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ERICH LICHTBLAU (ELI LESKLY) COLLECTION IN THE LOS ANGELES
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The Holocaust memory is a multifaceted phenomenon. Memory of survivors and eye-witnesses reflects the extreme situations of heartbreaking brutalities, unconceivable instances of betrayals, as well as a mundane life in the world that the Nazi regime had determined as unworthy to exist. The implementation of the Final Solution of Jewish Question differed from country to country, yet it always had the common premise – dehumanization of victims. The Jewish inmates of Nazi ghettos and camps were exposed to all possible hardships and brutalities that could not but led to extinction, often before the mass killings had actually taken place.

Testimonies of the Holocaust era may vary in form – memoirs, diaries, oral histories, and picture-stories. The latter is least common, least known, and least researched. Most of the Holocaust testimonies, if they are not the wartime diaries, originate from the post-war recollections. Besides being a valuable evidential source, they also present a combination of descriptive and interpretive post-Holocaust reflections.

A series of the Theresienstadt ghetto picture-stories created by the Jewish artist Erich Lichtblau (Eli Leskly) from Czechoslovakia is a unique Testimony revealing for us mundane life in this so-called model ghetto, “a gift from the Führer.” His artworks

significantly differ from a 'typical' Holocaust graphic. Instead of a barbed wire, striped uniform, and death scenes, we see ghetto life through the prism everyday errands and chores, depicted in the grotesque, caricatural manner. By no means these images ridicule the ghetto inhabitants, neither they are a form of travesty on the survival tactic. Erich Lichtblau convincingly challenges the Nazi anti-Jewish concepts by depicting and interpreting the ghetto life in a style he would use for a 'normal' commercial advertisement in his pre-war practice.

Erich Lichtblau was born on 16 June 1911 in Austria-Hungary (Czechoslovakia after 1918) in a small town of Hrušov (Hruschau near Ostrava) in Moravia. Nowadays Hrušov has merged with Ostrava (Czech Republic). In Ostrava, he worked as an apprentice, decorating store-windows. Erich continued his education by entering a school of commercial design – the Hamburg Decoration School (*Hamburger Decorationsfachschule*) around 1930. Having finished the school, he returned back to Ostrava resuming commercial decorating. In March 1937, Erich married Elsa (Else) Silbiger (born on 26 June 1913), who had become Elsa Lichtblau (Lichtblauvova).

In October 1938, the Nazis partitioned Czechoslovakia (the Munich Dictate) and then in March 1939, Nazi Germany invaded the rampart state of Czechoslovakia. The Czech lands (excluding Slovakia) became a German Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. The Protectorate had been included into the Greater Germany. Under the new authorities, Erich and Elsa moved to Prague, where Erich worked as a construction worker. The life in Prague did not last long, soon after they were transferred to a village of Dobešice near

Písek in southern Bohemia. It was in Dobešice where Erich and Elsa Lichtblau were put into forced labor in accordance with the Nazi anti-Jewish measures. The only pre-Theresienstadt time photograph of Erich and Elsa Lichtblau available to us is dated by 1940.



Erich and Elsa Lichtblau in Pisek, 1940

In November 1942, Erich and Elsa Lichtblau were deported from the town Klatovy (*Klatau*) to Theresienstadt ghetto-camp with the transport Cd. They were given the transport numbers, respectively Cd597 and Cd598. This transport arrived to Theresienstadt on 26 November 1942. Terezin Memorial Archives provided us with a copy of the original transport document that listed Erich and Elsa Lichtblau among other deportees who arrived in Terezin on that date. In the transport document Erich was listed as a forest worker and Elsa – as a housewife.

594	Kafka Max	70594	Arbeiter DR-958	22. 3. 1891	Pisek Pragerstr. 59	81060
595	Kafka Wlasta	70595	Haushalt DR-961	7. 12. 1902	Pisek Pragerstr. 59	81061
596	Bornstein Josef	70596	Dentist C2-1522	13. 11. 1904	Pisek Podiebraderg. 2	81012
597	Lichtblau Erich	70597	Wald- arbeiter	16. 6. 1911	Pisek Prokong. 362	81077
598	Lichtblau Elsa	70598	Haushalt	26. 6. 1913	Pisek Prokong. 362	81076
599	Adler Rudolf	70599	Privater C2-1523	25. 11. 1883	Pisek Heyduk. 99	81002
600	Adler Olga	70600	Haushalt C2-1524	15. 10. 1890	Pisek Heyduk. 99	81001

Transport Document from the Terezin Memorial Archives: Erich Lichtblau and Elsa Lichtblau are listed under the No. 597 and No. 598.

Theresienstadt (Terezin), besides being a main incarceration center for the Central European Jews, also functioned for the purpose of Nazi deception of public opinion. It was a stage for filming, a ground for touring of international commissions, and to some extent 'a privileged incarceration center', all in all, only to deceive the world that the Jews of Europe were alive and they were treated humanly.

