

Laugh With Us

Cabaret in the Terezín Ghetto

Forgotten cabaret written in a concentration camp and rediscovered by Dr Lisa Peschel

“It was in the cabaret that we forgot the powerlessness of our daily lives...”

(anonymous Terezín survivor)

March 15 1939

The Nazi occupation of the Czech lands begins. Two and a half years later the Nazis establish a ghetto for Jews in Terezín (in German, Theresienstadt), a fortress town just 60km north west of Prague.

December 4 1941

Felix Porges, Vítězslav Horpátek and Pavel Stránský are deported from Prague to Terezín on a transport of 1000 young men. A few days after their arrival the first cultural activity takes place: an informal cabaret.

May 18 1942

Elly Bernstein is deported to Terezín from the provincial city of Třebíč.

December 1942

Felix, Vítězslav and Pavel perform in a mock ‘radio show’

Spring–Summer 1944

Felix, Elly and Vítězslav perform in ‘Laugh with Us’.

September – October 1944

Mass deportations to Auschwitz begin; they include Vítězslav. When they end in October, eleven thousand people remain in Terezín, including Elly and Felix. In the spring of 1945, Vítězslav perishes in a slave labour camp.

May 7 1945

Pavel returns to the ghetto on a death march from Schwarzhöhe, a satellite camp of Sachsenhausen. The next day Terezín is liberated by Soviet troops.

Summer 2005

Felix and Elly’s son Zdeněk and Terezín survivor Hana Lojínová (neé Ledererová), who danced in the cabaret, show Lisa Peschel the cabaret script.

Summer 2011

Pavel attends a performance of ‘Why We Laugh’, an English-language adaptation of ‘Laugh With Us’, in Terezín.

In December 1943 Felix and Elly married in the ghetto—just eight days after Pavel was deported to Auschwitz. In spring and summer 1944, Elly, Felix, Vítězslav and seven others performed the cabaret ‘Laugh with Us’ featuring Pavel’s song lyrics and dialogues such as this one set far in the future, in which a pensioner (played by Vítězslav) tries to explain Terezín to a young man (played by Felix):

Vítězslav: Now what was that town called, named after some German poet, Schiller, Schiller-o? No, something else. Who were the other German poets?
Felix: Heine, Hein-o? Uhland-o?
Vítězslav: No, not him either. What is this called in German? (points to his fist)
Felix: Hand.
Vítězslav: No, this part.
Felix: Aha, the part at the top. Faust.
Vítězslav: Yes, yes, and who wrote Faust?
Felix: Well, Goethe.
Vítězslav: Yes, correct, it was called ghetto.



Felix and Elly’s post-war wedding



Felix Porges



Vítězslav Horpátek



Pavel Stránský



Elly Bernstein

These four prisoners immersed themselves in the theatrical life of the ghetto. Paradoxically, in an environment of fear and deprivation, comedy reigned supreme.

Felix and Vítězslav hosted a Czech-language cabaret for their one-year anniversary in the ghetto: a comic ‘radio show’, with satirical commentary on Terezín embedded in everything from a children’s story to a play-by-play account of a football match. Pavel read from his own poetry.

Felix and Elly met in the ghetto, perhaps while performing in a German-language literary cabaret led by Viennese artist Dr Leo Strauss.

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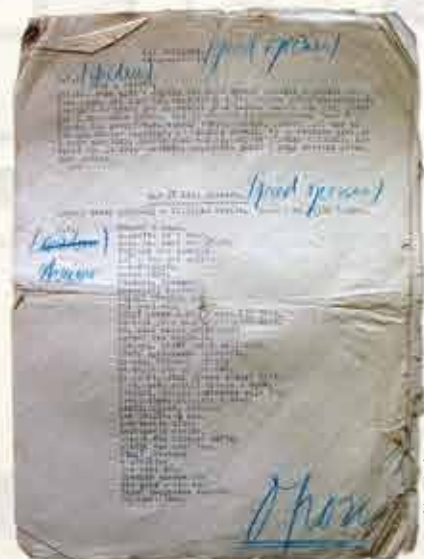
“During my research, what surprised me most was the discovery that most plays written in the Terezín ghetto were comedies. This has led me to further research about the social effects of humour.”



