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## THE GHETTO DIARY IN THE PICTURE-STORIES

Eli Leskley (Erich Lichtblau) Collection in the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust

Our Museum is fortunate to have a unique collection depicting a mundane life in the Theresienstadt Ghetto (Terezin Ghetto). These artworks were created by Erich Lichtblau (after the war known as Eli Leskley) during the two and a half years of his incarceration in the Theresienstadt Ghetto. As a former professional commercial decorator, he was assigned to the so-called 'Signs Department' in Theresienstadt. His work-duties allowed him relatively free passage within the ghetto compound. His sketch-book became a ghetto diary executed in the picture-stories. Every sketch, fragment, or a larger painting transforms into a specific ghetto-life story. He commenced such art-narration from the beginning of the incarceration. Erich Lichtblau and his wife Elsa Silbiger (Lichtblau) were deported from the town of Pisek to the Theresienstadt Ghetto on 26 November 1942.



Erich and Elsa Lichtblau in Pisek (German-occupied Czechoslovakia) in 1940

The variety of the ghetto life-scenes is more than a dairy, this is rather a portraiture of survival, mingled with irony, humor, and hope for a better day. Some of his paintings can be ascribed to a caricature genre and grotesque vision. While the extent of the latter differs from artwork to artwork, an undeniable message of defiance to the German dehumanization and internal distancing from the terribleness of the outside world is well present in the collection. At least in their dreams, if not in everyday acts Erich and Elsa remained devoted Zionist Pioneers (Halutzim), preparing for Alijah (emigration to Palestine). They both survived Theresienstadt, liberated by the Soviet Army on 8 May

1945. The picture-diaries survived due to Elsa's courageousness and dedication. Mindful of the last days SS searches, Erich had cut many fragments in two or more pieces for they presented the incriminated evidences against the Nazi regime. Elsa, disregarding the imminent danger managed to secure the fragments in the safe places. After the liberation the fragments of the picture-stories were recovered back to life, thus giving a new impetus of creativity to the artist.

In 1949, the couple made Aliyah to Israel. It took about ten years for now Eli Leskley to become capable again of continuing his ghetto picture-stories. In the late 1950s and in the 1960s, he worked on the enlarged versions of the war-time fragments. He always kept the initial topic intact, while modifying the scope, the notes, and the color spectrum. This work culminated in the 70 large watercolors and a number of the reconstructed fragments. All in all, they introduce public to the intricate ghetto life, while always leaving room for interpretation and amazement.

In 1983-1984, the Jewish philanthropist of Los Angeles together with the leadership of the Jewish Federation Council and Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust worked out a scheme, permitting to make this collection part of the recently opened Museum of the Holocaust. Since then, these phenomenal artworks saw light of other museums and communities centers. We at the Museum realize the high historic and artistic values of the Eli Leskley Collection, and we cherish a hope to make it accessible for publications, reproductions, and public.



84-50 SMUGGLING FLOWERS INTO THE GHETTO, Terezin, 1943.