A fortress-town Theresienstadt was built in the 1780s by the Austrian Emperor Joseph II and named after his mother, Empress Maria Theresia. What had originally been a fortified military installation became in 1941 – 1945 a place of suffering for 140,000 prisoners from thirty nations. The ghetto was opened on 24 November 1941. The first internees were the Czech Jews, the second wave of deportations comprised privileged German Jews, such as the First World War veterans and former German army officers civil servants, and public figures. They began to arrive in the summer of 1942. Out of

140000 people who passed through Theresienstadt, 90000 were deported to death camps, primarily to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Additionally, 33430 perished at Theresienstadt and were buried in the Bohušovice graveyard or burnt in the adjacent crematorium. Approximately 30000 prisoners survived when the International Red Cross took over the ghetto on 3 May 1945. The Red Army arrived on 8 May 1945.

Upon arrival Erich Lichtblau was assigned to the *Bauhof* (Building Yard); Elsa was to clean children homes and to work in the kitchen. It is plausible that Erich did not reveal his real profession, instead he had registered as a builder to secure a lasting employment in the ghetto. It is remained debatable when, how, and to what extent he had become known as a former decorator outside the circle of the close friends, if he had at all. Some time later the Jewish administration of the ghetto assigned Erich to *Graphik und Reproduktion* (graphic and reproduction) workshop, a subdivision of *Technische Abteilung* (Technical Department). Among other jobs he also worked on the stage designs for the Terezin theaters.

It could have been simply a result of discrepancy or a German bureaucratic immobility that a construction worker, previously listed as a forest laborer, working on a stage design project, officially was listed as *Hilfsarbeiter* (worker assistant). Notwithstanding, that could have been a way how the Council of Elders, the ghetto leadership, identified Erich Lichtblau. With some certainty we can say Erich Lichtblau was officially engaged in professional activity. It is believed that the nature of his work allowed him access to some art materials: paper, paints, pencils, ink, and so forth, or, speaking in a ghetto jargon, he might have ‘organized’ them for his needs.

It remains unclear whether or not Erich Lichtblau exercised relative mobility within the ghetto. If he had, he may wander around the numerous barracks and facilities. If not, his picture-stories could have been a result of inter-prisoner interaction, reflective imagination, and mundane ghetto-life experience. His other probable sources were spontaneous observations and various forms of the ghetto folklore. Picturing these mini-stories in his mind, Erich later begins to transfer them on the paper. Thus in 1942-1945, he created a multiple picture-stories, in other words, the Ghetto-Diary in pictures.

It is symbolic that the first entry in this Diary was not a picture, but a narration of the poem devoted to the New Year of 1943. It is regarded that in the late December 1942, Erich Lichtblau narrated a poem Sylvester, penned by an unknown to us female ghetto inmate. It was a hope inspiring and spirit elevating appeal to the children in the ghetto. The last verse makes people believe that one day, next year (1943) the Jews led by G-D will return back to Prague. The English-German translation reads as follows:

*Because one of the coming 365 days
Will be surely the one, about which Jewish history will say*

*In this month, on that day
Baruch Hashem, the Jews will be led to Prague.*

His first sketches (pencil and ink on paper, as well as watercolor) saw light in 1943. Erich continued picturing ghetto life in 1943 and 1944. In 1945, he created only a few sketches and watercolors.

Initially, most of the ghetto-made sketches (pencil on paper) had captions and slogans. However, only a few original sketches in the Museum Collection still have them. We know that a short narrative was initially part of every sketch, however, in the spring of 1945, Erich Lichtblau eliminated the captions of incriminating content. He also cut into pieces most of the pictures. Mr. Lichtblau recalls after the war: *And each of my pictures had titles combined with slogans. I cut them out and burned them. We were lucky to survive.*

Fortunately, his wife Elsa had hidden these fragments, rescuing them for posterity. That is why most of the sketches in our Collection have no captions or slogans, while the recreated after the war pictures of the same subject include them. We categorize them as the secondary sketches that resemble the initial ones by the topic, composition, and content.

From August 26, 1944, to February 1, 1945, Erich Lichtblau was working on a secret construction site in Wulkow, Germany (also called *Arbeitskommando Zossen*). He was assigned to a forced labor detail that was transferred to Wulkow from Theresienstadt. It is feasible that German bureaucracy continued to regard Erich Lichtblau primarily as a construction specialist. Upon the construction completion, Erich Lichtblau was sent back to Theresienstadt. At the construction site, Erich Lichtblau created several sketches depicting the life in this labor camp. The style resembles that of Theresienstadt, while the content reflects the new settings.