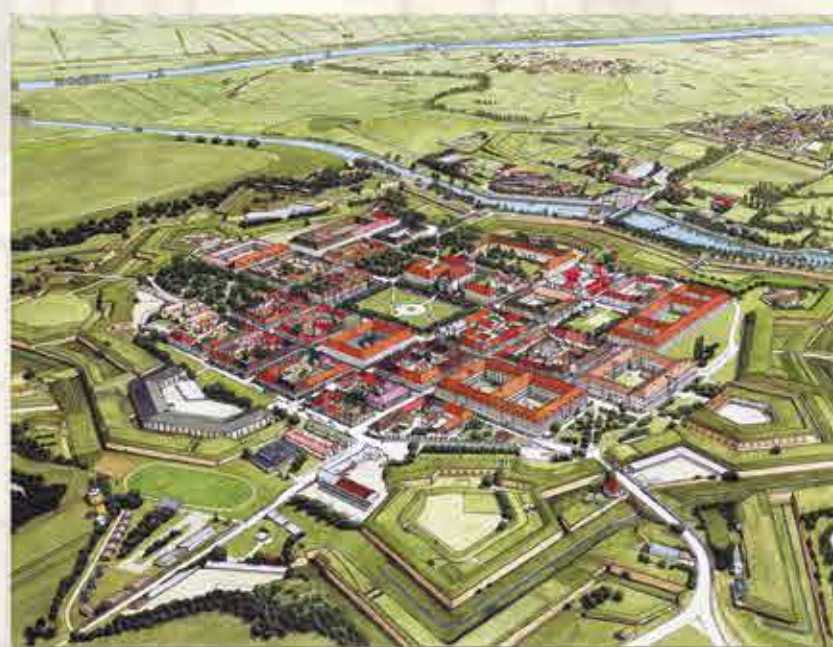
Souvenir poster for the cabaret ‘Laugh With Us’



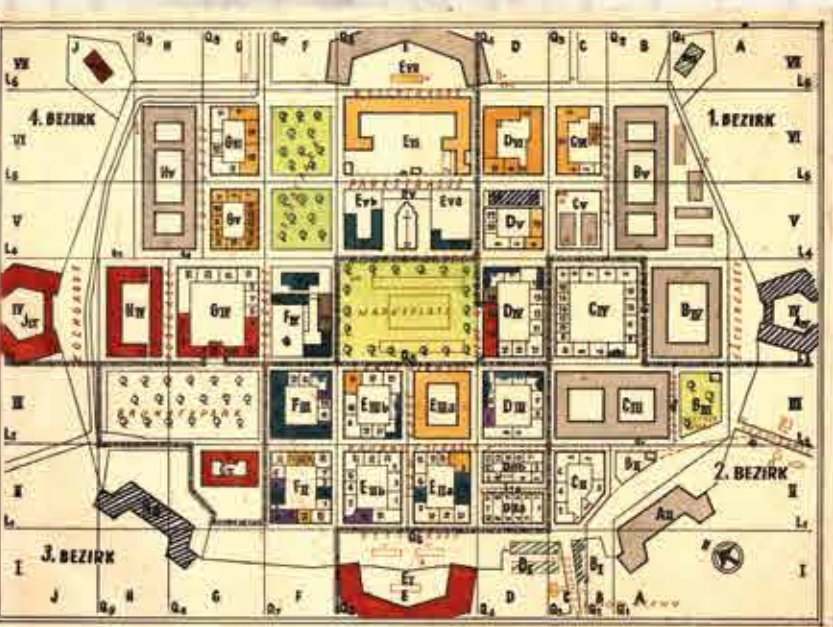
Souvenir poster for German-language cabaret featuring Elly and Felix



‘Laugh With Us’ original script



Terezín (in German, Theresienstadt)



Colour-coded plan of the Terezín ghetto, 1944



Pavel attends a performance of ‘Why We Laugh’, an English-language adaptation of ‘Laugh With Us’ (Terezín, Summer 2011).

Left to right: Lisa Peschel, Pavel Stránský, actress Elise Langer (as Elly)

Courtesy of Michal Stránský