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The Diary of Petr Ginz 1941-1942


Maria Tumarkin

A Jewish boy's creative spirit comes to life as he records the years before his deportation.

How do I tell my 10-year-old daughter the story of Petr Ginz without making it either too unbearable, or all-too-bearable and soggy with optimism, a la Roberto Benigni's Life is Beautiful? For days now she has seen me pore over a book with a black-and-white teenage boy on its cover. She notices the boy's wide smile and his pixie ears, but not the star of David on his chest. Perhaps I should let it be. No need to drag her through the underworld of ghettos, cattle trains and camps one more time. After all, she read Anne Frank's diary, has been to her house in Amsterdam, knows what happened in the Holocaust to the millions of Jewish kids just like her. Yet somehow I cannot keep Petr to myself. I want my daughter to know Petr Ginz, even if it means following the trajectory of his life right up to Auschwitz.

So I tell her that in a country, which no longer exists, called Czechoslovakia, not far away from another country swallowed up by history, by the name of the Soviet Union, where her mother was born, there lived a boy called Petr Ginz. He was a teenager when World War II began, big-hearted and brilliant, and blessed with seemingly inexhaustible reserves of creative energy. He painted, drew, invented and wrote poems and wild adventure novels in the spirit of Jules Verne. Even two years in Theresienstadt, the ghetto and concentration camp to which he was deported at the age of 14, did not deter Petr. In fact, at Theresienstadt he seemed to be at his most unstoppable. Here is his report from June 1944. "I have learned: The Antiquity (Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Indians, Phoenicians, Israelites, Greeks, Persians, etc.), the geography of Arabia, Holland and the Moon." He also founded, edited and contributed to a secret weekly magazine called Vedem brought out by a group of boys who lived in the same house. When, two years later, Petr's younger sister Chava was deported to Theresienstadt, she discovered that her brother was widely admired, even revered, by other kids.

Chava survived the camp and has edited Petr's diary and written a detailed and heartbreaking commentary to it. The diary itself was re-discovered accidentally, following the loss of the space shuttle Columbia in 2003. The shuttle's crew included Israeli Ilan Ramon who wanted to take a symbol of the Holocaust with him into space. His choice was Petr Ginz's drawing Moon Landscape held by the Holocaust Yad Vashem Museum in Jerusalem. Following Columbia's explosion and the death of the shuttle's crew, Petr's name was in the news across the world, including in his native Czechoslovakia. Within a few weeks, a man from Prague contacted the Yad Vashem Museum offering to sell six exercise books filled with Petr's writings and drawings,
including his diary. He had found the notebooks in an old house he bought a number of years before, and for some reason kept them.

The published version of Petr's diary, complete with his drawings and paintings, tells of his life in Prague and stops shortly before his deportation to Theresienstadt in 1942. (After he got to Theresienstadt, he went back to the diary and reconstructed the events surrounding his deportation, though he did not record his daily life.)

Elena Lappin, the diary's translator, calls it "the equivalent of a captain's log on a sinking ship". It is an apt description. The captain is, first and foremost, concerned for the ship. Petr sees it as his duty to record facts, not his feelings of foreboding, fear or powerlessness (these are present, of course, but mainly as powerful and silent undercurrents).

"9 July 1942 Mummy was in Veletrh early at 5 a.m. to see Grandma board the train ... But soldiers were chasing her away from the street (the transport Jews walked in groups of 50 accompanied by soldiers along the southern tracks) ...

We received our report cards. Me, Hanka, and Pavel have all A's."

Throughout the diary, his school reports and everyday activities are fused with the details of the increasing oppression and violence towards Jews - stars of David, confiscation of properties, uncertainty, fear, deportations of teachers, relatives, friends. All of these are related without any lyrical flourishes, with hardly a spare adjective to lubricate the reality Petr is at pains to document. Even though the entries concerning his deportation to Theresienstadt effectively complete the diary, Chava chose to reproduce them in the beginning of the book, believing that they "throw a light on and a shadow over his earlier diaries". It is a wise decision for we learn straight away that Petr's voice, with its starkness and composure, is not an affectation. Even when torn away from his life and family, even in the most extreme of circumstances, that unforgettable voice does not change its register.

In the introduction to The Diary of Petr Ginz, the American novelist Jonathan Safran Foer notes, "While the diary in your hands is a resoundingly good book - by just about every imaginable definition - what it stands in opposition to isn't evil, but speechlessness." To survive genocide, he continues, "Language must be reconstructed with an energy greater than that of its destruction." It is precisely this kind of energy that Petr Ginz brings to his diary, his novels and poems, to Vedem and his Theresienstadt reports.

"Diaries recorded during periods of crisis," says the writer and academic Irena Klepfisz, born in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1941, "make special claim on us as both scholars and lay readers, for it is through such writing that we can view history as present rather than past, as experience rather than honed and sifted narrative." Klepfisz is writing to introduce yet another extraordinary diary - that kept by a Polish Jewish teenager, Lena Jedwab, between 1941 and 1945, as she found herself stranded in a Soviet children's home, far from home and her family. This is Lena's entry from January 1942: "I feel a weakness, and I can't do anything except write in my diary. My diary is my most intimate friend! Only to my diary do I entrust my thoughts and my secrets, pour out my heart, seek consolation. My paper friend, you are part of my
being." Hannah Senesh, the national heroine of Israel, killed by Germans during the war, likened her diary to "a second self". For Petr, Lena, Hannah and countless teenage diary-writers across war-torn Europe, their diaries functioned as their second selves, their second skin - alive, breathing and as intimate as the most trusted of friends.

Children's diaries - spontaneous, uncensored and unguarded - are a unique kind of historical record. When written in confronting and terrible circumstances, they are not just a means of self-expression and reflection. They are deliberate and courageous testimonies, precious tools of survival, sanity and meaning-making. Keeping a diary in the Vilna ghetto, 14-year-old Yitskhok Rudashevski wrote, "I consider that everything must be recorded and noted down, even the most gory, because everything will be taken into account."

Interned in the prisoner of war camp in Changi, teenager Sheila Allan, born in Malaya to an Australian father and a Malayan mother, wrote: "No longer am I a happy-go-lucky child but a frightened, uncertain girl of 17 whose life before had been serene, innocent and joyous. Now I am stripped of my sensitive covering I feel naked - I have no place to hide my tearful face, my knowledge of the evil that has erupted in this world that I am born into. I want to take flight from all this - I don't want to know that this is happening but where do I go?"

It is tempting to see these diaries as symbols of human resilience, children’s courage and survival of human spirit against all odds. Yet researcher Alexandra Zapruder, who in the early 1990s compiled a ground-breaking anthology of children's Holocaust diaries, cautions us against this romantic view. Diaries of genocide, she writes, should "serve not as a consolation or a comfort, but as a condemnation and a warning."

Zapruder is equally uneasy about the glorifications of the diaries' authors, particularly exemplified by the mythology surrounding Anne Frank.

"No matter how intensely personal, confidential or immediate," she writes, "[diaries] can be little more than a pale shadow, a wretched fragment from which to try to capture the immeasurable complexity, likes, dislikes, dreams, wishes, desires, contradictions, and stories that compose a whole, complete person."

This is what I would like to tell my daughter in the end: that as much as I was desperate for her to know Petr Ginz, I also want her to understand that she can never really know him, that for all its qualities, his diary is but a wretched fragment, a pale shadow of his extraordinary life.