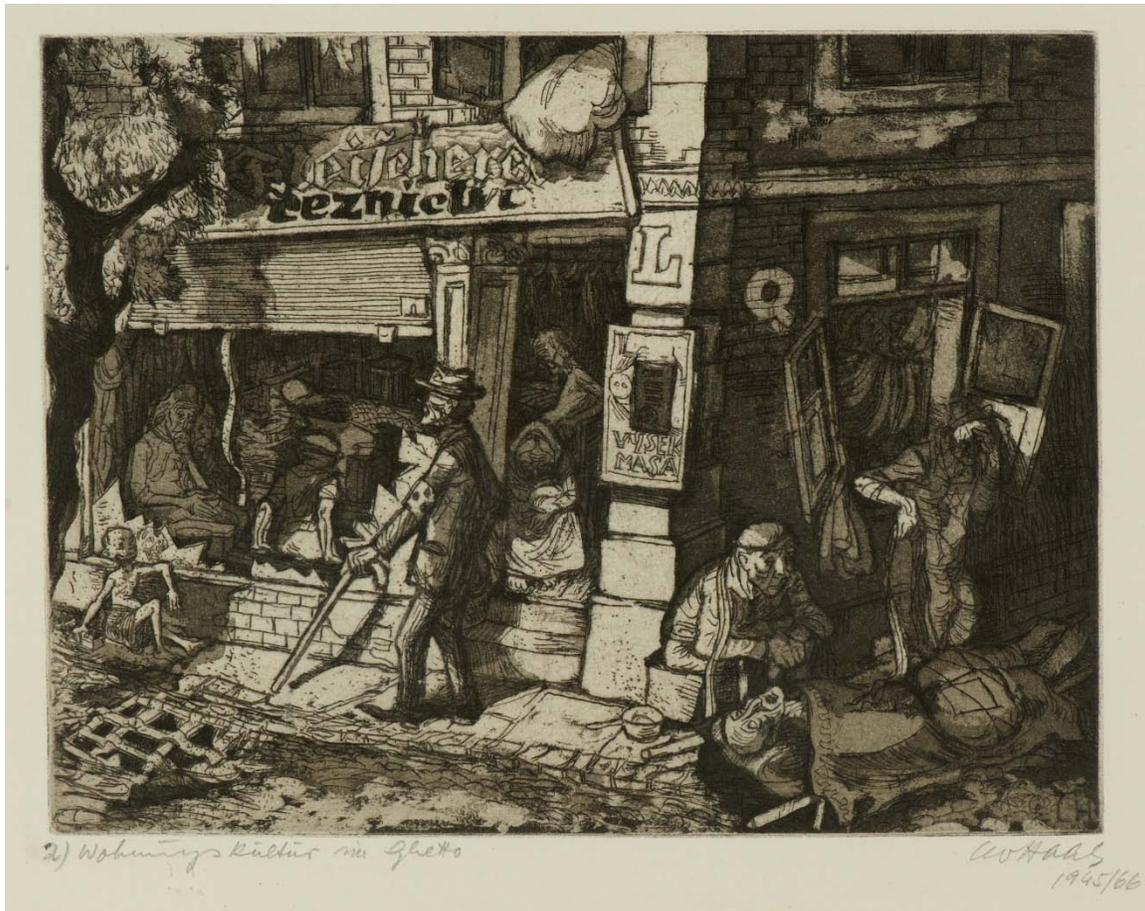


A Living Culture in the Ghetto (1945/66)

21.5 x 28 cm

Drypoint and aquatint

Ben Uri Collection, The London Jewish Museum of Art



Overview of Work

This depicts the Jewish ghetto-labour camp of Terezin, Terezin was set up by the Nazis to be the “perfect ghetto.” The camp had fake buildings that were nicely painted so that from the outside the ghetto would look pretty and pleasant. It had trees, gardens, and a bank and a café. However, the bank had no money, and the café had no food. The Nazis sent many Jewish artists, such as Leo Haas, to Terezin in order to create pictures that lied about the ghetto-labour camp. They wanted the pictures to depict Terezin as a carefree living space where the people were happy and treated well. However, the truth was that Terezin was a brutal place. It was very small and Jews were forced to live in very crowded, unsanitary, and poor conditions.

Leo Haas made a series of pictures to show what life was really like in the ghettos under the Nazis and he risked his life by doing so. While there he produced numerous illegal prints, which he hid in the walls and among the other inhabitants of Terezin.

In 1944, while Haas was still in Terezin, the Red Cross went to visit the ghetto-labour camp. In order to fool the Red Cross, the Nazis made Terezin look like a model ghetto. A video was made to show how wonderful life in Terezin was, and The Red Cross left with a positive impression of Terezin. After the visit the people who had participated in the video were sent to Auschwitz.

After this Red Cross visit, in 1944, Leo Haas began to be suspected of producing truthful images such as 'Ghetto', and was arrested and imprisoned in Theresienstadt for "smuggling atrocity propoganda abroad" and sent to Auschwitz. He was subsequently moved to other labour and death camps before being liberated in 1945 by American troops. After the war he moved back to Czechoslovakia and retrieved his more than 400 drawings from Terezin.

Overview of the Print

This print was made at the end of the Second World War, but the actual plate is thought to have been made during the War and the Holocaust. It depicts the Jewish *ghetto-labour camp* of Terezin, where Haas spent much of his time during the war. Haas drew upon what he saw in Terezin to create this picture. It is a documentation of the life of the people inside the ghetto-labour camp. The decaying, old, building implies that the ghetto-labour camp is dirty and unsanitary place to live. These ideas are reinforced by the street in front of the building; with uneven stones and cracked pavements. The road also gives the same impression.