He later recalls arrival to Theresienstadt: *When our transport came back to Theresienstadt, I found my wife again. She had saved all my pictures.*

On 8 May 1945, the Red Army arrived to Theresienstadt. From the beginning of May until the liberation of the area, it was the International Red Cross operated the abandoned ghetto. Many of the survivors still remained within its walls. After the liberation, Elsa Lichtblau recovered the hidden fragments of the sketches. The portraiture of Theresienstadt survived. Erich and Elsa Lichtblau remained in Czechoslovakia until October 1949, when they, with two children Mira and Rami (born in 1946 and 1948), had repatriated to Israel. The process of sketches restoration perhaps started in Czechoslovakia. More definitely it had begun in Israel in the 1950s, continuing into 1960s. Erich Lichtblau had been recreating the original scenes together with the captions and slogans: *I put all the fragments together and I wrote the missing words next to the picture fragments, so that every survivor of Terezin was able to see and understand their meaning.*

It is regarded that Erich Lichtblau changed his name to Eli Leskly (Leskley), allegedly compressing the first and the last name into the short form Eli, as early as in 1945, while they still lived in Czechoslovakia. Their identification documents issued in the Protectorate Bohemia and Moravia were still valid for some time after the war. On the Erich's document the name Lichtblau is crossed out and instead Leskly is written in. The same is true about Elsa's document: instead of Lichtblauvova there was written Lesklá (both are the Czech grammatical forms for a married woman). We can only speculate if

these name changes were officially made by the Czechoslovak authorities, or Erich had made these amendments himself and the authorities recognized that.



Erich Lichtblau's identification document, stamped Ghettoized



Elsa Lichtblau's identification document, stamped Ghettoized

After the war Mr. Leskly recreated the sketches from their fragments, he began the secondary circle of small-size artworks (replicas from the ghetto-created sketches), and transitioned into the ultimate project of the large colored versions of the initial ghetto-time sketches. The third circle artworks were watercolors on paper. All his restored, recreated, or newly made works, he signed by Eli, adding Terezin, and a subsequent wartime year. A number of the restored after the war sketches, in fact, the pieces were glued together, do not retain his signature, while some are signed. His first personal exhibition took place in 1976 in the museum *Beit Theresienstadt*, in Kibbutz Givat Chayim Ihud.

In the beginning of the 1980s, Eli Leskly began to work on the enlarged versions of the whole Theresienstadt portraiture series. He created more than seventy watercolors. Overall, they stem from the originals, although some variations are noticeable especially with regard to the captions and slogans. Apparently, the ultimate circle was completed by 1983. This same year, two Los Angeles philanthropists, attorney at law Paul R. Greenberg and Ilan Leskly (nephew of Erich Lichtblau) purchased his latest artworks together with a number of original sketches and donated this Collection to the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust via the Jewish Federation Council of Greater Los Angeles. Perhaps Mr. Leskly's new project undertaken in the early 1980s was driven by a Los Angeles initiative.



Eli and Elsa Leskly in their Givataim home, Israel, 1983

In April 1984, the first exhibition of the Leskly Collection was opened in the United States. The artworks were exhibited in the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust. Eli and Elsa were invited to the opening ceremony. Historian and former Museum director Shalmi Barmore wrote for this occasion: *As a historian, I cannot comment on the artistic significance of the material. However, from a historical point of view, there is no doubt that we have one of the most important and rare collections of the Holocaust documentation.* Since the first exhibition, this phenomenal Collection was introduced to many museums and community centers across the United States in the 1980s and 1990s.

The author of the Ghetto-Diary lived equally modest life before, during, and after the war, remaining truthful to his self-perception: *I was not a famous painter, I was just a little man.* In Israel, Mr. Leskly was making a living by painting houses, and only in the

later years he was employed by one of a Tel Aviv department store as a decorator and graphic designer. Eli Leskly died on 2 October 2004 at the age of 93 in Tel Aviv.

Since 1984, the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust serves as a repository for this unique and multifaceted Collection. We have systematized this Collection in respect of chronology, content, and technique, conditionally dividing it onto three sub-collections.

The first sub-collection is composed of the initial ghetto-period sketches with and without captions. The media comprises pencil and ink on paper and sometime watercolor on paper. These sketches are by and large composed out of the formerly destroyed ones, with cut-lines vividly seen and some fragments are often missing. The majority of these artworks are framed, although there is a number of the unframed sketches, mainly of the same content as the framed ones.

The second sub-collection comprised also small-size sketch-like artworks (pencil, ink, but mostly watercolor on paper). In our judgment, they can be dated to the post-war Czechoslovakia period and to the early Israeli period. In some instances, categorization between the first and the second sub-collections is somewhat conditional. A determining judgment in favor of affiliation with the second sub-collection relates to the media (watercolor versus pencil and ink) and to presence of the integrated captions and slogans, as well as to no evidences of cut-lines and other intrusions. These criteria are met by no more than ten artworks in our Collection.

The most numerous is the third sub-collection or the third ultimate circle. It comprises large, poster-size watercolors on paper created in Israel. While some can be dated to the 1970s, in all likelihood, they were completed in the early 1980s. These artworks represent a phenomenal reflection if not a mirroring on the original ghetto-period sketches. One can only be amazed by the author's memory, his precise reproduction of the artistic and contextual details, as well as by historical relevancy of the narrative. All these aspects make the third sub-collection a cinematographic diary from the Theresienstadt Ghetto.

Realizing high historical and artistic values of the Eli Leskly Collection, we hope to make it accessible for public, reproductions, and publications.