon after the Communist dictatorship came to power, she was sentenced to death in a politically motivated show trial and executed. A commemoration is held in the Milada Horáková Memorial Hall in the Small Fortress every year in June to mark the anniversary of her execution. This event is organised in conjunction with the Confederation of Political Prisoners.

In the research sector in general, the Terezín Memorial expanded the processing of documents from the domestic and foreign archives,



as well as recollections of survivors, plus the research results gained by the Memorial's partner organisations and individuals. Collection items kept by the Terezín Memorial have been systematically digitised and an increasing amount of its files has successively been made available to researchers and the general public on the Memorial's website, together with search engines for databases of former inmates. In addition to the Department of History, other specialised sections of the Terezín Memorial, namely the Department of Collections and the Department of Documentation, have been participated in implementing this project. Through these activities, the Terezín Memorial has definitely contributed to modern historiography, museology and education. Making such data available to the public also helps to educate adults and younger generations, thereby preventing the falsification of history, the denial of historical facts such as the genocide of the Jews and the phenomena of neo-Nazism, xenophobia and racial intolerance.

The activities of the Terezín Memorial maintain a permanent emphasis on the memory of the Holocaust today. Interest is great and many young people are discovering more about this earlier unknown chapter of the history of their country. Some are even discovering their Jewish roots after a long period of forced assimilation. The number of Czech visitors to the Terezín Memorial has been increasing faster than that of foreigners. We hope that this positive attitude of the Czech population will grow as a result of new education and media influence. However, racism is still a problem in our country. It is connected mainly with the situation of the Roma minority, but there are also those who deny the Holocaust. Learning from the memory of the Holocaust therefore remains important not only for the memory of the victims, but also for education about democracy and the danger of racism.

5. Participants of the teachers training seminar organized every year under the title "Holocaust in Education".