The figures in this picture are etched in the same way; the hunched figure sitting outside the store door looks old and frail, as does the person standing next to him. In front of these figures is a person lying down on a stretcher. He looks skinny and sick, with a long hollow face. It is not clear whether the person is still alive. The figures inside the store are dark and hard to see, but they too seem frail. Only the central figure walking along the street stands upright, and he uses a cane to do so. In the left corner is a thin child. By depicting the figures as thin, sick people, Haas is revealing the harshness of life in Terezin.

A common theme in the picture is the figures' lack of clear facial expressions and gender identification. The print is dark, which makes it hard to see the facial expressions of the figures. They all seem to have the same tired and sad expression. Also, it is difficult to see if there are any women in the picture. Haas may have purposefully made the figures generic and somewhat genderless to show that everyone suffered in the ghetto; it didn't matter if the people were young or old, male or female.

Terms explained

Ghetto-labour camp: Used for German, Austrian, and Czech Jews, this was a place where Jews were forced to live in overcrowded conditions. There was little food and the people living there had to perform labour, but it was shaped like a town so that the Nazis could deceive visitors into thinking the ghetto-labour camp was a nice town in which to live.

Looking Closely

Form and Composition

The corner of the building divides the print into two parts: the left side of the picture is bright, emphasizing the darker figure with the cane and contrasting him with the hunched figures inside the building. The right side of the work is dark and the three figures here form a triangle, contrasting with the right side of the work, which forms a rectangle.

The shapes in this print are angular, the corner of the building forms an angle, as do the bodies, with bent elbows and knees. Pattern is created through the repetition of lines for the cobblestones and the bricks. Lines show the texture of the clothing, making the clothes look rumpled and rough.

As a viewer you are positioned across the street from the figures and the building, so that you may feel like an outside observer.

Materials and Techniques

The print was made with drypoint and aquatint. Drypoint is a method of printing in which a steel point is used to etch shapes directly onto the surface of the printing plate. Aquatint produces a print that has a watercolour wash effect. Once the printing plate has been created, the artist is able to make multiple prints of the image.

Content and Ideas

The detail in the setting and figures as well as the bleakness of the overall scene shows that life in the ghetto-labour camp was unsanitary, brutal and dangerous.

About the Artist

Leo Haas (1901-1983)

Born to a Jewish family in Opava, Moravia, in 1901, Haas attended an art school in Opava from 1907-1919, where he learned landscape and cityscape painting. In 1919 he attended the Karlsruhe Art Academy. Haas moved to Berlin in 1922, where he was influenced by German Expressionism, Goya, and Toulouse-Lautrec. After moving to Vienna in 1925 he worked as an illustrator for the working class press. The following year Haas moved back to Czechoslovakia and worked in Opava from 1926 to 1938 as a painter, book illustrator, and stage designer. In 1939 he was arrested by the SS for helping illegal border crossings by German Communists. He was first deported to forced labour camps, and then to Theresienstadt, Terezin in Czechoslovakia in 1942. While there he produced numerous illegal prints, which he hid in the walls and among the other inhabitants of Terezin. In 1944, while Haas was still in Terezin, the Red Cross went to Czechoslovakia to visit the ghetto-labour camp. In order to fool the Red Cross, the Nazis made Terezin look like a model ghetto; they planted trees, set up gardens, and established a bank and a café. The bank, however, had no money, and the café had no food. A video was made to show how wonderful life in Terezin was, and The Red Cross left with a favorable impression of Terezin. After they left the people who had participated in the video were sent to Auschwitz. After this Red Cross visit, in 1944, Haas began to be suspected of producing truthful images such as *Ghetto*, and was arrested and imprisoned in Theresienstadt for “smuggling atrocity propaganda abroad” and sent to Auschwitz; he was subsequently moved to other labour and death camps before being liberated in 1945 by American troops. After the war he moved back to Czechoslovakia and retrieved his more than 400 drawings from Terezin. He also reunited with his wife and adopted the son of Bedrich Fritta (also an artist), who had been a

friend of Haas' and who died in Auschwitz. In 1955 he moved to East Berlin and worked for the film company DEFA and the German Democratic Republic's television network. His works have been exhibited widely throughout the world.

Why is this picture important?

This print was made at the end of the Holocaust. It depicts the Jewish ghetto-labour camp of Terezin, Czechoslovakia, where Haas lived for a time during World War II. Terezin was a small space in which the Nazis forced Jews to live in very crowded, unsanitary, and poor conditions. This fact, however, was kept a secret from the rest of the world.

Terezin was set up by the Nazis to be the "perfect ghetto." It was to show the rest of the world that the Nazis were treating the Jews well. Here, the Nazis erected fake buildings that were nicely painted so that from the outside the ghetto would look pretty and pleasant. The Nazis sent many Jewish artists, such as Leo Haas, to Terezin in order to create pictures that lied about the ghetto-labour camp. These pictures depicted Terezin as a pretty, carefree living space where the people were happy and treated well. While Haas had to create these images for the Nazis, he was determined to expose the lies they covered.

Haas created a series of images, of which *Ghetto* is one, that show the realities of life in Terezin. *Ghetto* is important because it shows what life was really like in the ghettos under the Nazis; it was not pleasant, and it was not happy. This print shows that life in Terezin was very hard, with buildings crumbling and people sad, tired, sick and dying. By creating images like *Ghetto*, Haas ensured that the true story of the Holocaust would be seen and remembered.

This work is also particularly important because it depicts the true state of the ghetto-labour camp that the Nazis created to show the world how well they treated the Jews. It is important to note that this print may well have contributed to Haas' arrest for "smuggling propaganda" abroad, and so it had personal meaning to his life as well.