

# GHETTO THERESIENSTADT 1941-1945

## EVIDENCE AND TRACES

### PRESS RELEASE

Terezín (Theresienstadt), Czech Republic

July 2015

#### **Last Signs of Life from the Theresienstadt Ghetto**

*Inscriptions left by Jewish prisoners documented for the first time in 70 years*

**Between 1941 and 1945, countless prisoners engraved their messages into the sandstone walls of the Terezín fortress, the site of the former Theresienstadt Ghetto – and many did so just before going off to their deaths. By inscribing their names, initials, dates and pictures, they memorialized their own fates and acted as witnesses as well. But the inscriptions are in danger of disappearing. The project Ghettopuren.de is the first international project to document these remaining traces.**

In a dark tunnel of the fortress gate, Poterne III, several square meters of the sandstone wall are embossed with traces: names, prisoner numbers as well as objects with deep symbolic meaning, such as a Chanukah menorah, stars of David or portraits of a ghetto police member. Hard to miss are the oft-repeated dates 1942, 1943, 1944, a time when Theresienstadt, overcrowded with Jewish prisoners, was cordoned off from the rest of the world. A Jewish self-administration, controlled by the SS, was responsible for organizing ghetto life, including its own security force, the ghetto police.

Members of the ghetto police were recruited from among the male prisoners. The job of those that were stationed at the Poterne III gate was to hinder escape attempts and curb smuggling. Among them were the authors of the carvings and inscriptions seen at Poterne III. Many of them were deported to Auschwitz.

In the decades following WWII, these traces went forgotten when Terezín was turned into a military garrison. Poterne III was again made accessible to the public in 2005. Urban planner and author, Ms. Uta Fischer became the first person to identify authors and meanings behind the inscriptions while working on her project, "*Theresienstadt 1941-1945 – Materielle Zeugnisse und Spuren*" (*Theresienstadt 1941-1945 – Evidence and Traces*).

These extraordinary witnesses of the Holocaust are now online, together with interactive maps, at: [www.ghettopuren.de](http://www.ghettopuren.de)

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Photos are available for download at [www.ghettospuren.de/presse](http://www.ghettospuren.de/presse)

*“This has been nothing less than true detective work. We’ve pieced the data together like a mosaic. Often, we had little more than name-fragments or numbers to go by,” Uta Fischer said, describing the painstaking efforts behind her work.*

Many inscriptions were impossible to read, having fallen prey to erosion and vandalism. Only after the discovery of two photos taken by former inmate Jiří Lauscher in 1945, after liberation, could some of these inscriptions finally be deciphered. In the meantime, dozens of names and fates of prisoners could be identified and documented.

*“In the hopes of reminding future generations about their fates, these prisoners were somehow able to create this place of collective remembrance within the dark passageway of the ghetto gate,” Uta Fischer said.*

Since 2012, Fischer’s team of international experts has been documenting the last traces of prisoner life still to be found throughout the grounds of the former ghetto in present day Terezín.

*“The future of Poterne III as a place of remembrance is threatened. After comparing recent photographs we can confirm how dramatic the erosion of the inscription-details has been. In three or five years it will be too late. We’re compelled to take preventive measures now,”* said Professor Thomas Danzl of the Dresden Academy of Fine Arts, a project partner of GhettoSPUREN.de, is heading the restoration research team of Poterne III together with the University of Pardubice’s Conservation Department, located in Litomyšl.

Although the first phase of GhettoSPUREN.de is coming to fruition, the documentation project will be continued.

*“The former ghetto is laden with nooks and crannies where many treasures from the past still lay hidden, waiting to be uncovered. Perhaps we will not succeed in saving all of the physical traces. But with the help of donor funding, we hope to continue documenting all that is still left to be preserved. We hope that by building awareness we will be able to offset further deterioration,”* Uta Fischer said.

And what better way to build awareness than through the lens of the project’s photographer, Roland Wildberg. *“We’re excited about all that there is still left to be discovered in Terezín’s attics, cellars and fortifications,”* Wildberg said.

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#### **Project information**

The project “Ghetto Theresienstadt 1941–1945, Evidence and Traces” has been supported by the German Federal Cultural Foundation, the Remembrance, Responsibility and Future Foundation, the Prague-based Czech-German Future Fund as well as other partners in Germany and Czech Republic.

Project trustee is the Association of Friends and Sponsors of Theresienstadt. Project manager is Uta Fischer of Büro WILDFISCH.

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