

With Hans Walter Hirschberg
and Arthur Goldschmidt in Theresienstadt

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Jewish believers from the past

This evening we are going to a place about 40 miles north of Prague, to Theresienstadt in what was then Czechoslovakia, to the town that Hitler “had donated to the Jews” and which in Nazi propaganda was described as a “spa town” where elderly Jews could “retire”. From the end of 1941 to the beginning of 1945, more than 140,000 Jews were sent to this ghetto, which for many, about 88,000, became a transit camp to the death camp Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Approximately 33,000 died in this ghetto. When it was all over and the ghetto had been liberated on May 8 1945, there were about 19,000 survivors.

Theresienstadt was governed by a council of Jewish elders; but although there was a certain degree of self-management, it did not mean that

they had freedom to do as they pleased; it meant that they were expected to make things work and to carry out the German orders with all the compromises that involved for the council itself.

Among those who died *in* Theresienstadt, or were deported from Theresienstadt *to* the death camp Auschwitz or survived the horrors *in* Theresienstadt, were individuals who were *Christians of Jewish descent*. It is tempting today to call them “Messianic Jews”, but this would not correspond with their self-perception. Like most other Jews in Germany they saw themselves as *Germans*; unlike most other German Jews they were Jews who had embraced the Christian faith, some by conviction, others for pragmatic reasons. In plain words, and whether or not we like to hear it: the Jewish identity Isaac Lichtenstein or Lucky had fought for 50 years before was quite beyond the horizon of these *Christian* Jews. But in Theresienstadt they shared the fate of “Mosaic” Jews. In the eyes of the Nazis, their Christian faith did not obliterate their Jewishness.

Arthur Goldschmidt – the founder of the evangelical congregation

Arthur Goldschmidt's parents had converted to Christianity in 1858. After Goldschmidt, born in 1873, had to resign his post as a judge in Hamburg in 1933, he devoted himself to his hobby as a painter. His wife Kitty, who was a baptized Jew, died in June 1942. The Protestant clergyman in the town refused to bury her in the churchyard as Mrs Goldschmidt was not an "Aryan". One month later Goldschmidt was deported to Theresienstadt. Here he founded an evangelical congregation where he preached and administered pastoral care. He survived in the ghetto. Before his death on February 9, 1947, he wrote down an account of the evangelical congregation in Theresienstadt. Here are a few glimpses from the account that was published in 1948.

On the first Sunday in the ghetto, Goldschmidt and another man get together in an attic and read the New Testament which he has brought. The word gets about, and others join them the following Sundays. No more than twenty persons can assemble without permission.

“What was I to do?” He realizes that the administration was not likely to appreciate the formation of a Christian congregation in a Jewish town, and without the consent of the Jewish council of elders he could not proceed.

Goldschmidt continues: “So I turned, nonetheless, to Mr Edelstein, who was then the leader of the Jewish council, and described the state of affairs to him. When he was informed of the fact that an evangelical congregation had already been founded, he was astonished but also full of understanding. The good God is ultimately the same, and to him, Edelstein, it is the same in which way he is honoured.” Both sides realize that the room where the Mosaic Jews worship cannot be used.

On October 18, 1942, they get the first and semi-official recognition of the congregation as a room with electrical light, used as a variety theatre and a lecture hall, is made available for them by the council of elders. And the congregation grows. Between 150 and 200 attend the services, at the festivals there are even more. It is an extremely mixed congregation; there are, for example, Lutherans, members of the Reformed Church, Anglicans,

Hussites, Remonstrants, Brethren, and others. NonChristians were welcome but could not receive Communion.

In the summer of 1943 a split threatens the congregation but it was prevented, another matter that I cannot go into here.

Goldschmidt says about the relationship between Mosaic and Christian Jews that the attitude to those who had been baptized as infants was “neutral”. It was a different matter with those who had been baptized as adults. They were regarded as “backsliders, renegades and traitors”. The idea that someone should have embraced Christianity out of conviction and not for pragmatic reasons seemed to be absolutely unthinkable. But this also needs to be said: Communion, consisting of bread and tea with sugar, was also administered to sick Christian Jews in infirmaries and sickrooms. Goldschmidt writes: “Apart from a few improper remarks, which were soon discouraged with a word of admonition, the other patients of Jewish persuasion observed a pious quietness.”

Goldschmidt does not hide that, from time to time, there were some difficulties with the council of elders. But the following words are

nevertheless remarkable: “In retrospect it must be admitted that this administration of what was intended as a pure Jewish society, which naturally would see a Christian congregation as a foreign body, in general has been very obliging.” Here is an example:

Christian German Jews cannot celebrate Christmas without a Christmas tree, which is difficult to come by. Again in Goldschmidt’s words: “Finally the SS permitted us to have a small tree, which would be decorated by the women; not even candles, a much desired rarity donated from all sides, were missing.” But then listen to how Goldschmidt continues:

“The last year the Christmas tree was cynically forbidden by the SS man who had to make the decision. But then, fortunately, the Jewish administration saw to it that an artificial tree with inserted branches and with multicoloured electrical lamps was made for the service!” I wonder if it was the Hanukkah bush?

“And what is more,” Goldschmidt continues, “the administration, or more correctly the leader of the Jewish council, Dr Murrelstein, even organized a gala performance for the Christian children with a children’s choir singing Christmas

carols, children performing a small fairytale play and a magician – a man in the camp that had been deprived of his profession – showed his tricks.”

Death and “Ego sum resurrectio”

For the evangelical congregation the question of how to honour their dead in death became a pressing one. Mortality was high, not least during the first years. A crematorium, which could cope with 200 corpses a day, had been built. The coffins, 40-50 or more, were first placed in open air, later in a casemate hall. After a rabbi had performed the ceremony, the coffins were taken to the crematorium. I will let Goldschmidt tell about this:

“The Christians had doubts about this funeral after Jewish rites. They tried therefore to attain a dissociation from the Jewish funerals. To begin with it was argued again and again that there were technical difficulties, but from May 1943 the deceased Christians were laid out a half hour before the funeral ceremony; later a special hall was allowed for this. The attempts to fit out this hall to some extent with dignity were long futile. The request to have a large crucifix and the inscription ‘Ego sum resurrectio’ – ‘I am the

Resurrection' was finally made, but the commandant rejected it since a public exhibition of Christian symbols could not be permitted.

Not until the end was the hall put in a suitable condition and fitted out with a big crucifix, with that inscription, made by a sculptor. It also became possible to have the corpse carts and the coffins covered with a simple black cloth instead of a cloth with the David star.”

So in death these Christians of Jewish descent chose not to have the David Star on their coffins. Who dare, under these circumstances, throw the first stone? And perhaps it is throwing the first stone to ask the question: If Isaac Lichtenstein or Lucky had been there ... which hall would they have chosen for their burial ceremony? And which cloth to cover their coffin?